



Jane Kanarek Transcript

Ronda Spinak: ... If you could start by stating your name and tell us what you're doing in the rabbinate?

Jane Kanarek: My name is Jane Kanarek. I teach here in the Rabbinical School at Hebrew college. So my rabbinate's really a teaching rabbinate. I teach Talmud and Halacha and Midrash. That's primarily the way I've shaped my rabbinate now. I teach, and I write.

RS: Great. Excellent. I'm going to take you back to your youth, and I would like you to share with us a favorite Jewish memory of your youth.

JK: I think I'll actually share a somewhat nerdy Jewish memory from my youth. I grew up here in Brookline, Massachusetts. On my way to elementary school, my walking way, we passed the Reform synagogue Temple Ohabei Shalom. Every time that I passed the synagogue, the side of the synagogue, there was one entranceway – I think there was a Jewish star over it – I would recite the Sh'mah on my way to my elementary school, my public school, and it's something that just stayed with me, that I did. So that's one simple memory.

RS: That's great. Maybe you share with us a little bit about your Jewish upbringing?

JK: Definitely. So my Jewish upbringing – my family is South African, which is really key to understanding my Jewish upbringing because my upbringing was very much South African Jews. So what does that mean? It meant that we had Friday night dinner every week and I wasn't allowed to go out until after Friday night dinner obviously when that got old enough to be relevant for me. We celebrated Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We didn't keep a kosher home, but there was a no pig rule. We belonged to a more



traditional conservative synagogue, and I went to Hebrew school four days a week, and it was also a very Zionist home. It was definitely a Jewish home and when I meet other children of South Africans, we very much have that kind of upbringing in common. I went to shul with my dad for Purim, used to go to junior congregation on Shabbat with him until I rebelled. It was a very Jewish and Zionist upbringing.

RS: Excellent. I'm going to get a cup of water. We have heard this from South Africans. Definitely the insular family, really tight Jewish [inaudible]. That's great. I almost wish I was brought up in a South African home.

JK: Yeah, it's very distinct. There's a very distinct culture to it.

RS: Lovely. Very lovely. Can you recall when you first had the awareness that you wanted to be a rabbi?

JK: I first had the awareness in college, actually, and it took me a little while to admit it to myself. I was actually at the gym with a friend of mine. I think we were on the Stairmaster, and she said to me – her name is Suzi LeVine. I still remember this – “Jane, just admit it. You want to be a rabbi,” and I admitted it.

RS: Great. Can you tell us a little bit –? I get a sense of the family, but can you tell us a little bit about perhaps the moments that lead up to that awareness?

JK: It was definitely a journey. I, like many kids, rebelled against Hebrew school and finished in sixth grade, finished a little early and refused to go to Hebrew high school, and my father said, “Okay, we're not going to fight that.” Then there were a couple real turning points. One was I didn't know what to do after my junior year of high school for the summer, and my father said, “Why don't you go to Israel?” I said, “Sure, why not?” He'd heard that Ramah had a really good program. We had no idea what Ramah was. That was another way in which we were South African immigrants; my parents just didn't know that whole United Synagogue/Ramah structure. So I went, and what really



happened there was – I always said I loved Jewish history but wanted nothing to do with the religion. In fifth grade I wrote a report on the Nuremberg Trials, for example, but wanted nothing to do with the religion. What happened there was I started to see the dichotomy that I'd set up between the history and the religion was false. That started to slowly, slowly bring me back into the religion part of Judaism. Then, when I got to college – I went to Brown – the people that I found that I connected with the most were at Hillel. So I slowly found my way back there; they were part of the traditional egalitarian Minyan, the people I became closest with. I found my way in there really through activism, political activism, and slowly again made my way back to the religion side.

Then, what happened was I started to put the pieces together about my Jewish life, that the only place where I'd been told no, that I couldn't do something because I was female was in Judaism, and everywhere else, I'd been told, "Whatever you want, go for it." My bat mitzvah, I was only allowed to read haftarah. Our shul wasn't egalitarian. Once that was done you weren't allowed on the Bimah again. So the big transition was defining myself as a feminist and coming to that definition through my Judaism, through my experiences in the Jewish world. Then I just started to learn. I started to read Modern Jewish Philosophy. I went back to Hebrew. I came into the world of teshuvot, of Responsa, and just realized that what I loved most was working with the ancient and the modern and people and books and trying to put those together. So that was really part of the journey, and it slowly became clear that the rabbinate was something that would enable me to do that.

RS: That's great ... I want to go back to this, which I'm finding very fascinating how you framed this. You found your feminism through Judaism. Could you please explain a little bit further? I'll tell you why I'm asking, but that's very, very interesting to me. Could you share a story around that or what that is exactly?

JK: I definitely found my feminism through my Judaism, and I'll share a couple stories about it. I don't remember how old I was; I must've been somewhere between four and



six. No, I was probably a little older than that. Anyway, my father decided my brother Denny – there were only two of us at that point – he needed a kippah for Friday night, and so he went and got him a kippah. I said to my dad, “Wait a minute, dad. Why does Denny get to wear one, and I don’t?” So my dad took me to the Israel bookstore and bought me a kippah. I think we still have it at home – green with silver embroidery, actually. So that was a yes. I’m sure my poor South African father had not really expected that from his daughter. Then, as I mentioned, there was my bat mitzvah, where I wanted to read Torah but wasn’t allowed to. I slowly – what I’d always said was, “I’m able to do whatever I want,” and hadn’t connected what I was and was not allowed to do with what other women weren’t and were allowed to do. As soon as I started to see more of the no’s in the Jewish world, I started to say, “That’s really an illusion. I’m not always able to do whatever I want to do as a female. Even more, what I can and can’t do is connected with what other women can and can’t do.” It was really moving more into the Jewish world that crystallized that for me. I had never been behind a mechitza until I was in college. The first time I was in a synagogue with one it was like getting punched. So it made it very, very clear to me that I was a feminist and that part of being feminist is seeing what I can and can’t do is bound up with what other women can and can’t do.

RS: That was an amazing explanation. Thank you.

JK: You’re welcome.

RS: I’ve had interviews with some of the first, and they talk a lot about how in the early days, there were feminists, but they weren’t exploring their feminism within the context of the religion. It was outside of Judaism. So it’s very interesting. You graduated from JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] in ’98, so people had already been ordained for quite a while in the Conservative movement. What year did you enter?

JK: I entered in ’93.



RS: So, eight years, seven years, they had been ordained. So they'd been in rabbinical school for a while. Can you share with us a little bit about rabbinical school? You had had women in there for ten years. I have a sense of what JTS still is. Maybe you could share with us any obstacles that you've had to overcome, yourself personally [inaudible] institutionally?

JK: Right. Obstacles at JTS, definitely. It was complicated. Some of it was very difficult and this is even some teachers that were very good to me. When I was there we had a conference celebrating ten years of women in the rabbinate. There was one session there, where they actually had a speaker who didn't think women should be rabbis, and was very public about that, and made some statement about having a woman as a rabbi is like seeing Jesus as a woman on the cross. Many of us decided – a few women who were there decided to make fun of that at Purim. So we got to get the speaker back by being a woman in fishnet tights, etc., on the cross. But I think while I was there it was still very much under the assumption that we can admit women and pretend that nothing's changed. That wasn't really true. So there hadn't been that much thinking about how does admitting women change the culture. Might that have us change some of their assumptions about Halakhah and how it happens? How different women might express themselves religiously? That wasn't there. You still had teachers who felt free to say in class very problematic things about women. So it wasn't an easy place to be necessarily. On the other hand, I have teachers there that I'm incredibly, incredibly grateful to, who pushed me along, who supported me. Even one of my Talmud teachers who had been one of the people against women's ordination actually came to hear all of our senior sermons upstairs in the egalitarian synagogue, which might seem like a small thing but was actually an immense cultural move for him to make. So it was difficult. It was definitely difficult, especially coming from Brown, which was a very, very different culture. I hope things are getting better. I think they are.



RS: ... because you do a lot of writing. Your work within the Jewish world – I read some of the books that you've done. Do you feel that continue to put along – deepen your sense of feminism and push you further to try to bridge the gap between what women could do and couldn't?

JK: Did JTS push me to bridge the gap between what women could and couldn't do? Yes and no. I think that it made me angry, and in many ways, I felt when I graduated, I needed to get away from that anger and to find ways to deal with that anger and push myself to a different place. In some ways, it pushed me to keep learning because I felt that learning was power, and to try to become a great teacher of our classical texts.

Then, I think in the long term, what it really pushed me to do was to find a way to teach the classical text of our tradition in a way that other women could enter into them and find ways to find their voices and deal with their own anger and really put themselves inside the tradition and become insiders in our tradition. So maybe more than anything, that's what it pushed me to do, is to find ways to help women, and not only women, find their voices in our tradition, learn to respond to it, to speak to it, and really try and enter into it.

RS: You bring up an issue that I've heard many, many times, particularly from the old-timers more than younger ones, and you're right in the middle in a certain way, that women feel very much like outsiders. Even when you're on the inside, you still feel you're somewhat on the outside. Could you just speak to the insider-outsider dichotomy of women?

JK: The insider-outsider dichotomy is really important in my journey. I started out, in some ways, feeling like an insider but more very much like an outsider – hesitant going into certain kinds of Jewish bookstores or entering into certain kinds of Jewish conversations and texts. But I don't feel like an outsider anymore. I very much feel like an insider, and I feel as if that's a product of years of study. I still have much more learning and study to do, which I think will make me feel even more like an insider. I



think it's a sense of growing mastery over these classical texts that have been other peoples', but now they're mine, and a growing sense [that] I can teach other people and help them to do the same thing. I think it's crucial. I don't think it comes easily. I've seen it happen in certain situations, for example, when I used to have – I don't go to synagogues that don't count women in a minyan very often. When I do, I used to get incredibly angry. Now I go and I kind of laugh. I just say, "They don't know on the other side of the mechitza that we count, but we actually do, and I'm not giving them the power anymore to decide whether I count or I don't count. I count. That's the end of the story. I'm actually not even willing to argue about it anymore. You think I do or you think I don't, and if you don't, that's your problem; it's not my problem." So, for me, that's really a sense of moving inside and not letting someone else define me as an outsider.

RS: That's great. Great answer. I was fascinated by your book ... I thought that was really interesting. I wanted to see if you could share with us one of the earliest examples in Genesis, how that was part of the formulation of rabbinic law?

JK: Great. I'm happy to talk about that. Legalizing Genesis was the title of my book. However, the publisher changed it, so it's now got just the stuff after the colon, Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law. It's Cambridge; they like straightforward titles. But it is still about turning Genesis into law. Actually, since this is an interview about women rabbis, I'm not going to share one of the earliest. I want to actually share one from the story of Rebecca because she's one of the characters I wrote about in a book. Again, central to my feminism was writing a book about Genesis, [which] meant just integrating women into it, not writing specifically a book about women or specifically writing a book about feminism. But it informed the topics that I chose for my book as well. The passage about her is going to be on the cover, so I'm very excited. So Genesis tells the story of her betrothal in chapter twenty, her betrothal to Isaac. It's one of the longest betrothal narratives in the Tanach, probably the longest one. That story actually becomes a central focus for marriage law. So we generally understand Jewish



marriage as having two stages. There's what's known as Kiddushim, what we see as the ring ceremony today, and the Nissuin marriage, what we see as marked by the Sheva Brachot, the seven blessings, but it's really the entering into the chuppah. However, ancient marriage had another stage in it, and that's called claiming, tevi'ah. What happened is the man and woman would get betrothed, so they're bound to each other, but then there would be no actual date for completing the marriage. That date was set through this thing called tevi'ah. He'd say, "Okay, I'm going to go through with the marriage." Then they have to go through with it. He has twelve months to go through on his promise. So the very early Midrash, Genesis, Rabba, and the Babylonian Talmud actually linked that practice to Rebecca. In her story, in the whole negotiation, her brother and mother ask, "Let her stay with us in another few days," and the Talmud and the Midrash actually read that as a request for her to remain for up to these twelve months. One of them even reads it as a response to her father Bethuel's death.

"Actually, let her stay for Shiva for another seven days, and then let her continue." So the Rebecca story becomes a central place for talking about marriage law and turning marriage into something that's actually rabbinic, and it also becomes a place for imagining sexual morality, moral behavior. Interestingly enough, in the Bible, the brothers ask Rebecca, "Will you go?" So her consent is key to the marriage happening. If she doesn't say, "I'll go," it's off. So she says, "Elekh." I will go. The Midrash actually emphasizes that and says, "I will go. Even if it's against your will, I'm going to go." So these texts really turn Rebecca, emphasize her strength and her – I'd almost say her pioneering nature as they build this picture of her.

RS: Very interesting. I guess you've done a lot of work around marriage rituals. This scholarship probably informed that. I don't know which came first. Maybe it was the ritual. I wanted to see –

JK: It's a good thing I didn't talk about the ritual slaughter part of my book. [laughter]



RS: Good. I'd be interested [inaudible]. It sounds like you are working to change marriage rituals today, at least within the Conservative – looking from Conservative eyes, right? So I guess the bigger question is how do changes happen? How does change occur in terms of –? You see these three parts of the marriage ceremony. How does changing rituals happen in modern times?

JK: How does changing rituals happen? That's a really, really big question and really important. I think that how change happens also depends on which Jewish community you're located in. In the Conservative movement or in the Conservative rabbinate, I think there are a couple different ways it happens. It has to happen one, through an encounter with our legal text, really reading the legal tradition and trying to see: can I make a convincing read, which will permit this change? I think another level though is really just courage. What are people willing to do on the ground? What risks are people willing to take? Are people willing to do a little bit of civil disobedience to try and make something legal that is not quite yet legal? I think a lot of it is also becoming a convincing reader and liver of these texts and of a Jewish life, not just of these texts but of living a Jewish life because once one's inside the rhythms of it, then the changes become more convincing and they become more organic. I think those have to work as a package. You need to ideally be living within it and living this rich Jewish life and also entering into the text that helps describe this and then be willing to actually do it and then step back and think about it again and do it again and see what arises.

RS: Which brings me to the next question I would ask you. Women have been ordained for a little more than forty years, and we've seen a lot of innovation in all the denominations.

JK: Even more, actually, I think. If we want to count –

RS: Yeah. Regina Jonas, but she was – exactly. In America, a little more than forty years. What I'm looking at is it seems [inaudible] by women – introduction of the ritual,



introduction of ways of living differently. What would you say, from your point of view, the midway point of it all, have been the greatest innovations or greatest changes that women have brought to Judaism? Do you think – because I actually have never thought of it this way – that people are making the changes and that women are catching up? Or are women introducing it, then the people taking those changes, making them their own, and asking the denominations to institutionalize those changes?

JK: What are the greatest changes? That's hard. I actually want to start my answer by talking about two different trends because I think it's really important in what women in the rabbinate or what women in the religious leadership positions have done. In the Conservative movement a lot of our push for change has started from public ritual, public synagogue ritual, which was where we saw ourselves excluded – not counted in the Minyan, not being allowed to read Torah, those kinds of things – primarily because Conservative Judaism was centered in the synagogue. So we pushed our way in there and now, the conservative movement is by and large in the United States egalitarian. That's actually a revolution. I think that is something we don't often take as revolutionary enough. But from where I sit, very, very revolutionary. By and large, if I go to a Conservative shul now I know it's egalitarian. That was not true – twenty years ago, that was not true. But in the Orthodox world, so much change took place in the world of study, so that the push for women there for religious leadership was really into the house of study, into the Beit Midrash – “I want access to learn the Talmud. I want access to learn our codes of law.” And that's also changed – revolutionary. It's totally revolutionary. What's happening now is I see a dialogue between the worlds, which is really interesting and I think is going to push change to even more interesting places because women in the Conservative world are now saying, “Wait, I want access to that deep level of study. I want to do that.” And women in the Orthodox world are saying, “Wait a minute, I want more public ritual access.” So there's a really rich and interesting conversation going on that I think is going to push change in a very, very powerful way. It's not going to look the same in both of those worlds, but there are these overlaps that



are being created. That's one area that I think is just phenomenal, the amount of change. What women know now is so radically different. That actually brings me to something else that is really important in my rabbinate, which is the more I learn, the more I see is actually there about women in our text and in our tradition, and there's tons that's been forgotten. As I've been realizing that I've really realized one of my tasks as a rabbi and a feminist is to recover those lost voices and make them usable for the future.

The more I learn, the more women I see and the more voices I see. I want to put those into the discourse so it's not just a view of we're creating anew, but that we're actually recovering and creating at the same time, and I see a push towards that as well.

RS: Can you give us an example of a voice that perhaps you've recovered or that somebody close to has recovered? Or something that you've read that we might not be aware of?

JK: I'm trying to think of a – let me try and think of a good one. I've started a tradition on a voice that I recovered. I started a tradition on the eighth night of Pesach, of Passover, called Seudat Miryam, Miriam's festival meal. There's really nothing to do on the last night of Pesach; you sit around and wait for Pesach to be over. So I had this idea, why not we start – we host Miriam's cup at the beginning with the Seder and Elijah. Why not have Miriam send out Pesach as well since she is actually one of the liberators of the Jewish people. So I've started this tradition of – I invite over a group of people, cook brisket and chicken soup. I've decided Miriam loves meat, so we do that. Everyone who's invited has to bring some kind of tradition about Miriam; it can be anything – modern Israeli poetry, ancient Midrash, a piece of art, whatever it is – and we sit around, and we talk about her over food for a couple hours. So through that, we've actually recovered an immense amount of stories about her and her imagined leadership, reading Zora Neal Hurston's *Moses on the Mountains*. What did she have to say about Miriam? Reading phenomenal traditions about the water and the well that followed the Israelites through the desert. Just really deepening the sense of who this woman was and having



an evening of celebrating her. So that's one way in which I try and bring the old and turn it into a new ritual.

RS: That's great. That's wonderful. [Recording paused.] We'll come back to explore more of this. The first question I want to ask you – and this is going to be very difficult for you. I already feel you bristling here – but can you share with us a favorite piece of text? You probably have so many, is my guess, but something that speaks to you personally and that you go back to over and over again. And why?

JK: I'm going share piece of text as a – do I want to do this? I'm going to share a piece of text as a favorite that actually starts out as a difficult text, and then share why it's become a favorite text. The text is from the beginning of tractate kiddushin, so a text about marriage. It talks about how a woman is acquired in three ways: through money, a document, and sexual intercourse. It's an incredibly troubling Mishnah; basically, a woman is located somewhere in between property and person. She's neither completely property, but she's neither completely person. Then there's a long Talmudic section on it, which tries to understand the basis for a woman being acquired/betrothed in marriage through money. And it has two different narratives in it from the Bible. One is from Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah to bury Sarah, and the other is a verse from Jeremiah about fields shall be bought with money. On the surface, again, it looks incredibly troubling. We're just deepening this. They're both about purchasing fields. But when you actually look more deeply, one is actually a narrative, a marriage narrative, Abraham marrying Sarah, even though it's about after they've come alive. Then the other is also about God's redemptive promises to Israel. Hidden in this sugya, in this Talmudic passage, is also a little piece, where it says we have to have certain language to prove that a woman can only be acquired with her consent. If she says no, no. So what I love about this sugya and its medieval commentators, is that if



you read it deeply enough and you go through this process of reading, what happens is that you start with a woman being acquired – pretty bad – and then, as you go, you see this line in the Talmud which is questioning it, and you see that coming through with the choice of Biblical stories that they're choosing to read as the basis for this betrothal.

Then you see it in the medieval commentators in the Tosafot, which try and actually neutralize her acquisition from money and try and distance her from property as much as they can. So what I love about studying and teaching this passage is I think it shows the power of interpretation, how something that on the surface is so troubling, can actually be totally transformed through reading and the troubling aspects can be really distant. So it's my way of saying, "If you invest enough time in learning to do this, you too can transform meaning and make something that is completely troubling – either neutralize it or turn it into something that's the opposite of making you into property." So that's why I love that passage.

RS: Very interesting. This is more of a personal question now. They're all kind of personal. Have you ever experienced a personal pivotal moment in your life or a personal crisis? Maybe you can share that with us and how Judaism helped you through it? If it did or if it didn't?

JK: Just thinking what I want to share. I don't know if I'll call this a crisis, but I'll share this personal moment. I got married late. I was forty-one when my husband and I got married. So finding a life partner, a husband, took me a while. I would really actually say that definitely Judaism is one of the things that helped me marry him. He's a wonderful, amazing man. We have a real commonality of values of the way in which we want to live our lives, and much of that comes out of Judaism. I think part of also saying we want to get married, [that] this is actually what we want to do – he's younger than me; he's like eight years younger than me – was coming from that shared place of wanting to walk through our lives in the same rhythms.



RS: That's great. Beautiful. Stay on this topic of marriage and balancing because you had young children at home. You're obviously in the middle of your career. How do you balance the requirements of rabbinate and writing with wife and motherhood?

JK: It's great. I'm not even sure that balance is the right word. I think that trying to seek – I left out the question. Balancing motherhood, children, career – I think that balance is the wrong word. I'm not looking for balance in my life, really. I'm looking to weight different things at different times, more or less. The way I say it is I feel incredibly lucky that I have work that I love. I also have an academic rhythm, which means I don't have a nine to five job; the work needs to get done, but it doesn't always need to get done between nine and five. That's great, having little kids. Basically, I just feel incredibly lucky. I have two phenomenal little boys, a great husband, work that I love, and it's just a matter of – not "just." It's a matter of weighting different things at different times and learning how to do that, and saying, "Okay, I don't have my Sunday afternoons anymore to catch up on my work. I'm going to the science museum." I might have to work a little more at night and figure out how to pay enough attention to the different people. What I actually miss the most, having had kids later in life, is my time to read. Not having time to just sit down and open a novel. I can't stay up until two in the morning reading a novel anymore because they don't know that they need to sleep in. But mostly, it just feels rich. I think the key is not thinking of it as looking for balance. I have a two-plus-year-old. He's two and five months.

RS: Being the mom of two boys myself and somewhat of a feminist as well, as having two boys changed your views of male/female –? Of course, they're pretty young still.

JK: Having two boys has not yet changed my views. I don't have a girl to compare them with. I mean, the two-year-old loves dinosaurs and trucks. But I don't know if that's because he's a boy or because that's who he is. I was actually more scared of raising girls than boys because I was a tomboy. I played sports and did all of that before it was



really acceptable for girls to do that. I was a couple years too early. I don't know how you do bows in hair and all that stuff. So boys for me, I said, "I know how to do that." I may eat my words, but that was what I felt.

RS: I understand you. Did you get your Ph.D. before your ordination?

JK: After my ordination, I got my Ph.D.

RS: Can you share a little bit about why you went on to get your Ph.D. and why you didn't do it at JTS?

JK: I can definitely share why I went on to get my Ph.D. When I started rabbinical school, I very much thought I wanted to do both rabbinical school and a Ph.D. I saw myself as a rabbi [and] a teacher very early on. Towards the end of my time at JTS, I wasn't sure that I wanted to do that anymore, and I was really burnt out, didn't want anything to do with academia, [and] thought, "Ugh, I don't want to do it." So I took two years off. I spent one year actually in Moscow teaching for a program called Project Judaica, and then I went to Israel and studied at the Conservative Yeshiva. Then I said to myself, "You know what? This is a dream that I had for so long, and I don't want to look back and say, 'I should've tried.'" So I applied. The reason I decided to go to the University of Chicago and not to JTS – I actually was in graduate school at JTS but decided it wasn't the right place to continue – was a couple reasons. One, I wanted to learn somewhere new. I think it's just important to have an education from a variety of places and a variety of perspectives. Two, I wasn't totally done with my anger about some of my experiences, so I didn't want to go back into the New York milieu at all. So I also didn't choose NYU [New York University] or a place like that. Chicago just felt to me like a really interdisciplinary, interesting, creative, rigorous place. So I went there and had a wonderful, wonderful experience in graduate school. I absolutely loved it, absolutely loved it. Loved Chicago as a city; it became my favorite American city, and it was just a really, really rich and rewarding experience. Partially, it was great not only because of



the graduate work I was doing but also because I did a lot of rabbinic work in the community as well – a lot, a lot of teaching. So I really felt that helped make me into a rabbi in a way that I wasn't before my Ph.D.

RS: What was your dissertation on?

JK: My dissertation was on the use of biblical narratives for rabbinic law, so how the Talmud and the Midrashim transformed biblical narrative into law.

RS: Great. I wanted to ask you if you could share your understanding of God?

JK: My understanding of God. It's interesting. There was a time in my life when I thought tons and tons and tons about theology and my conception of God. I don't anymore, to be honest. But I'll share some of my thoughts. Maybe what I'll share is also the times when I thank God. That might give some of my sense. I see God as immanent in the world and also transcendent, a power that we can't understand or fully conceptualize at all. But I also see God as something, someone that I can experience in the moments of my life. One of the things I love to do is swim. I swim in the mornings on a master's team. The times when I get in the pool and everything in my body's just working correctly, and I just feel myself moving through the water really, really smoothly, I always thank God for my body and for creating me in a way that the parts work. So that's a way in which I'm – and when something particularly beautiful happens or when I'm with my boys, I just thank God a lot for bringing me to this moment and enabling me to have this stuff. So I think one of the ways I think of God is a force that needs to be thanked and acknowledged. Yeah, and I thank God when I've come through something difficult, and I get to the other side. God for me is also someone, something, some power to be thanked for helping me move through something difficult to another place. I think that's what I will say about God for now.

RS: Can you share with us a holy moment in your life?



JK: Study. Always holy. A holy moment in my life is for me when I'm learning. I don't experience God mostly through formal prayer; I really experience God when I'm sitting and learning. Sometimes it's by myself; sometimes it's with a havruta, but that's when I feel God the most is when I'm studying Talmud.

[Recording paused.]

RS: – a woman who wants to go into the rabbinate today? What's your best bit of advice to her?

JK: Just do it. Just go into the rabbinate. You can come as you are. You can come as who you are. I would say study, teach, and look for people that you admire, that you want to emulate, that you want to learn from to help you find your own voice as a rabbi. But as I'm talking, the key piece of advice I think that I would offer is you have to find your own Jewish voice, and you have to find your own Jewish voice in dialogue with our lived and our written tradition, and you have to enter deeply into both. That's what you need to do. There's not one way to do it, but that's the challenge. You have to find that, and if you can find that, then you can help other people find that, and you can build communities that can also do that.

RS: That's great. Good articulation. So I was intrigued – when you were at the University of Moscow, I saw that you were an invited speaker at the European Conference – and I know that was a long time ago. But Steven [Glidden] and I were in Europe, and we interviewed many of the women rabbis at that time that were around. I remember when we were doing research for that trip, this conference came up. So I'm wondering if you feel you can speak to this question great; if you can't, that's fine too. Being an American rabbi, having gone to that conference, you have a unique perspective. I guess the question I have for you is can you speak at all about European Jewry in terms of what women are facing there? I know it was a few years ago, but maybe at the beginning, I know there were a few that were around, and (Lisa?)



[inaudible] eventually became a rabbi because I know their challenges are quite different from ours. Maybe you can talk about the challenges and what unifies us, if at all – if you feel comfortable doing that.

JK: Talking about the European rabbinate is hard. That was a long time ago. I can say a few things, I think, about challenges and what unifies us. In the United States, Conservative and Reform Judaism is much more normative, so that automatically gives us as women rabbis a more normative starting point, a more central cultural starting point. European women rabbis, particularly Conservative – Reform, it depends on which country you're in – they're not as much part of the normative Jewish Culture, so they both have to fight for movement recognition as well as for their recognition as women rabbis. It's a double battle that we don't really have. We also don't have the state actively supporting a particular religion. We don't have an established religion. Whereas in many European countries, there is an established religion and even an established head of the Jewish – I was going to say "church," but that's wrong – head of the Jewish synagogue, however you want to say it, and that's not going to be a woman. So that's a very different starting point for the two communities to be working from. But what unifies us is what we're trying to teach and build, which is vibrant Jewish lives. We have more money and more resources to do it in the United States; they have less in Europe, and the communities are smaller. But the project is very similar; it just has different cultural manifestations.

RS: Good. Thank you. That's a good answer. Coming from a Conservative background, and it certainly sounds like you're still working within the Conservative movement, and yet you're teaching here at a pluralistic college – I know you live not that far away. I am just wondering: was that an active choice to be teaching at a pluralist college. Speak about that a little bit.



JK: The choice to teach at Hebrew College was actually, in some ways, an accident. I'll talk on two levels. When I finished graduate school or towards the end, I was constantly in tension in graduate school about whether I wanted to be primarily based in the Jewish community or teaching in a secular university, and I didn't really know which I wanted to do. What happened about my coming to Hebrew college was when I was writing my dissertation – this happens to so many people – my funding was done. Art Green reached out to me from Hebrew College, saying, "We need someone to come and teach part of the lashim, the curriculum about gender. Would you be interested in coming here?" So I thought to myself, and I said, "Well, I don't really want to leave Chicago, but I'm going to have to anyway. This is where I'm from. My parents are here, and it's a great teaching opportunity, and maybe it will help me make the decision of whether I want to be in the Jewish community or the secular world." So I said yes. I did not particularly want to be teaching rabbinical students at the outset at all anywhere. I actually found that I loved teaching here. So when I finished my dissertation, they offered me a tenure track position and said, "Would you like to stay?" I thought about it, and I thought hard. Eventually, I decided, "You know what? I don't have to actually choose. I can both teach for meaning, i.e., teach in the Jewish community, and I can write and continue being an academic." So I said yes, and I stayed here, and it's been a really rich and rewarding environment in which to teach. There are certainly differences between here and JTS that I had to process in teaching [at] a pluralistic school, where we don't, for the most part, mandate a particular type of Jewish, religious living. But it's just been an incredibly rich environment in which to teach.

RS: If you feel comfortable answering this question, please do. If not, that's fine, too. Do your JTS colleagues look down on the fact that you're not teaching at JTS or in a Conservative movement? How do they view this college?

JK: My JTS colleagues don't look down on my teaching here. Some of them have questions, very pointed questions to ask about here; they want to know more, they're



curious. There's definitely from some of them some skepticism and some curiosity, but from others, there's, "Oh, I wish I'd had that curriculum. I wish I'd had that education." I think that once they see what's happening here, they actually see what a rich program it is and that we're creating great rabbis.

RS: Last question. Someday in the future, there will be Jews that will look at this footage and be curious about the women whose stories are being collected here. What do you want them to know about you as a rabbi, as a scholar, and as a Jew? An easy question. What do you hope they remember about you or know about you?

JK: What I hope that they remember about me – that actually almost wants to make me cry because it makes me think about my whole family, that I come from a really rich family, that what I've chosen to do is continuous with how I was brought up. It's not a rejection of my parents, of my past, but actually what I think that they brought me up to be, even though they would never have imagined that their daughter would be a rabbi and a teacher of Talmud. I hope that people will remember me also as a great teacher, as someone who was able to take really difficult text, sacred text, the Talmud, and make it a living text for students and help other Jews find their voices in it, and because of that be part of creating really rich living Jewish communities. I hope also that people will know how much women really are there, that we're not silent, that we're not invisible, but that we're really there, and all you have to do is just open your eyes and look, and we're there.

RS: That's great. Brilliant. Anything else that I haven't asked you that you'd like to speak about?

JK: No, the one thing – yes, the one thing I realize that I didn't mention in my answer about legal change also was that I'm actually a member of the Law Committee, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative movement, and so that's another forum in which changed happens, and there are now more women on it than



there were before.

RS: Susan Grossman's still on it?

JK: Susan Grossman's still on it. Gail Labovitz, Pamela Barmash, and Miriam Birkowitz – and me.

RS: That's half or more than half.

JK: No, it's not. I think there are twenty-plus members, but it's certainly – I said Gail Labovitz, right? Yeah, it's certainly more than when I was in rabbinical school, where there were one or two. Pam's been on it for ages.

RS: Did they tap you?

JK: They tapped me.

RS: Let's get a question about that because I think that is important. Maybe you can share a story. You can share a story about what this entity is. When they reached out to you to be a part of it, maybe you can share what your reaction was and what your thinking was before you said yes.

JK: The Committee on the Jewish Law and Standards is the entity of the Conservative movement that officially passes laws for the movement. Most of the laws are not actually technically binding, but they are very, very, strong suggestions, and they basically set the legal direction of the movement, so key decisions like counting women in a minyan, the ordination of out gays and lesbians came through this committee, things about conversion, and much smaller – I shouldn't say smaller things – end of life decisions, down to smaller things really go through this committee. When I was in rabbinical school – it's very funny. It was in some ways this aspirational thing for many of us – “Oh, to get appointed to the Law Committee.” I was invited to join by the chancellor of JTS; he gets



a couple appointments, and so he appointed me – Arnie Eisen. Originally, I was very excited, and then I said, "Oh, God, I don't have time for this," which I really don't. But I said yes anyway because of it. But I was a bit skeptical of it at the beginning. I still am a little bit, but the Law Committee is actually in a very interesting place, in a very interesting generational place right now because it has people who have been on it for a long time, congregational rabbis who've been congregational rabbis for ages, and then another cohort of people who are scholars, educators, congregational rabbis, members of independent, minyanim, who also spent chunk a time studying in Israel, so are bringing all these different worlds of thinking about Halakhah, Jewish law, and what it means and how we do it, to this group. So we're starting to see evolutions of, "Well, maybe we should alter the process a little bit in the way in which we decide law, to make it a little more efficient," and you're starting to see different voices come through in a really interesting way now. So I actually think and hope that it's going to actually become more relevant and more interesting as we slowly push for these changes in the way in which the committee makes its decisions. The other thing I should say about that is that one of the hallmarks, I think, of some of the newer people on the committee and of, I'd say, rabbis now in their late twenties through their forties, is that we're an interesting mix. I should say there's a group of us that are an interesting mix of being ritually Conservative – shomer Shabbat. You don't drive. You don't play instruments in Shul on Shabbat, etcetera, etcetera, but socially progressive. So that voice is starting to come through in the Law Committee, and you can't easily break it down to [the] right and left anymore. You just can't do that. There's a much more interesting and, I think, alive mix of opinions about law.

RS: Very good. Thank you for sharing that. I'm glad you brought that up.

JK: Thank you.

RS: So that's it.



[END OF INTERVIEW]