Sharon Cohen Anisfeld Transcript

Ronda Spinak: If you could just state your name and tell us where we are and a little bit about what you're doing in your rabbinate?

Sharon Anisfeld: My name is Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, and we're at Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts. I've been working here as the dean of the Rabbinical School since 2006.

RS: Great … So I'm going to take you back to your youth, your childhood. I'd like you to share with us a favorite Jewish memory from when you were growing up.

SA: Any age growing up? Well, I'll just share the first memory that comes to mind, which was – I must've been about fourteen, fifteen, and I had just come back from summer camp. It was a summer camp called International Torah Corps in New Hampshire, run by a group of maverick Reform Rabbis. I had learned a lot there, but one of the things I learned was this wonderful old Israeli folk song. I was humming. I was in my house. I think I was in the bathroom, actually, and humming this song. My mother called from down the hall and said, "What is that melody that you're singing?" So I started to sing it with the words and told her what it was. She had been born in Pre-State Palestine and came as a five-year-old with her parents when they left Israel and came to the States. She said, "That is a lullaby that my mother used to sing to me when I was three and four, living in Pre-State Palestine. Her mother had died when she was quite young, and she had never heard that melody again. So it was this incredible gift to return a lullaby to my mother, this lost lullaby. It somehow captured for me something about the mystery of the way these things are passed from generation to generation. It's not always so simple as the parent passes it on to the child, but sometimes we find ourselves on these winding paths back, so that gift goes in both directions.

RS: Beautiful. Can you share with us what your Jewish upbringing was like?

SA: Sure. I grew up in a suburb of Rochester, New York, and I grew up in a large Reform suburban congregation. When I was thinking about rabbinical school and starting rabbinical school, I would say to people, "I think I'm one of about four or five people in North America who actually loved their Hebrew School experience, their religious school experience." One of the other four or five people was my brother, who is also a rabbi. Anyway, it was Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York, and we were just blessed with really wonderful rabbis and teachers, a Hebrew teacher in (Ingvar Lieberman?), who instilled in us this very deep love of the Hebrew language. So that was my community that we were a part of and my religious school upbringing. My parents had both grown up Reform also in Rochester, New York, but were more committed than most, so they both worked as religious schoolteachers and youth group advisers. One of the formative experiences for us growing up was being advisors' brats on some of the temple weekends and, as young children, watching these teenagers exploring what it meant to make Judaism their own in the '60s and early '70s when there was a lot of permission to be as creative as they wanted to be. So that was sort of our model, this very *chutzpadik* creativity of young teenage Jews in the '60s and '70s, trying to make it their own.

RS: Can you share with us when you first thought about wanting to be a rabbi? Do you have that recollection? Can you share with us when you knew you wanted to be a rabbi?

SA: Well, I started thinking about becoming a rabbi at an embarrassingly young age. I think I was about eleven or twelve, which means it was before – that was in 1971, '72. It was really just before the first women were ordained. I had absolutely no idea that gender was an issue in relation to the rabbinate, even though there were no women rabbis, and I had never met any. It never occurred to me that that would be an obstacle. I was just in love with Jewish prayer and Jewish learning. So that's when I started

thinking about it. I was the only kid around who seemed to be as into it. This is a little bit of a – I don't mean this exactly as a critique, but it is an implicit critique, in a way. In the Reform community that I was growing up in, there were very few role models of people who were really living serious robust Jewish lives who were not Jewish professionals, who were not rabbis or cantors or teachers. So as it became clear that a kid was really passionate about it, people would start asking, "Have you ever thought about becoming a rabbi?" So I think that was around the age when people started asking that question, and there's something about the invitation to really think about that. That was powerful.

RS: Did you share that with your parents? Do you recall when you decided that you were going to go to rabbinical school, or was that always just an assumed thing that you were going to go to rabbinical when you went to college?

SA: Well, I remember arriving at college and my first meeting with my faculty adviser in the religion department. He said, "What are you thinking about professionally?" I said, "I think I'd like to become a rabbi." He said, "That's okay. You'll grow out of it!" That was it, and I always wanted to go back and say, "Guess what? I didn't grow out of it." Anyway, I knew at that point. Now, of course, there was some agonizing back and forth after that. Between high school and college, I went to Israel for about eight months and that really kindled a whole other spark for me, and I thought very seriously about living in Israel. So there were four or five years where I was really debating whether I wanted to pursue the rabbinate or pursue Aliyah. In fact, I've gone back and seen old journals from that time, where I have these diagrams, what my life would be like if I moved to Israel and chose that path, and what it would look like if I decided to become a rabbi. At that time, it was really inconceivable to do both. So anyway, it was something I was serious about already going into college, but I didn't finally decide until after college.

RS: When you go back and look at those journals and imagine your life as a rabbi, how close is your life? You became a rabbi. Was it fairly close to what you had imagined as

your young self?

SA: That's a great question. I have to pause to think about that for a minute. I don't think that I really pictured what it would look like day-to-day to be a rabbi. The elements were there. I think it is basically pretty close, though. When I first started thinking about becoming a rabbi, it was because I was really drawn to – as I said before, I was drawn to Jewish prayer. I was drawn to Jewish learning. Then, during my college years, I became very politically active, and the rabbinate remained with me as an aspiration, but it was much more about engaging with social justice issues from a spiritual perspective, and I'd be happy to say more about that, but it sort of evolved you know with that becoming more central, and those elements have always been there – the spiritual depth and life of prayer and serious Jewish learning and engagement with text, and then the social justice activism being a central piece of it for me as well. The other thing is that my involvement with Jewish life during college was very important to me. I think that has a lot to do with why for the first 15 years of my rabbinate, I went into Hillel work and worked on campuses. I think it's just because those years were such formative, transformative – so much opening of heart and mind, and I was really excited to return to work with young people at that age. Really, from the time I went to rabbinical school, it was pretty clear to me that that would be a direction. I did not ever anticipate being the dean of rabbinical school. I have to say that piece – and in fact, my friends from college – because, if anything, I was getting in trouble with deans in college, and my friends from those years say, "Really? They're letting you be the dean?" At some level, though, the work of being the dean of a rabbinical school here feels very deeply connected to the work that I was doing as a Hillel rabbi because it's all about helping people, accompanying people on their own spiritual journey, and helping them give birth to who they want to become as Jews and what they want to give to the world. I think about it through the metaphor of being a midwife, and that's been a central metaphor for me for a long time for the work that I did in Hillel and now that I do here.

RS: [inaudible] Can you share with us a quick story around that?

SA: There were really two contributing factors … So there were two things that really led me to choose the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. The only other place that I seriously considered was Hebrew Union College. I had grown up Reform. I think the two factors – basically, one was that my older brother had gone to Hebrew Union College and he had a good experience there. Really, the main factor was that, as I said before, I was coming out of a period of being very quite engaged in political activism and social justice activism. When I got to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, I immediately felt a sense of kinship, a sense that I would really find kindred spirits there, both in terms of the activism in particular and more generally, it didn't feel like just a professional program. It felt like a learning community, and that's what I was really looking for was a learning community of kindred spirits, if I had to put it in a nutshell. So that's what drew me to (RSA?).

RS: What was the main obstacle that took you five years or the main trajectory that kept you out of rabbinical school? You had this feeling. You were living in Israel, back and forth. What was the main internal conflict or question in your mind about why you wouldn't do it or why you would, and what finally made you decide to do it?

SA: Well, I had been thinking about rabbinical school, and when I entered college, I was serious about pursuing it. Then, I ultimately took three years after college, where I did some other things before I decided to start rabbinical school. So I would say – I wouldn't actually describe it so much as an obstacle. It was keeping me from going – one issue was figuring out whether I was going to stay in the States or move to Israel. But more generally, there were some other experiences that I really wanted to have before I started rabbinical school, I think. I wanted to devote some more time to the activist work that I had gotten involved with, particularly with anti-poverty work, which I was doing in Providence, Rhode Island, after college and also, to some extent, with Central America

solidarity work, which I was also involved with during those years. But it's a great question, the question of what the central conflict at that time for me was if there was one that I was wrestling with. Now that I think about it, it's reminding me of a conversation at my rabbinical school interview, actually. Art Green, who is the founder of the rabbinical school at Hebrew College and the rector and a very close teacher and mentor and friend, at my interview for rabbinical school there said, "So how do you feel about giving up the life of an activist and really entering into this serious learning program for the next five years?" So he was picking up on something very real for me. I was struggling with that at the time. Before I even had a chance to answer somebody else at the table, another faculty member said, "What are you talking about? She doesn't have to give up the life. We are all about the integration of learning and spirituality and activism." So they got into an argument, and I was sort of off the hook in terms of answering the question. But that was a central question for me: would I be able to maintain the kind of engagement in the world that was so important to me? Also, would I be able to maintain the kind of engagement in the wider world? I was concerned about a Jewish life that would become overly parochial, and it was very important to be engaged in wider issues and with other faith traditions and just in other experiences of what it means to be a human being.

RS: Have you been able to do that?

SA: I have been really blessed to be able to do that. It's one of the things that brought me to working on campuses, where one is immersed in such a diverse community and really by necessity in multicultural work and interfaith work. That was part of what's so attractive to me about the Hillel world. More deeply than that, and this is one of the things that I loved so much about being here in this rabbinical school, I feel that we're not just interested in asking narrow Jewish questions. We're interested in asking human questions and bringing Jewish wisdom and insight and language to thinking and talking about [these] human questions. That's an orientation that goes so deep here, and that makes me feel like there's room to be a full person and weave together Jewish text with

other kinds of literature that I love and that have always been an important passion for me. My major in college was the influence of the Hebrew Bible and American literature as a way of weaving together Jewish studies and American literature. I think that reflects something of what I'm talking about. I'm interested in that meeting, that dialogue, and just the richness that comes from being open to different sources of wisdom and inspiration.

RS: I want to come back and talk a little about the school, but I want to go first a little deeper into you. Then we'll come back because I have lots of questions. Well, you know what? The first question I'm going to ask you is this: you went from Reform to Reconstructionist, and now you're here, which is transdenominational, post-denominational.

SA: Pluralistic.

RS: Can you speak to that? Can you speak to that transition? Are you still Reconstructionist, or have you moved away from that way of thinking about yourself? Did you ever think about yourself like that? Maybe talk to me a little about yourself personally? Then we'll talk about the school.

SA: Yeah. Well, from a personal perspective, I feel that I have really drawn very deeply from a variety of experiences within different denominations. So yes, I grew up Reform. During my college years, I was involved both with Havurah-style Judaism and also with the Conservative minyan on campus. I became more interested in traditional practice, even as I was becoming very interested in progressive political activism. I went to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College seeking that sort of blend. I then worked in Hillel for fifteen years, which was a completely pluralistic environment, and also worked during all of those years with the Bronfman youth fellowships in Israel. I married someone who grew up orthodox and whose family is still orthodox. So that's very much a part of my Jewish world and in a way that I really value and appreciate. So I feel that I really just gleaned so much, so many different things from all of those experiences and haven't

really left any of them behind but sort of taken parts of all of them with me. I guess, constitutionally, temperamentally, I feel a little claustrophobic in any one denomination. I think that's part of why I have gravitated throughout my professional life to these pluralistic settings. My experience of Jewishness and of Judaism is that each of these different approaches has real strengths and real weaknesses, and none of them is the whole picture, and they're all part of this larger organic whole. So I think at some level, even though I'm trained as a Reconstructionist and grateful for my education at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School and still a dues-paying member of the Reconstructionist movement, I've never narrowly identified as a Reconstructionist Jew and never narrowly identified as a Reform Jew. Whenever I've done conversations over the years, and people say, "I want to convert to Reform Judaism or Reconstructionism," I say, "You don't get to do that. You are converting to Judaism, and you will find your own way of doing that." But I don't really believe in that, that one can convert to one brand of Judaism. It's a whole, a messy, complicated whole, and we're part of each other somehow. So I carry that.

RS: How do you teach that here? Can you explain the difference between transdenominational, post-denominational, pluralism? Maybe start with those three definitions.

SA: Sure. Transdenomination was the term that we used for the first several years of the school. It was the language of choice of David Gordis, who was one of the founders; he was then the president of Hebrew College. The wonderful thing about the word transdenominational is that it captured – we wanted to make sure that people felt welcome in this rabbinical school, who identified with any one of the movements, any one of the denominations, or with none of them at all. Also, people who fell between the cracks. So it was an all-inclusive way of saying yes to the denominations and yes to people who didn't identify with a denomination. Post-denominationalism is not a term we've ever used to describe ourselves, and this is a pet peeve; I don't like the term. In

general, I distrust people who identify as post anything – post-feminist, post-Zionist, post-denominational. All of these things, for me, are laced with a little bit of condescension. You may still be in that place, but I've grown out of it. So I don't identify with that. Maybe partly because of what I was describing before about feeling like I've gained so much from all of these things, even if I'm not exactly there; they're all a part of me, and I want them to be honored as part of the whole picture. So now, for the last several years, pluralist is the term. Pluralism is the term we've been using more commonly. Pluralism, for us, goes a little bit beyond transdenominationalism in that it's trying to speak to not just the sociological reality of diversity but a positive, intellectual, spiritual engagement with that diversity. So whereas transdenominationalism was just describing people who identified in a whole range of ways along the denominational spectrum, pluralism is saying, well yes, that's a reality of who we are, and there's so much to learn from that if we really listen to each other carefully and with curiosity and respect. So it's actually a really values-based approach to diversity.

RS: I heard that you're a dues-paying –

[Tape paused.]

SA: Late on the dues every year. [laughter]

RS: When you graduate from here, where do they go? Can they become dues-[paying] members of the Reform movement or the conservative movement? Can they do that? I don't really know the answer to this then if they're not – because they don't really fit anywhere [inaudible].

[Tape paused]

SA: So there are a couple of answers to that. First of all, we now have fifty-six alumni, and as of this summer, we will have seventy. We're graduating fourteen – ordaining fourteen people this year. So this summer will actually be the first time that we make the

transition to having more Alumni than current students, which is a really important tipping point for us. It's nice that it's coinciding with our ten-year mark. There's something about that that feels symbolic of the transition that we're really making from being a powerful inwardly focused to community to really thinking about, "Okay. What's the impact that our students and alumni are having on the wider world?" From the very beginning, we began speaking with the different denominations about – long before we had any alumni, we started speaking with the different denominations about whether our alumni would be eligible to apply for membership in the other rabbinic associations. That process is continuing. The CCAR [Central Conference of American Rabbis], which is the Reform rabbinic association, very early on sent a delegation to the school and got to know the program pretty well and made the recommendation that our graduates should be eligible to apply, and in fact, they have been welcomed. We've had a number of alumni who have applied for membership in the CCAR and been accepted. We're going through that process right now with the RA [Rabbinical Assembly], which is the conservative movement rabbinic association, and they just came this fall again to visit the school, and we had a wonderful visit. We have our first graduate who's applying for membership, and we're hoping that that will go well. On the flip side, part of what's happening, as you probably know, in the denominational world, is the landscape is really shifting a lot, and not all of our alumni are interested in affiliating with one of the denominations. In fact, most are not. So we have a very, very robust alumni association. It's also something that we created before we had any alumni. I'll tell you what really motivated it. Thankfully, we had a student at the time who was a lawyer in his previous career, and probably two or three years before we graduated our first class, he said, "We need an alumni association because we need an ethics policy that binds our alumni because when our alumni start going out and interviewing for jobs, we need to be able to say to any congregation or organization that our alumni are serving that we have an ethics policy to which our alumni are accountable." So we began working on that right away and had that in place by the time our first graduates were ordained. Just as a footnote

that's reflective of something else that feels important to me to say about the school, which is in these first ten years, it has been such a joint venture between students and faculty. There's really a sense of a shared pioneering endeavor here. So that's not an atypical example at all, but just part and parcel of what it's meant to be. [We] engage in this creative process together. So anyway, that was the first step in creating the alumni association, but we now have an active alumni listserv – a very active alumni listserv, so people are constantly turning to each other online with questions and looking for support. We have opportunities for continuing education for alumni. We now have a group of alumni that are working on setting up a mentoring program so that older alumni can mentor new graduates as well as students. So there is a strong support network within the alumni community.

[Tape paused.]

RS: Great. So I want to shift gears just a little bit. Favorite piece of text and why?

SA: That's a big question. A little snippet, huh? I just want to pick carefully. Well, let me try. I'll start with the first one that came to my mind. Then I'll beg for a chance to give a second example if I don't like that. When I think about a favorite text, the first one that comes to mind is probably partly because we're approaching Purim as the next holiday on the calendar. So my mind is right now a little bit in *Megillat Esther*, in the story of Esther. There is a verse in the *Book of Esther* that I think is the most important verse in the book. It's actually a verse that I learned from a teacher of mine, Rabbi Jim Ponet, back in Israel in the summer of 1993, sitting in the living room at (Beit Ticho?) in Jerusalem, in Anna Ticho's house. We were studying it together with a group of the Bronfman fellows. I remember it very vividly. So towards the end of chapter four in the *Book of Esther*, Mordecai sends a message to Esther. He's urging her to go to the King to plead on behalf of the Jewish people because Haman has hatched this genocidal plan against the Jews. The message that Mordecai sends to Esther begins with the words, "

Mi yodea im la'et kazot higa'at la'malchut," which means, "Who knows if it wasn't just for this moment that you became queen? Who knows if it wasn't just for this moment that you ended up in this position to help save the Jewish people?" So what has always been really important to me about that passuk, about that verse and that text is, is the "mi yodea," the "who knows. That moment in which we're called to take action, to step into the unknown, to have hope that we can do something even if the situation seems hopeless, and we have to do all of that only on the strength of "mi yodea" – who knows. No promises, no guarantees, but you got to find a way to take action, and to hold on to hope, and to live with not knowing. So that's the first one that comes to mind.

RS: It's a great one. Really. Who knows?

SA: Right. Yeah. There are a few other key – actually, in studying – I've looked through Tanakh at where that phrase, "who knows," comes up, and it comes up in some other very key junctures.

RS: Are rabbis today needed differently? Are the needs [inaudible] different today, so rabbis need to be different than they might have been twenty-five years ago or close to when you were ordained?

SA: Yeah, I think so.

RS: How so?

SA: Well, yes and no, right? Has the role of the rabbi changed in the last generation? Are the needs really different? On the most individual level, I suppose the needs are what they've always been for a person to really be able to accompany people through the most significant moments in their lives and to somehow bring not only Jewish wisdom but a feeling held by the Jewish community and Jewish tradition to individuals in those moments. So that hasn't changed, I don't think, and I don't think it ever will. This is part of why I feel this work is so deeply important, that every generation will need that kind of

wise accompaniment. Individuals in every generation will need that kind of wise accompaniment. One of the things that I think has changed is – oh, gosh. There are a few things I think have changed. One of the things I think has changed is that there is much greater diversity and complexity in the Jewish community, and that's not only writ large, thinking about the North American Jewry, in general. But it's true within every congregation. Any of my colleagues and friends who work in affiliated denominational congregations tell me all the time, "It doesn't mean there's any less diversity within the congregation itself." Right? So people are coming from such a wide range of perspectives and backgrounds and even within families. One of the most powerful experiences I had in thinking about what it means to be training rabbis for diverse Jewish communities was accompanying a family through a loss and officiating at the funeral. I just remember one of the sons was baal teshuva [and] had become Orthodox. The father was a very strong rationalist and classical Reform but with a strong rationalist bent. The daughter was engaged in new age spirituality, for lack of a better word. They each needed something really different from their rabbi, right? The one who was a baal teshuva needed to know *halakha* about mourning and burial. The one who was involved in new age spirituality needed to know how she could make this her own and give expression to her needs in the ritual. The rationalist historically-oriented father needed to know, "Well, what's the history of this tradition so that I can decide whether I'm going to do it?" So that's just everywhere. I think the diversity is even within each individual at this point; that there's so much fluidity, and people are feeling a need to be able to find their way and to change, to realize that what they need at one point in their lives might be different from what they need at another point in their lives. So I think rabbis really have to be prepared to listen very carefully and very deeply and know how to meet people who are changing, and who are part of complex families, and who are part of complex and diverse communities. I do think that's part of what we're really trying to provide for here. Then, the other thing I would say about how things have changed, I'll just say just quickly, is that while the majority of Jews in North America will still find their way into a synagogue

at some point in their lives, and we better figure out ways of making that a more compelling experience for people, there are a lot of Jews and young Jews, in particular, who are looking for other entry points to Jewish life, where the synagogue is not going to be there doorway. So I think we also need rabbis standing at some of the other doorways, whether it's camps or organizations, communal organizations working on different kinds of issues, or whether it's Jewish arts projects and initiatives. Whatever it is, we need to be able to be there to meet people and welcome them in. So I think that's another significant change.

[Tape paused.]

RS: – personal crisis in your life and Judaism helped you through it.

SA: I'll have to decide afterward if I want to have this be shared more widely, but I'm trying to keep it real. When you say personal crisis, I feel like I have to keep this real. I also have to think about whether Judaism really did help me through it because I want to be real about that as well. Probably the most significant personal crisis I went through was a few years ago when my son was quite ill. Did Judaism help me through that? I want to say yes and no. One of the things if you ask my students here, you will find that I am known as the princess of paradox here. Everything is yes and no, and everything's ambiguous. So the way in which it did not help me, the way in which I felt my – I don't know – Judaism, my spiritual life, whatever left me empty-handed during that time was that I could not pray for the life of me, other than just crying and calling out for help, which that's prayer. But words from a *siddur*? There was just no way. So that was an important learning for me both personally, and as a parent, and as a rabbi, not to be glib about what will and won't help people in a time of crisis. The way that it did – the way that being – I don't even know if it's right to say Judaism helped me but being Jewish helped me – was that I felt so held by a community, by my community here, by the Shabbat community that we're a part of, by the close friends who we were with and

throughout that time were with for every single Shabbat meal no matter what was going on. So that sense, I guess, of not being alone – that's what sustained me and sustained us, and that had everything to do with the rhythms of our Jewish life in the most intimate way.

RS: Thank you for sharing that. Another really easy question: can you share with us your understanding of God?

SA: No. [laughter] I can't share my – no, I'll try. I'll do my best. It's funny. Whenever people ask the – this is actually a better question – "Can you share your understanding of God?" – than "Do you believe in God?" I remember once being on a panel with a close friend, who's an Orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem, and somebody asked, "Do you believe in God? Have you ever had moments of doubt?" He immediately said, "That is much too personal a question. That's basically like asking me, how am I feeling in the universe," [laughter] which I thought was great, actually. Anyway, I digress. So the first thing I'll say is that I am not drawn to theological language; I'm drawn to poetry as a way of giving expression to theological intuitions and spiritual questions, so I'm much more comfortable with poetry as a way of talking about God and the life of the spirit than with theological prose. Having said that, I think that probably the most – I'm hesitating because it doesn't feel like such a fancy or sophisticated way of talking about God, but I think if I'm honest about my own theology, it really is grounded first and foremost in a very deep sense of the soul, that people have souls and that every person's *neshama* is a unique thing in the world, that there have been two *neshamas* alike since the creation of the world. When I start from that place – who's the creator of the soul? Who's planted that spark in each of us? – that's how I get to God. It's from the *nashema*, from the soul, and then some sense that the world as a whole has a soul. I think that's how I think about God as the world's soul. There's a lot more to say, but maybe I'll just say a couple other things about that, one which goes back to the question of paradox, which is very, very central to my spiritual life. So part of the way I understand our God, the God that I have inherited from

Jewish tradition is the God that holds paradox. In some sense, that's how I understand the Shema – *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai E?ad* – "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One." *Yisrael* means "God-Wrestler," so I feel like that speaks to the truth of we, as human beings, wrestle with all these contradictions that are part of the human experience, and God is somehow the one that is able to hold all of that contradiction, all of that paradox. So an important symbol of that for me is the *sneh*, the bush that burns and is not consumed. So I think a lot about the contrast between Pharaoh as the God of Egypt, Pharaoh as a God of black and whites, of masters and slaves, of girls and boys, of Israelites and Egyptians – all these very stark black and white categories. And then Moshe comes out of that world of black and white, Pharaoh's world of black and white, and encounters the God that's in this bush that's burning and yet isn't consumed. There's something about that that goes to the heart of how I understand God. The last thing I'll throw at you, and I think of this as sort of Jewish Zen *Koan*, but it's a fragment of a poem by Yehuda Amichai, who's sort of Israel's poet laureate in some sense, who died in 2000. So in this particular couplet, he says, "Once I believed that God is death and change is his prophet. Now I have calmed down, and I believe that God is change and death is his prophet." You can ponder that. Anyway, God is change.

RS: Can you share with us a holy moment?

SA: Sure. [laughter] I want to pick carefully. Can I do two? Well, actually, let me just think for another minute. It feels like there is something so intimate about that question of what is a holy moment. So I'm thinking about the other people involved in those whole holy moments. It almost feels like talking about them makes them a little – I'm worried about it somehow being sacrilegious.

RS: You don't have to answer the question if you don't want to.

SA: I want to, but I don't want to. It's a paradox anyway.

RS: I love rabbis on this end, but then on this end …

SA: Yes. Let me decide whether to come back to it.

RS: Okay. We'll come back to it. What simple advice do you give a woman who's leaving to become a rabbi? The single best advice you can give somebody.

SA: I would give this to a woman or a man, or a person of any other gender. What advice would I give to someone becoming a rabbi? Preserve your humanity.

RS: I'm not sure I know what that means exactly. Can you explain that? It's the first question [where] I don't know what that means.

SA: [laughter] What that means to me is make sure you never confuse the role with the person. Never confuse your role with who you are, and make sure you have places in your life where you can stop being a rabbi and just be with people as a mother, or a friend, or a lover, or a teacher, but don't get too bound up with the role.

RS: Single greatest contribution women rabbis have given Judaism in the last forty years? Another easy question.

SA: I'm going to have to give two there. The first is Midrashic. In terms of the greatest contributions of women to the rabbinate over the last forty years, I would say, from my perspective, it's two things. One is the Midrashic contribution. In other words, we are part of a long, vigorous creative, interpretive tradition, but it's an interpretive tradition that until recently has not really benefited from the wisdom and creativity of women. What are the questions that women bring to the text when they need it? What new meanings emerge from that meeting? So I am so excited by that. I just think if Torah is this infinite, continually unfolding thing, the seventy faces to Torah, the infinite impossibilities for interpretation, we've just opened up a whole new world of possibilities by having women meet that text and become part of the interpretive tradition. So for me, that's probably

the single most exciting thing on the level of communal creativity. Then, the other single most important thing is for a whole generation of young women – for our daughters, for our granddaughters – just by virtue of seeing women as rabbis, they are invited to the table in ways that they never could have been before. There's something about that moment where a young girl looks at a woman, whether it's on the bimah or in the classroom or whatever, and says, "Well, wait a minute. If she's a rabbi, that means I could be too. That means I have something to say here that is important and welcome. So I think that's also going to change everything. It already has. But I think we're still actually seeing the impact of that because, of course, even while young women and girls are seeing that, there's still a lot of vestiges. I remember when my daughter – maybe she was five or six, and she said to me, "*Eema*, I just want to make sure you know – no offense, but I want to make sure you know when people hear the word "rabbi," they don't think of a woman." [laughter] So that's still there, right? We still have a ways to go. But for me, those are the two greatest contributions: the interpretive creativity and the invitation to new generations of women and girls to come to the table.

RS: That's great. [inaudible] in your rabbinate?

SA: The language of mission is not exactly –

RS: [inaudible]

SA: Right.

RS: Do you have something you want to accomplish in your time as a rabbi?

SA: Yes.

RS: If you don't, that's okay.

SA: I mean, I have a lot of things. I'm trying to distill – if I had to distill what is most important to me, I think it goes to this metaphor of midwifery, of being a spiritual midwife for other people. But the other way that I would – another way that I think about it is I feel that there's a real crisis in American Judaism, which is a reflection of a larger crisis in American culture, which is rampant consumerism and seeing everything through the lens of consumerism. What that means, the reason that's a Jewish crisis is that we are often treating Jews as consumers of Judaism rather than as co-creators of Judaism. As co-authors of the next chapter of Jewish life and Jewish history. So I think that's the thing I'm most passionate about is I don't see the people who I teach and work with – and I never have – I've never seen them as consumers to whom I am trying to sell something. I see them as people who I want as partners in this process of co-creation.

RS: That's very nice. Two more questions. What do you do to exercise or flex your own spiritual life? How do you create a spiritual life? Actually, maybe three questions. There's one I want to come back to. [inaudible] about that. [inaudible] the story around that would be great. What do you do?

SA: Well, let me take a stab at it and see if a story comes to mind. I'm very, very lucky; I'm luckier than most rabbis because I am part of a very vibrant, passionate, and committed community of practice. A lot of rabbis are really lonely. They're serving communities, and they don't quite have a community of their own. So I'm serving in a community, which is also my community. The sense of community among faculty here and between faculty and students is really rare. So I'm lucky in that regard in that I feel like my spiritual life is constantly nurtured by the communal prayer here. I happen to be particularly partial to the stairwell minyan. We have a minyan that meets on Tuesday mornings in the back stairwell of the college. I like that it's in the cracks there. The music is really beautiful. My spiritual life is also nurtured all the time by the learning here, so many opportunities to be learning with and from other people. On a more personal level, poetry is a really important part of my spiritual life – and music and song, singing

and songwriting. Probably those are the most important things.

RS: What is the stairwell minyan? I haven't heard of that.

SA: I wish you could – yes.

RS: Tuesday? I'm here tomorrow.

SA: You should come.

RS: What time?

SA: Eight o'clock. It's really worth it.

RS: I'll think about it.

SA: We happen to have a number of really extraordinary musicians in the community right now.

RS: That's the back one over there on the other side?

SA: You know where the hallway where my office is?

RS: Yes.

SA: At the end of that hallway.

RS: [inaudible] Go under and around?

SA: Yes.

RS: So I wanted to get back to your husband, who's Orthodox.

SA: He's not Orthodox anymore; he grew up Orthodox.

RS: He grew up Orthodox.

SA: He's lapsed Orthodox.

RS: Maybe this is not such a great question. Did he have to share with his family that his wife was becoming a rabbi? How did that go?

SA: Yes.

SA: So, my husband grew up in a modern Orthodox family. He was Orthodox through his college years but had already started to lapse just a little bit. He was still a committed *Halakha* observant Jew but egalitarian by the time we met. He had moved from the Orthodox minyan at Harvard Hillel to the egal minyan at Harvard Hillel. What I will say – and his parents were wonderfully open and welcoming. We had the advantage of one other family member, a cousin, also orthodox, [who] had previously married a Reform woman rabbi. That was the first in the family – Karen Fox-Rosen. I don't know if you interviewed her. So they really trail-blazed things in the extended family for us, and it made things much easier for me. That made it much easier for me. I'm trying to figure out how to quickly, without going into too much complexity. Within his immediate family, it was not terribly difficult. Within the extended family, including a lot of family in Israel who are significantly less open-minded, and folks in the Bobover Hasid community, and accommodating those – accommodating everyone at our wedding, from Bobover Hasidism to my radical feminist anti-marriage friends and everybody in between was no simple challenge. But in terms of his immediate family, they were – I don't feel like I did a great job with that.

RS: At some point, long from now, someone will look back on these tapes. So is there anything that you would like to share about what you hope that you've done here and what they think of and how they might remember you as a rabbi and as [inaudible]? Easy question.

SA: Oh, God. It's too hard.

RS: It's late in the day, I know. I almost didn't even ask it.

SA: It's such a fair question, but it's a scary one somehow to really try to – it's funny when you ask it because I ask that kind of question all the time at our admissions interviews. Now I think what a cruel, terrible thing to do to an aspiring rabbi. I think what means the most to me is when I hear students reflect on my role in their lives, either personally or in terms of creating the institution. It has to do with a lot of the things I've been talking about – creating a culture of deep humanity and mutual respect and compassion. Two things I'll add, actually, that I haven't mentioned – I'm very, very proud of the community here. I don't think I'm the only person who has something to do with it, but I think I have a significant role in it. I feel like we've created a culture here, which is not cynical and that our graduates leave not cynical about the work that they're doing in the world, and that's no small thing, to really come out feeling still hopeful and still wanting to take the risk of doing something that matters with your life. That's a big deal, and it's really a privilege to be part of creating that culture on a daily basis. The second thing is we are also – we are not preparing rabbis who are coming out with a contempt or condescension for the people that they're going to be working with. I think that's also a bit of a malady. It's easy to fall into in this work. It's tiring. It's spiritually and emotionally draining. So that battle against both cynicism and contempt is – I feel really proud of that. It's just not who we are and not who our faculty are, not who our students are, not who our alumni are. So that's important to me. I also feel really, really deeply grateful to be working with colleagues who are committed to creating that kind of a culture. Yes. So that's what I mean when I say, "Preserve your humanity." It's those things. It's keeping your heart open. I feel that I'm blessed to be around people who help me keep my heart open, even though sometimes that means your heart hurts. I hope and pray that I'm helping students find ways to keep their hearts open as they go into doing this holy work.

RS: Great. Do you have any bit of advice for somebody who says, “How do I keep my heart open?” What would you say? “I’m having a hard time keeping my heart open. What tricks of the trade can I hold on to?”

SA: Well, the first thing that comes to mind in terms of keeping an open heart is allowing for ebb and flow. This is true in the rabbinate, and it’s true in every relationship that I’ve been in. When you start to feel your heart sort of tightening up or going numb, just remember not to get locked into that. I mean, we all feel that in moments. The heart needs to close to protect itself, or we numb ourselves to protect ourselves. But keep it fluid. Ebb and flow so [as] not to get so scared that what is right now is how it’s always going to be. If you’re feeling a dry spell in your *tefillah*, in your prayer life, it’s okay; just stay open to the possibility that the waters are going to start flowing again. If you’re feeling distant from somebody who you felt close to, stay open to the possibility that things are going to flow again. Something about that feels very connected to me to keeping an open heart. Again, as a leader, allowing yourself to hurt, not being so afraid because that’s why the heart closes. It’s afraid of getting hurt.

RS: Well, thank you. That was great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]