Elaine Zecher Transcript

Ronda Spinak: Just state your name and where you work. Maybe tell us a little something about your career.

Elaine Zecher: My name is Elaine Zecher, and I work at Temple Israel in Boston. It sits right on the border of Boston and Brookline, and it's around a thirteen-hundred-family congregation. I am in my twenty-fourth year there and my job description has included many different responsibilities over the years. The synagogue is located in the hospital area. Harvard Medical School is right down the street, and so there are many hospitals as our neighbors. We're not suburban; we're more urban, and so our work centers a lot on what happens in the urban population as well as Brookline and the outskirts of Boston.

RS: Fantastic. I'm going to take you back to a time when you were growing up. I would like you to share a sacred memory of your youth as a starting place.

EZ: Our house had two doorways into the kitchen, and our table was right in the corner with the doors on each side. I remember I was about five years old, and I was standing at the outside of the door. My parents were inside the kitchen, eating, doing something. I remember I wanted to tell them that I could recite the Shema all by myself. It wasn't like I ran in and said, "I can recite the Shema." It was very thoughtful and very intentional, but what I remember most is I was so proud that I could recite the Shema. Inherit in that pride was knowing that reciting the Shema had a kind of value in our home and in the community in which I grew up.

RS: Nice. What was your Jewish upbringing like?

EZ: My parents grew up in Pittsburgh, and when it was time to move to the suburbs in the ’50s, most of the Jewish community went west. They went east. So it was a very small Jewish community, and they helped to found the synagogue. Our life was very much based in the synagogue. My father was one of the very first presidents of the congregation. My mom sang in the choir for as long as they were members into the thirty-year mark until they moved into the city of Pittsburgh. Our life was really centered around everything synagogue. I remember sitting under the table when my mom was sewing with these women. I remember going to religious school. Members of the congregation taught. It was very much a family-centered idea. My father also ran the Jewish paper of Pittsburgh. We were very much involved in the Federation world, and I was very much aware of the Jewish community in Pittsburgh, even in the suburbs. But, it did not feel like the Jewish community was there because mostly we were very much a minority. There were very few in my class who were Jewish, and you really had to assert yourself to be Jewish. As a matter of fact, most of my friends growing up were born-again Christians. That was in the ’70s, and over the summer, they would go to these retreats, week-long retreats, and talk about their experiences with Jesus. That permeated my experience, especially since there were signs on the parkway that declared, “Jesus is coming soon,” right there in big, bold letters. It was very much if you didn’t assert your Judaism, and if you didn't connect with the Jewish community, it was much harder. So, I learned at a very early age that being part of the Jewish community and being part of synagogue life which was very important to my family and my parents, was the way that you learned and really explored and understood Judaism.

RS: What denomination [inaudible]?

EZ: I grew up Reform. The thing about our congregation was it was a combination, I think, of more traditional Jews and more liberal Jews, and they decided to associate with the Reform movement. But it wasn’t classical Reform, like Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh. It reminds me more of the way Reform Judaism is now. There was lots of Hebrew.

There was lots of participation. There was lots of involvement. Our rabbi, when I was growing up, who actually was from New England, was very inviting in terms of participation. I remember he invited me to lead services one week. So, we were very active. I also have to say that one of the things that I loved was youth group. In some way, youth group and Jewish camping – I think those are really key components to Jewish life.

RS: Do you remember the moment when you knew you wanted to be a rabbi?

EZ: I was in the pomelo fields in Israel When I decided I wanted to be a rabbi. I had grown up being very much part of the Jewish community as the president of the youth group and then president of the sub-region, I was very much interested in leadership in the Jewish world. In essence, I knew I wanted to be part of the Jewish world and even wrote my college essay on why I wanted to work with children in the Jewish community. Brandeis accepted me anyway. I wasn't sure really whether or not I wanted to be a rabbi. I knew I wanted to work in the Jewish communal world. I knew I wanted to maybe run a Jewish organization and be active, but I wasn't really sure about the rabbinate.

I have a sister, a wonderful sister who is six years older than I, and she had entered into the rabbinate. I felt like she was very much more a pioneer than I because she entered into the rabbinate in the ’70s. That was a different time than entering into rabbinic school in the ’80s. Six years between us makes a big difference. She made it feel very accessible, but I wasn't sure that was the pathway. I had a wonderful mentor and teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, that I met at Kutz Camp, a Reform movement leadership camp. One of the things he said to me was, “If you want to work in the Jewish world, be a rabbi. You don’t have to be in a congregation but be a rabbi because you will learn a great deal, you'll have a lot to offer, and you can move in a lot of different ways within the Jewish world." So, I entered rabbinical school, saying, “I would never work in a congregation," somewhat because I felt like congregations didn’t feel as if there was a lot

of life in there. It didn't feel like there was a lot of energy for change and adaptation and innovation and creativity, which was something that I felt I was much more interested in. I entered into rabbinic school saying, "I'm going to become a rabbi, but I'm not going to become a rabbi in a congregation."

Do you want to hear about why I became a rabbi in a congregation and I'm there in my twenty-fourth year? So, I went through rabbinic school. I really thought about going into congregational life. I worked at the Union for Reform Judaism. I was a regional adviser in New York City, loved it, loved the kids, and a wonderful time. I helped to run the biennials, the international biennials of the Reform Movement when I was in rabbinic school, but I also had a student pulpit. I worked in Florida. I would commute down to Jupiter, Florida – that was wonderful – and I also was an intern at Central Synagogue. But all that time, being in Jewish organizational life, I felt that I could have a greater impact. So, when I was ordained, I looked at a lot of different jobs, none of which were in the synagogue, and I ended up in the Jewish Community Center of Greater Boston in Stoughton, which was opening up a JCC there. As much as it was lovely and wonderful, I felt like the spiritual pulse in the Jewish Community Center was really not what was reaching me, and I wasn't having the kind of impact that I could have. However, I met my husband at a Torah study because you have Shabbat off working at the JCC. So I met him on a Shabbat at a Torah study class in Sudbury, Massachusetts. My personal life was great. We ended up marrying. After meeting each other for just ten weeks – we married eight months later. I realized that I needed something different. I wanted something different. I remember back when I was in rabbinic school, there was a session by the Women's Rabbinic Network. It talked about women as change agents, and I really didn't understand that until I realized that I could "be the change," quoting Gandhi, that "I wanted to see in the Jewish world." Temple Israel happened to open up. Temple Israel is a very large congregation. It has a lot of organizational components to it. When I applied and got the job at Temple Israel, I felt like I was a parched flower in a field, picked and put in a beautiful fertile garden. It has been at Temple Israel where I felt my spiritual

interests have been able to blossom.

RS: That's great. [Recording paused]. Your sister was a rabbi. She had gone in, in the '70s, which is a very different time from the '80s. When you called her up and said, "I'm going to rabbinical school," did she offer any advice to you?

EZ: What advice did my sister, who was in rabbinic school, give me when I entered into the idea of going to rabbinic school? My sister, who was in rabbinic school when I decided to become a rabbi, was very enthusiastic. I remember when I called her and said, "I want to be a rabbi." The first thing she said to me was, "You will be a great rabbi." With our six years difference, I was only going into tenth grade when she entered into rabbinic school. I was in high school and then in college when she was already a rabbi. She was ordained in 1982. She was in a congregation where I think she was working what seemed like four jobs in the same congregation. She was working eighty-hour weeks. It was amazing what she did in that congregation. But I do remember that. She advised me, "You might want to take some courses in rabbinic studies." I had not done any biblical or rabbinic text study in college. I had done all Jewish communal kind of work. I was an American Studies major. She also went to Brandeis. We actually have a brother in the middle. A number of years ago, he and his family moved to Israel. They're Modern Orthodox. What do you do when you have two sisters who are rabbis? Which way do you go? He became Orthodox and is very happy. My whole family was very enthusiastic, and my dad, in particular, who has since passed away. There was nothing that made him more joyful than being able to say, "My two daughters, the rabbis, and my son the Orthodox Jew." It brought him a lot of kvelling. I think he was always in over-kvell when he would talk about his kids. My sister has been a wonderful role model for me. She's a wonderful rabbi and teacher. She's very enthusiastic. In every congregation she's been part of, people love her, and that's a positive image to see and to aspire to.

RS: You met your husband when you were already ordained.

EZ: Yes. [laughter]

RS: How soon after you guys met did he know you were a rabbi? Was it immediately because you were in Torah class?

EZ: I met my husband when he was already a doctor, and he met me when I was already a rabbi. Neither of us had to endure the training of either field. Rabbi Larry Kushner was a teacher of mine in rabbinic school. I loved him. I love him still. I just became very attuned to his sense of the spirit and the way he describes Judaism and the way he lives his life and his family, and just his humor – love it all. So, I would go there to his congregation for Torah study because, as I said, I worked at the JCC, and I had Shabbat off. So there was one Shabbat I went. It was Parashat Chayei Sarah when Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac who's getting on in years. There I was at Torah study, and there was this man there who had just come back from China. He has been doing a lot of work in China then. We had been talking about arranged marriages in the Torah study, and who knows best. Do the parents know best? Do the kids know best? We're all talking. There was one line in the portion when Rebecca sees Isaac for the first time. You can translate it – "and Rebecca alights from her camel." But I really think it says, "And Rebecca fell off her camel." She sees Isaac, and she falls off her camel. At that moment, there was this shift in the room, and then Larry, who would always leave early to get ready for a bar or bat mitzvah, had the conversation keep going. He walked out the door. He came back. He whispered in this young man's ear, "Rabbi Elaine Zecher is also an unmarried person," and he left. Ten weeks later, David and I were engaged. Now, the funny part of the story is we sent him flowers two weeks later, and we said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you. David and Elaine." Larry had no idea who they were from. Totally forgot that he had matched us up. He and my sister ended up officiating at our wedding.

RS: Great story. Great, great story. By the time you were in rabbinical school, I'm sure it wasn't the same as when your sister was in it. They were used to women. Is there any story that stands out? Anything that you had to overcome in rabbinical school? How did you do that?

EZ: Well, I think in rabbinic school, not all the professors were still – what I would call – female-friendly. There would be little slights. There would be little comments they would make. One, in particular, really had a very hard time accepting female rabbis, even though he had daughters. He would quip, "Now that I have daughters, women can do anything." It took his own daughters for him to be able to see that.

By the time I got to HUC, there wasn't the sense that women were so new. Although when I was a rabbinic student in Jupiter, Florida, there was a member of the congregation who said, it's so important we have a female rabbi so that the women have someone to talk to. I remember saying to him, "You know I'm a rabbi for everybody, not just women." On the other hand, there was a little girl who, upon meeting a male rabbi after I had been there for two years, turned to her mother and said, "I don't understand. I thought rabbis were women." Now back then, everyone was like, "Ha, that's so funny. That's so great." But it does speak about a gender-related profession, that you were either a man in a profession or a woman in a profession.

I was very moved by Betty Friedan's second book. Of course, we all love *The Feminine Mystique*, but the second book was called *The Second Stage*, and it spoke about how we can move into the next level or the next era of feminism by ensuring men and women work together. That's something that I have always thought has been very important. I think in rabbinic school, we all tried to make that happen. Our class was the first class where there was one more woman than men in terms of the amount of students. We were the first class. I was ordained in 1988. My experience in rabbinic school, I would say, was that the women who came before me had really, really cut down a lot in their

way. The path was much smoother. I think one of the indications of that is I was never asked to speak about being a female rabbi anywhere, and I know my sister was asked all the time, “Come speak about what does mean to be a female rabbi.” It wasn’t a deal. It wasn’t an issue. Now, when I think back that I was ordained in 1988 – Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972. I felt that there were a number of generations between 1972 and 1988. Although now, in 2014, 1988 is much closer to 1972 than it was when I was ordained. So I do feel that sense of being closer to the first female rabbis than the latter female rabbis.

I’ll add that when I came to Temple Israel, it wasn’t in my mind that I was a female rabbi coming to Temple Israel, but I was and am the first female rabbi Temple Israel ever had. I felt when I came there that the women and men were saying to me, “What took you so long?” as if it was my decision of when I would arrive at Temple Israel. I actually had to embrace being a female rabbi when I started at Temple Israel, more than all the way through rabbinic school, and up to the point where I first started.

RS: It sounds like they were very welcoming to you, but were there any obstacles that you had to overcome? It’s a Reform synagogue. Were there any obstacles? By then, of course, fifteen years women had been in the rabbinate – more than that. Probably, you didn’t come until –

EZ: 1990.

RS: 1990. That’s right. Were there any obstacles to overcome, or was it a big sigh of relief? When I was reading about you, it said that you brought a lot of innovation. You spoke also about your whole spiritual connection. You created a lot of different services. Were there any obstacles, or was it like the floodgates opened, and everybody was so relieved? If you could share.

EZ: I'm happy to say that I really feel that it was the floodgates opened and people were waiting. In this congregation, there are women who were very much involved in early feminism. There are women who helped write "*Our Bodies, Ourselves*." There were women who marched. So, when I stood on the bimah, for those women, this was a seminal moment in their lives. There were tears flowing when they saw, finally, there was a female rabbi leading this congregation in a spiritual way. That was profound for me, and I still am connected to these women, actually. We've been part of a women's study group. These women have PhDs. They have been in the forefront of their careers. They are the early feminists. I look in awe to them because they have really taught me about breaking down barriers and hitting those glass ceilings and what that means.

Now, having said that, I will also say that I am the first rabbi of Temple Israel in another way. Temple Israel is going to be celebrating its 165th year. We're pretty old. I'm the first rabbi of Temple Israel to be pregnant, as well – three times. That idea of a pregnant rabbi, I think for some people, made some people uncomfortable. That would be the only time where I felt like, "That's an inappropriate comment." Because people were so aware of my body and my growing body, and I was huge. [laughter] You couldn't miss it. There were some people who, every time their kid had a bar or bat mitzvah, I was pregnant. So their guests always thought that the rabbi was pregnant. I had three kids in my tenure at Temple Israel. So the congregation saw me in a very different role of having babies and of having these kids grow up. My kids are now twenty-one, nineteen, and seventeen, and the congregation has seen me as a mother and a rabbi and all the balancing that I have to do. The congregation has been enormously supportive of me as a mom and as a rabbi and all of those different roles I carry.

I will say, in addition, as Betty Friedan spoke about, in order for anyone to be successful, you need to be part of a team. I feel that my colleagues, my male colleagues, were incredibly enthusiastic and supportive of me and knew how important it is to have female

rabbis be part of the staff. One other part about being pregnant or having babies had to do with how every time I came back from maternity leave, I would say to the rabbi I was working with, Bernard Mehlman, “I can’t do it. I’m not going to be able to do it.” He would say, “Well, what do you need?" “Well, I need another day off.” He would say, "Fine." Then the next child – "I can't do it. I can’t do it.” “What do you need?” I would say, “Well, I can’t work all these nights.” He’d say, “Fine. Let’s arrange it so you don’t have to work all these nights.” Because he could see the long view and not just the “You’re affecting me at this point.” So really, I have a lot of gratitude to him and Ronne Friedman, with whom I also worked, who have been very supportive of that new role of a rabbi at Temple Israel.

RS: That’s great. Can you tell us about any tension that might have come between your responsibility as a rabbi and your responsibility as a mother and how you solved that?

EZ: Yeah. Okay. So, here’s the truth. When I had little kids, I used to have what I called "The fire-me fantasy.” I’m not going to quit. I would never quit, but if they fired me, it would’ve been so much easier. Life would’ve been so great. (so, I thought!) Then, as my kids got older, and we started to save for college and looking into the world, and I had more time, I was more like, “Please don’t fire me. Please don’t fire me.” Not that they were going to fire me, but that sense of “I really love working here” combined with that sense of always feeling like when you’re at home, you should be working; when you’re working, you should be at home causes tension. I’m not sure that the pursuit of balancing work and home can ever be achieved.

In the end, I think it’s where you are and making sure that my kids always know that I’m a hundred percent their mom and being there with them. I love texting now because I can be in communication with them at any time. They know they can text me and ask me a question. There is an accessibility that we have now that we didn’t have before. Now, I never text on the bimah or text during class, but it’s good to have those connections. I

think that the tension is always there. It's always there. Even as they've gone off into the world, it's always there. But I feel like I had support around me from my colleagues.

I also have to say I have a wonderful husband, and my husband is the cook in the family. I don't cook, and neither does my sister, by the way. My mother cooks, but we just don't. So that's something I never had to worry about, what was going to be for dinner because my husband is the one who makes all the food and is a wonderful cook and has taught our kids. So, I'm well provided for in that area. [laughter]

RS: It's great because you're knocking off all my questions as we go. It's fantastic.

EZ: Great.

RS: Would you say there's a goal that you have for your rabbinate or a mission in your rabbinate?

EZ: Yes. I do feel like I have a goal or a mission in my rabbinate, and it's not where I started when I first became a rabbi, but it's something that I really have embraced, and that is the world of the spirit. Temple Israel had a very famous rabbi; his name was Joshua Loth Liebman. He wrote a book called *Peace of Mind*. He wrote it in the '40s, and it was on the New York Times Bestseller list. He, unfortunately, died at a very early age, but I think he left a really important legacy, and that is, "If we don't nurture our inner life, we can't nurture the world." Martin Buber said, "Start with yourself, but don't end with yourself." In my rabbinate, although I feel like I have a very diverse kind of rabbinate, I feel that I have brought to Temple Israel or enhanced it or allowed to blossom what it means to have a healthy spirit. What does it mean to recognize someone has a soul? What does it mean to nurture the soul? What ways do we do that? And then, when our soul is strong, how do we then go out and recognize and see the divinity in other people's souls? Then we can engage in helping to repair the world and to engage in Tikkun *Olam.*

That is why I believe I have become very interested in liturgy. I think that liturgy and prayer really help us to nurture our souls. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a wonderful piece called “Depth Theology.” So there’s this idea of theology; different people have these different ideas of what God is. What Heschel talked about was what’s the way we get to that idea. He talked about the psalms being the birth pangs of theology. The connection of the soul and one's inner life to this higher sense of the world, this sense of God, or whatever way we want to describe that source in the universe, I think that all of that is connected. Reb Nachman talked about how it’s ourselves, it’s one another, and it’s the one. Those three are really foundational for me when I think about what I focus on in the rabbinate and what matters to me as a rabbi.

My love of liturgy combines all three. My love of creating the high holiday liturgical experience is that it is about the creative cutting edge, the growing edge experience, where it’s not just, “Sit, stand, sit, stand,” but there’s movement, singing, connection, and there’s involvement. My involvement in working on *Mishkan T'filah*, the Reform Movement’s new prayer book, and now working on Mishkan HaNefesh, the Reform Movement’s Machzor, are all part of the way that Judaism helps us nurture the soul. So that’s what I would say is my mission or my intention when I think about what does it mean for me to be a rabbi and what does it mean for me to be a rabbi in a congregation.

RS: Beautiful. Can you share with us how you personally nurture your own soul?

EZ: I personally nurture my soul in a number of different ways. The first is my own prayer practice. I love being part of the liturgical experience. When I was growing up, I was very active in theater and loved it. But what I love about the rabbinate is I get to play myself. What I love about prayer and services and the worship experience is that the fourth wall is down. So there’s definitely performance. I think that liturgy is performance, but that fourth wall is down because everybody is not the audience, everybody is part of the liturgical drama. So for me to prepare for prayer, to lead services, and to facilitate

worship, is something that is very nurturing to me. That's one piece. Another piece is I think that the nurturing of the soul comes in psychologically, physically, spiritually, and mentally. I think all those are pieces of nurturing the soul.

So, I was involved in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. It was a profound experience. It really brought together a lot of the pieces that I had been thinking about and working on. Creating a meditation practice and being mindful, I think, is a key part of nurturing one's soul. When we lose our mindfulness, we really lose a lot because we're not in the moment; we're in some other moment. I bring that to my rabbinate. I bring that in the way that I lead services and the way that I talk, and the way I give sermons – all of those facets.

So, there's being mindful, having a mediation practice, having a prayer practice, and also having a physical practice. I think that it's really important to be in good health. Fortunately, my husband, who is a wonderful cook, is a healthy cook. So we eat very healthy in our home, and that's very important. I don't eat meat. That's also part of my practice. I like to exercise. I do marathons – half marathons. I did one full marathon, and that was enough. The New York City Marathon. It was a fantastic experience, but I decided now I do half marathons. So I train for half marathons, which I love because it takes a kind of patience. It takes seeing the long picture, the end as not just doing that immediate gratification, and so that's part of it. All of those pieces.

When I first came to Temple Israel, I recognized that our neighbors were hospitals. It was also at the time in 1990 that AIDS was everywhere, and the AIDS community, I think, gave us the gift of the idea of healing services. What I noticed was that there were a lot of different congregations doing one healing service, and everybody felt good. On the back of the service, they would write a special thanks to all these people. But if you have any chronic illness, you know that you can go to a service and feel wonderful, but then you leave, and you still need nurturing. In Boston – I think it was around the country

as well – every other week, there were these AIDS healing services. Because our neighbors were all these hospitals, you'd walk down the street, and you could see there were many, many AIDS patients. So we started, once a month, having a healing service. Now, what was interesting about the healing service – there were two others going on at the time. One in Dallas and one in Los Angeles were the only continual healing services. What we came to see was how it wasn't just people with AIDS; it was people with any kind of chronic illness – people with diabetes, people with arthritis, all of those different chronic illnesses that people were looking for healing.

For sixteen years, we had a healing service the first Tuesday of every month. We were able to recognize how the Jewish healing prayer asks for healing of the body and healing of the soul. Yet there's a difference between a body that is a mess and a soul that has found shalom, has found a kind of completeness. It's always good if your body matches your soul in health, but sometimes you can't have that. So that was another piece for me of understanding the significance of the soul and the nurturing of the soul and that healing service.

It's also another indication of the evolution of the service and liturgy that if the weekly – well, we do have a daily minyan -- Shabbat service doesn't feel that it's healing, then we're doing something wrong. It took that long to integrate the concept of healing and not just, "We will now do a healing prayer, and if there's anyone you're thinking of who needs healing, please say their name out loud." The entire experience should be healing. That was an evolution as well which goes back to the intention of my own rabbinate about the nurturing of one's inner life, one's soul. It could happen in a service, any Shabbat service. It should be able to happen in every Shabbat service.

RS: Can you share with us a personal crisis and how Judaism helped you get through it?

EZ: Sure. So, I had a personal crisis in that, fifteen years ago, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. At first, I didn't want to share it with the congregation. I wanted to keep it

to myself, so I went through all the therapy and the surgeries and all of those pieces. Then I was ready to share it with the congregation and to share my own struggle of what does it means to be sick. What it means to waltz with the "angel of death." That was the title of my high holiday sermon that year – "Waltzing with the Malach ha-Mavet." Waltzing with the angel of death is trying to understand what it means to be so close to death.

My father had died the year before. So, it was a one-two punch. I found great comfort in Judaism. After having led all of these services for the healing of the soul, I was now thinking about, "Well, what were the messages I had conveyed to all those people all those years? What was the message I wanted to tell myself about being so close or touching or dancing with the angel of death?" There's so much about Judaism that brought me comfort. One was prayer and the connection that there is a relationship with the divinity who could be out there. But also, there's strength in here within oneself of finding what is that strength. I also found strength in the idea that – I can't say we know for sure there's life after death because no one's come back to tell us that there's life after death – but I have a comfort that the soul lives on, that the soul remains. It is not in the same way as our bodies because if we could come back, we would want to determine what age we were when we came back. The soul is not something that's in a specific form. But I found great comfort that if I were to die, a part of me would still be in existence. I was thinking about my dad. I was thinking about being connected with him. I was thinking about just the whole realm of finding the strength that comes from your spirit and God. Neither can be seen but can be felt. So I relied on that.

Also, there's a phrase that we sing in Adon Olam, "In God's hand I place my soul." So, at some point, you have to say, "I'm not in control, and there's something more in this universe that I just can't control." Opening up my hands and opening up my heart to that idea was also what I struggled with. It didn't come so easily. I did rely on Judaism to help me, and now I'm back to good health.

RS: That's great. Well, you look beautiful. Very healthy. Do you ever teach about faith?

EZ: All the time.

RS: Can you share with us how you –? Somebody comes to you with a loss of faith, or maybe they never had faith. What do you say? How do you help them?

EZ: The way that I talk about faith emerged by how I'm teaching a class on psalms. I love the psalms because I think they are, as Heschel called them, birth pangs of faith and birth pangs of theology. It begins with that sense of yearning, that sense of desire, that sense of – am I the beginning, the middle, and the end of the universe? If we are the "master of our fate, the captain of our soul," it's harder to have an entry point to speak about faith. That's where I go when I'm with someone who comes, who's questioning, "Well, what is faith? What is this?"

I love when people say, "I'm not religious." I try to redefine a lot of these words. We've given a lot of these words definitions so that we can reject them. I try to redefine words so that we can bring them in and embrace them. Faith and religious are two words that I really try to redefine. So when people say, "I'm not religious," they're thinking, "Well, I don't daven. I don't not turn on lights on Shabbat." That's not what being religious is. To me, and what I help people understand, is to be religious means that it's possible to see that one has a spirit and that there's a power greater than all of us in the universe. That's the starting point. If we can get just to that point, then there's something more than us.

I often refer to the Reiner/Brooks 2001-year-old man routine. It's the part of the conversation where he goes, "We used to worship Phil, and then one day, thunder came and struck down Phil. They gazed up to the heavens and realized there was something bigger than Phil." There's something more than us in the universe, and it doesn't have to be named God. I think when we use the word "God," it ruins everything because all of a sudden, we've placed this restriction because we've named it. The word, God, is just a

placeholder. Marcia Falk talks about that. It's that sense. It's like saying, "Here's love. I'm holding love in my hand. Do you see it? Do you believe it? It's right here?" Well, you don't. You can't. You don't see it. But you know you've experienced love. Likewise, we've experienced faith. When Moses is climbing the mountain to go up for a second time to receive the commandants, Moses begs God, "Let me see your face. Let me see who you are." God says, "You can't see my face. You can only see my back." That, I think, is a wonderful way of understanding faith because sometimes we only know it when we look back on it. We only know we've experienced God when we look back on the experience of God. So faith, for me, is an openness. It's a soft heart. It's a way to say, "I can be in this moment. I can experience this moment. I can have an attitude that expresses thanks in this moment and believe that there's more to the universe than just me."

RS: Do you have a favorite piece of text or sacred piece of text, and why?

EZ: I have two favorite pieces of text. One is from Psalm 30, which speaks about "You have turned my lament into dancing." I think that is a trajectory of Judaism, in that we all suffer. Our experience of suffering is different. Some people's suffering to one person might not be to another. We know what it means to be in lament. Judaism tries to help us get to, whether it's even in Shiva and mourning – Shiva to Shloshim to Yahrzeit –that progression to be able to live, to learn to walk again, to move again. It's that never-ending cycle of darkness into light, like the prayers *Ma'ariv Aravim* or *Yotzer ohr*. There's a never-ending process of creation. There's darkness into light, and we know that there will be darkness, and then there's light, to know that teaches us that our lament can be turned into dancing.

The other is Martin Buber – "Start with yourself, but don't end with yourself." He wrote that in *The Way of Man*, and it's a fabulous book on the teachings of Hasidim. In essence, what he says is, "We have to be able to nurture our inner lives. But we can't

stay focused on ourselves. If we stay focused on ourselves, then we're nothing because then we only have ourselves. Hillel professed this idea as well. ("What is hateful to you, do not do to another.") That is projecting outward where we get the strength inside of ourselves and then act how we're going to be helpful to others and affect the world.

RS: Great… You talk a lot about rituals and remaking rituals. Maybe you can share with us some rituals that you helped imagine or helped reform, why you did it that way, and maybe the result of that.

EZ: Rituals help us get from point A to point B. So, you're not married? You are married. You don't have a name? You have a name. You are in prayer, and you're moving through prayer. From the beginning to the end, you want to feel transformed. I saw that in the high holiday liturgy that there was a lot of repetition. There was too much experience of facing forward and being led from the front. The assumption was that people were doing their work at their seats. But I felt we needed to make the experience different. We needed to get to the heart of what the Yom Kippur experience is. On Yom Kippur afternoon, for example, we are at that moment in Neilah, right at the end of the day, when the ark is open, but then the ark doors are going to close, and we will ask ourselves, "Have we been transformed? Are we different? Have we been affected by Yom Kippur?" So, we worked on all the different services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But Yom Kippur afternoon really needed that kind of "oomph" to get us to a new place. In the Yom Kippur afternoon in the Reform liturgy, there's something called "The Great Aleinu." It is the time when the clergy would actually bow down in front of the whole congregation. Now I'm sure watching it is pretty magnificent, but you're just watching it. Let me also say being a pregnant rabbi and kneeling down was always interesting because I needed people to actually lift me back up because I was pregnant with a big belly. Instead, we invited each person to move into the aisles, to find some place, and to join together in that moment of "The Great Aleinu," to actually bow down completely with one's whole body in this moment. It was an amazing feeling to be part of

the congregation and together experience that moment. All of this was possible because we were in a room where we could move the chairs SINCE there were two services going on, one in the sanctuary and then one in the room where we were. To have hundreds of people in the moment of “The Great Aleinu” bowing down together is a profound experience.

When I consider ritual innovation, I think about how I connect people. Another example is the parade of Torah scrolls during the *Hakafah*. During a Torah service, what does it mean when the Torah moves past you. You either kiss the Torah, or you kiss your lips and then kiss the Torah? I asked: What would it mean if we took all the Torah scrolls out and we created this very joyous, ebullient musical passing of the Torah scrolls? And that is what we have done. We take all the Torah scrolls out on the high holidays because we have a very large congregation, and we pass all the Torah scrolls. As the Torah scrolls are going through the congregation, I say, “It’s not to see how quickly you can get the Torah scroll from the person’s arms into someone else’s and out of your own arms, but rather you’re actually passing on a gift and receiving a gift.” So it should show in your face, and it should show in your body.” When you’re holding that Torah scroll, feel it. All of a sudden, the Torah scroll has a meaning to them personally as opposed to just watching it parade through the congregation.

I will add that I realized that one way to do liturgical and ritual change is to do it in a smaller group. So When I came to Temple Israel, there were a number of women who were very active in the early feminist movement and knew the power of women gathering. In my second year, we created a women's kallah. And at the women’s Kallah, I would say to people, “We’re going to experiment here, and it doesn’t mean it’s a “life sentence.” In other words, it doesn’t mean just because we do it once we’re going to do it all the time." I used to say, “Just because you try brussels sprouts doesn’t mean you have to eat it all the time.” “Okay, let me try it.” There we could unfurl the entire Torah scroll at the women’s Kallah. We could pass the Torah scrolls around and create this

kind of song session as we passed Torah scrolls. Slowly but surely, many of the things we did in the women's Kallah made their way into the liturgical experience of the congregation.

When i first came to the synagogue our Simchat Torah custom was to open two Torah scrolls right on the lectern, and there we would read the end of Deuteronomy, quickly start in Genesis, as is the custom to end and begin Torah on this holiday. Now we have the Torah scrolls all unfurled around the congregation. That started with the woman. It started because women are change agents, and it was safe to try it with the whole congregation after we had experimented at the kallah.

RS: That's great. Really great. We might go a few minutes over because we don't have somebody after. A couple more questions. You've covered a lot with the healing service and all of that.

EZ: Right. [laughter] Trying to do it in a story.

RS: You're doing great. You're doing absolutely great. I understand you got a Doctor of Divinity in 2013.

EZ: Yes.

RS: Can you share with us what that was for, how that came about briefly, and its meaning to you?

EZ: The Doctor of Divinity is given by the Hebrew Union College to every graduate who has remained as part of the rabbinical world for twenty-five years. It differs from a PhD. It's more a degree of recognizing a lifetime of accomplishment. I felt very honored to receive it after five years of serving as a rabbi. What I loved about that experience was it's a moment in time. Any moment you have, where you can stop and take stock and say, "Where am I? What does that mean? What has my experience been?" that's a

helpful moment of reflection. In addition, it helped my congregation – any congregation – to see that there is significance in being in the rabbinate for twenty-five years and being a rabbi for that amount of time. I felt it showed the congregation what a twenty-five-year trajectory looks like. I was surprised at how meaningful and grateful I felt that the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion does this for its rabbinic and cantorial graduates.

RS: That's great. I want to go back to the rituals a little bit. When you came, you started this minyan or this group of these women who were on the forefront of feminism and were experimental. Can you share with us the most recent innovation in ritual that you may have had? Have there been any recently?

EZ: Now you've stumped me. A lot of the things that we've been doing – I think actually the rituals, especially with these women, are more – I'm going to go back [to] what I think female rabbis brought to the rabbinate.

RS: Perfect. That was my next question.

EZ: We that Judaism is focused on particular moments in life. What female rabbis said was, "What happens in the spaces in between? How do we recognize those spaces in our lives?" Having a baby, getting pregnant, not being able to get pregnant, getting engaged, recovering from illness – all of those significant events had no or very little liturgical options. In fact, few had asked if it would even be ritualized. So particularly in this women's group that I've been part of for the – going on our twenty-fourth year of being together, what has just warmed my heart and soul, is that when there is a moment, they have said, "Let's do a ritual about it." Here is an example: two of the women are in the process of becoming grandmothers. [laughter] That's how you know we've been together a long time. Both of their daughters have had some pregnancy issues. So, we did this ritual. Now here's the great part of it. I couldn't be there. I worked with someone in the group who was going to be there. We talked about what the ritual could be, and

she did it. And that, to me, is a great sign of success. It's not, "We can't do the ritual unless the rabbi is there." It's being empowered. It's having ownership of one's own Judaism.

I have to say that one of my strongest memories was the first time we passed the Torah scroll at the women's Kallah and how many women had never held a Torah scroll before and how powerful that was. At those first Kallot that we had, there were always tears because it was all of these experiences of owning one's own Judaism. "I didn't know I could own it. I didn't know it could be mine." Of course, in those early years, we would have a service. It would be innovative. It would be creative. It would be different. Then, afterward, we'd spend an hour talking about the experience because people really wanted to process it. They wanted to process their own spiritual experience because it was like a match had been ignited for them, or there was this spark that hadn't ever been kindled.

What I see in ritual and bringing new rituals and new ideas is actually people owning that for themselves and being able to create. So, you see the most memorable recent ritual is not actually one I did; it's one I helped with so that someone else could do it.

RS: That's great. I read that you had developed a recipe for integrated theology.

EZ: I'm so glad you asked about that. [laughter]

[Recording paused.]

RS: Can you share a story around how you got there?

EZ: Sure. I came up with this idea called "Integrated Theology" by working on Mishkan T'filah, the Reform Movement's prayer book. I worked very closely with the editor, Elyse Frishman, who is very creative and wonderful. *Gates of Prayer*, the previous prayer book, had a number of different services. Each service actually focused on a different idea of

God. What we wanted to do was bring all the different ideas of God on the same page. Now Mishkan T'filah is based on a two-page spread. We posed this question: could it be possible to have a God who is authoritative or rabbinic as well as a God who was expressed in human interaction on the same page? Is that something that contradicts one another, or could it create a complementary relationship? The reason I call it integrated theology is from my husband who has done a lot of work in alternative and complementary medicine, but now it's called integrated medicine. The idea of integrated medicine is to apply a number of different medical modalities in pursuit of healing and curing. And together create a synergy toward wellness and health. Likewise, it is possible to have a rabbinic-sounding God as in "Blessed are You, Adonai our God" as well as a God described or addressed as one whom you felt you some kind of internal strength. These two very different ideas of God, and yet we can have both present in our prayers and in living our lives. Sometimes we need that God who feels more like a parent. And sometimes, we experience the divine because we have this profound and meaningful encounter with someone. All can be integrated potentially into theology. That's why I call it an integrated theology. I feel like it makes God much more accessible when you talk about faith and being religious. Most people assert that the God they don't believe in is that theistic kind of God.

There are lots of different ways Judaism understands God. Judaism balances many disparate ideas. The rabbis of the Talmud say: "These and these are concepts of the holy." In Judaism, we can contemplate a myriad of ideas at the same time that don't always agree. All help to create an understanding that we can have a relationship with the divine in a way that reflects who we are and the way we understand God. I think integrated theology helps us do that.

RS: That's great. Can you share with us your own personal understanding of God? Does that dovetail into this integrative approach?

EZ: Yes. My own idea of God is integrated because I feel there is the potential of divinity there all the time. It's whether or not we are recognizing it. That's why I feel mindfulness is a very sacred way of being because it's about consciousness. It's about an intention. So when we live our lives thinking of the possibility that God could be possible, that the experience of God is accessible, then God will take many forms. If I'm always looking for one idea of God, I am setting myself up to fail. That's why I do like the concept of integrated theology. It actually sets us up to succeed because if we're open to an idea of God in many possible ways and experiences, then we'll find God.

RS: That's great. Anything else I didn't ask that you were hoping I would ask?

EZ: Yes. One facet of Judaism, which is crucial to me, is the role of the synagogue. I grew up in the synagogue; it was our life, my mom's life, my dad's life – my sister, my brother, and me. We're all part of the synagogue. As much as I am enthusiastic about all the Jewish organizations that exist, I really believe that the synagogue is foundational for Judaism. Ironically, I went all the way through rabbinic school, saying I would never work in a congregation – never say never! I have found that the synagogue is willing to be vibrant, introspective, intentional, and transformative in people's lives. As a result, those connected to synagogues recognize that they can then go and be involved in lots of aspects of the Jewish world. I believe we need synagogues to ensure the survival and thriving of Judaism.

RS: Yes. What do you hope people remember about you and the work that you've done, say Jews, a hundred years from now?

EZ: I hope people remember that I really like being Jewish, love Judaism, and believe in what Judaism has to offer the individual and the world. There are lots of other religious experiences out there, and they're all very important, but how we particularly play out universal values, for me, is how Judaism has so much to offer. So I hope when people remember me, they remember me as someone who has been innovative and creative

and really sowed and tilled the garden of Judaism to allow all that's beautiful to blossom and flourish.

RS: Beautiful. Fantastic. You've been a great interviewee. This is fun. I've learned a lot.

[END OF INTERVIEW]