Idit Klein Transcript

JULIE JOHNSON: This is a recording of the Jewish Women's Archive, the Women Who Dared project, research fellow Julie Johnson. I'm interviewing Idit Klein on February 25th, 2005. If you'd just spell your last name.

IDIT KLEIN: K-L-E-I-N.

JJ: Okay. So I wanted to start a little bit with your background and your family background. The first questions – just basic questions about when and where you were born, where you grew up.

IK: Okay. I was born in 1972 in Tel Aviv, and within the first two months of my life was on a plane to Italy, where my parents were graduate students at the time. And so I spent the first years of my life going back and forth between Italy and Israel. And then, just before my second birthday – Recording?

JJ: Yeah. I'm going to check occasionally.

IK: Oh, okay. That's all right. Just before my second birthday, we came to the States, ostensibly for a summer vacation. My father got involved with a business venture with his uncle, who's now living back in Israel. Everyone in my family is constantly kind of wandering and shifting locations. Anyway, that summer vacation turned into thirty years that we've been here. So I'd say that one of the most important events of my life happened before I can recall it. And that is that I was born in Israel, and somehow established a really – it's a complete enigma to me how this happened, but somehow, I established this real sense of connection to the country and sense of identity, on my own, as an Israeli. I mean, so much so that – what I do remember is my first day in preschool in the States. I screamed and banged on the wall with my fist for the first couple of hours

of the day, screaming in Hebrew that I wanted to go back home; I wanted to go back to Israel. That could have been just a little kid wanting to go back to the familiar, but the familiar was actually our apartment in Milano, not Tel Aviv. So that's why I'm always struck by that when I think about it – and that significant event of my life, of being born in Israel and establishing that strength of identity. The other piece of it is that we left Israel and we came here. I'd say an almost equal part of my identity has been – growing up, certainly, in my family has been – being from Israel and that we left Israel. So that was always very significant. Growing up, like a lot of Israeli transplants in the US, my parents were always talking about when we'd move back to Israel. And it was clear to me – only checking my cell phone because there's this one sort of crisis thing that's happening at work. This is not it. So, I just want to see if this one guy calls.

JJ: That's fine. Also, I didn't say this before, but if you want to pause and you want to do anything, just let me know.

IK: Yeah. There's this joke that a lot of – I don't know if you are familiar with a lot of the Israeli émigrés, but there's this joke in the community of some Israelis who left Israel and are visiting for a couple of weeks, and they see all their old friends. Their friends are like, "When are you coming back? When are you moving back?" Those who left say, "Oh, we really are going to come back. We're coming back as soon as our daughter finishes school." "Oh, okay. Well, how old's your daughter?" "Oh, she's four."

JJ: Yes. [laughter]

IK: I feel like that was very much sort of the psychology of how I grew up, the sense that this wasn't really our permanent home, yet a departure wasn't imminent. Anyway, all of that said, I grew up with a really strong sense of Jewish identity as a sense of peoplehood. And that I definitely got from my parents. I know that that comes from being Israeli, that comes from – my parents are both originally from Transylvania, and they moved to Israel in their teens when they were [teens]. So, they moved to Israel in

their teens with their families when they were able to get out of Communist Romania. Their families had both applied for visas years before but weren't permitted out because people weren't [laughter] being permitted out. My parents, like a lot of Jews in Europe, definitely had a sense of identity and connection to their Hungarian identity. Because most Jews in Transylvania at that time were Hungarian, just because Transylvania used to be part of Hungary. They definitely have an affinity for Hungarian culture and language and food. Yet, when they talk about their lives there and their friends, it's always, "Oh, that person was Jewish. That person wasn't Jewish." I mean, they weren't seen, nor saw themselves, as Hungarian. They saw themselves as Jewish.

JJ: I see. Yes.

IK: And again, that meaning – being a member of a people. So, for me, I think, growing up, when I first started noticing that American Jewish friends of mine would refer to being Jewish as their religion – or when I got a little older and these questions would be raised, like, "What are you first, an American or a Jew?" – which to me always seems like such a stupid question because I felt like being Jewish is not merely my religion. First of all, my family is largely secular.

JJ: Yes, I wanted to get to that too.

IK: But even if they weren't – and I'm not – but even if I were, I very much view Judaism or Jewishness – to quote Mordecai Kaplan, as an evolving civilization that has a history and a culture and languages and literature and art and music, *and* a very rich religious and spiritual tradition, but that being a part of it.

JJ: Can I just –?

IK: Yeah.

JJ: Do you have siblings?

IK: Yes. I have a brother who is twenty-seven. And he was born here when I was four, which – do you want to ask –? I was going to go on to –

JJ: Yeah, you can.

IK: A major event happened on the day of his birth that's probably relevant to this.

JJ: Yeah, you can say that.

IK: Okay.

JJ: Then I have some other just sort of family-related questions about your parents' professions.

IK: Okay, go ahead. Because this will come up because this is like –

JJ: Okay, yeah. We can always go back.

IK: – how I became an activist. [laughter] I'm sure you'll ask about it.

JJ: Yeah. So your parents were in graduate school in Italy.

IK: Actually – excuse me – my mother was in graduate school. My father was an undergrad. Because they were twenty-three, twenty-four when they were in Italy before I was born. I was born when they were twenty-five. And my mother hadn't gone into the Israeli Army. So she had gone to art undergrad and was in an art graduate academy in Milan. My father had been in the Army. He was in the '67 war. So he was getting his first degree in Italy.

JJ: I see.

IK: Actually, that played a role in why we ended up staying here because my father, while he was here, learned that what would take another three years or so in Milan would

only take him a year or so here, at the local UMass [University of Massachusetts] in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, which is near where we were living when we moved to the States. So that was another factor. Initially, it was, "Oh, well, we'll stay until Andre," – my father – "gets his degree, and then we'll move back." And then it was like, "Well, we'll stay for a few years to see how this business opportunity turns out, and then we'll move back."

JJ: Right.

IK: And then you get established and build a life and –

JJ: Right. Right.

IK: – and you don't –

JJ: Right. And what are your parents –? What have their professions been? And what would you say your economic/class background is?

IK: My father is an engineer by training. He owns and runs a textile factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts, which is actually one of the last remaining small-to-medium textile factories in the US. It's been quite a struggle for the last ten years. This probably isn't relevant. But whatever –

JJ: It's fine.

IK: – to keep it afloat. That's been a really hard thing for me to watch. My mother is an artist. Growing up, when we were really little, she always had an art studio that was always separate from the house, or sometimes it was a separate wing of the house. But it was always somehow separate.

JJ: Part of and separate, I guess.

IK: Yeah. But usually, it wasn't in the house. I just remembered – one time, it was like this finished part of our basement. But mostly, it wasn't in the house. So she always had her art and spent time doing that. And then, as time went [on], she started teaching art and also started teaching Hebrew at the local synagogue. But she definitely, in terms of her time, was primarily a mother and a wife, I would say. In my family, gender roles were pretty traditional. I mean, absolutely, my mother did the cleaning and the cooking and was the primary caretaker of the children, and my father worked sixteen hours a day, although we did see him a lot. I mean, he worked when people slept. [laughter] So in terms of class, I mean – well, it's an interesting question because when we came to the States, we didn't have anything. And so, monetarily, we were poor. My parents, one of the stories that they tell – they tell all these romantic stories of our life in Italy. I think it was the most romantic time in their lives. So, one of the stories they tell is that they were so poor because both of them were students that my mother would make two little [inaudible]; it's like this like a spicy Hungarian hamburger, sort of. My parents would share one, and I would have one when I was a year old or something. So, in terms of money, certainly, we were poor, starting out. My father worked insane hours and very, very, very slowly built up what became a successful business, such that, by the time I was in my teens, I would say we were solidly middle class. By the time I went to college, we were just above the cutoff income bracket for me to get any financial aid. So, there was a significant shift in terms of income. Then, there was always the sense of where we had come from. Where we had come from was the pre-war Hungarian Jewish intelligentsia. So growing up, when we were living in this little cramped house in New Bedford and just pretty low-income – well, then more than now – but still, it's a pretty low-income city. I grew up hearing stories about the home that my grandmother and her sister grew up in [inaudible] the town that my mother's from in Hungary, and how it was the most magnificent house in the city, so much so that when the Gestapo came to [inaudible] in May 1944, they set up their home and headquarters in the city – and that was said with kind of this interesting tone of pride. There was a bell under the dining

room table that anyone could ring at any time, and servants would come. They had a private German governess who taught them German, and they went to this fancy French high school. I don't know if you've seen the movie *Sunshine*.

JJ: No.

IK: Well, it's like the story of my family.

JJ: Oh, yeah?

IK: Yeah. I mean, so all of these images and stories created this sense that, from an age of – I can't remember when – I knew that we came from wealth and high education and a family that really valued arts. On my father's side, they were more – what's the word? They were more like landed peasants. My father's family basically owned the agricultural village that his father is from. So, there is the sense that we came from this high position in society, from which we were unjustly and horrifically thrown out when the Nazis came. And then, after the war, my mother very briefly lived in this mythic house that my grandmother had grown up in during this kind of limbo period between Western powers occupying former Nazi-occupied lands and the Soviet regime taking over. Then, when they did, everything became collectivized and redistributed. So, they were moved out of their – anyway, so I'm sharing all of them – this very long story just to say that even though I – I remember our not having money to do things, but I've always felt like it would be irresponsible for me to say that I was poor or came from a low-income family because these memories were so significant in the shaping of identity and because it changed –

JJ: For your parents –

IK: For my parents and –

JJ: – to you.

IK: – and communicated to us.

JJ: Yeah, sure. And so you spent your early years here in New Bedford? What schools did you go to around your educational career?

IK: Yeah. For kindergarten, first, and second grade, I went to the Winslow School, which is a public school in New Bedford, just a few blocks away from our home. In the middle of second grade, I asked my parents if I could go to the Orthodox Jewish day school in Providence, Rhode Island, which I had learned about because my parents, despite being secular, were concerned that I was losing my Hebrew. Because like many immigrant children, I went through what I've learned is a very common phenomenon, that when I first came to the States, I refused to speak English. So for my first year in preschool, I wouldn't speak to anyone. There was this contest amongst the kids who could get me to talk first. I remember understanding. I don't know. I just didn't – I wasn't even unhappy. I just had this feeling like, "This is irrelevant. I'm not a part of this place. I'll just play over here."

JJ: "I'm going back." [laughter]

IK: Right. But then, once I started speaking English, then I refused to speak Hebrew as my primary language of communication and stopped speaking Hebrew with my parents and started answering them in English, probably when I was four years old, so quite young. So, my parents were concerned that I was losing my Hebrew. At the time, the only really rigorous Hebrew and kind of Jewishly-related education that was available was at this Orthodox Jewish day school in Providence. My parents had taken me to visit it when I was in first grade. For reasons that are completely nonsensical, in memory, I didn't like it and didn't want to go. So, I said I didn't want to go, and they respected that. Then, when I was in second grade, my best friend, who lived next door, who, when she wasn't my best friend, was my arch enemy and greatest bully and who was a lot bigger than me – she often, if we would be in a fight, would catch me after school and she would

just bully me in various ways. And one day, it occurred to me that if I went to this school in Providence – because sometimes my mother wouldn't be home for a little bit after school. It occurred to me if I went to the school in Providence that wasn't within walking distance of our house, and so my parents would have to pick me up, or someone would have to pick me up, and I would be able to get inside my house and be safe. So, I decided to ask. So one night, I crawled into my father's lap and, without saying why – because I somehow felt like, if I said the reason why they wouldn't really take it [laughter] seriously. So, I said, "I want to go to the day school." Then, the next year, I, as a quite secular Israeli girl, entered an Orthodox Jewish day school, and I stayed there through eighth grade. That was extremely significant and impacting and life-changing in a lot of ways.

JJ: And your parents were –

IK: I would say all positive, actually.

JJ: – obviously, in favor of this.

IK: They were in favor of it. They were in favor of it because it was really important to them for me to maintain my Hebrew. Language is really a big thing in our family. My father decided when he was sixteen years old – he'd been in Israel for a year-and-a-half – he decided, when he was sixteen, that he would marry a Hungarian Jewish woman from Transylvania whose parents were Holocaust survivors because he wanted their parents to be able to literally talk to each other and understand each other. There are people in our family who are Jews from the Romanian part of Transylvania, and they speak Romanian, not Hungarian. They're sort of marginalized in the family in silly ways. So language was very explicitly associated with identity and in very stated ways. So they wanted me to keep speaking Hebrew. So, it started out as that. Then I think that my parents do have, like I said before, the strong sense of being part of a people. Even if they're not Jewishly observant, they both, in their own ways, I think, have a relationship

with God. They think about it in terms of a relationship with God and feel like it's important to know about the tradition that we come from. That said, when I was in fifth grade, I asked my parents if we could start keeping kosher, and when I started sort of observing Shabbat in different ways, they weren't so happy with that. That was kind of disturbing to them, and all these panicked calls went around to all my relatives in Israel, "What's happening to Idit? What's happening to Idit?" Like I was going astray. But on the whole, they were supportive. They saw that I was really happy there and that I completely loved studying Chumash and Gemara and Mishnah and was very much encouraged by the all-male Orthodox Rabbis there in my learning. That was something that they respected a lot.

JJ: And up until what grade did you –?

IK: Through the end of eighth grade.

JJ: And then –?

IK: And then I went to public high school in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. We were living in Dartmouth at that point, which is just a town adjoining New Bedford.

JJ: Did you go to college after –?

IK: Yeah, I went to Yale University. And then – five years? – yeah, five years later, during which time I lived in Israel – but I assume I'll get to that in another question –

JJ: Okay. [laughter]

IK: So five years later, I was back here, and I went to graduate school at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and got a Master's in Social Justice Education.

JJ: Right, they have a big department there. Yeah.

IK: Yeah.

JJ: Yeah.

IK: So that is all my educational history to date.

JJ: That's your school line. Some of these may jump around a little bit. Were your parents political at all or activists in any way? Did they identify themselves in that way?

IK: I'd say that they were always political and moral. The political and moral messages were very much woven into family discussions. I became politicized at a young age.

JJ: You did.

IK: So, I feel like my parents conveyed that. That was only part of their worldview. But they themselves weren't activists.

JJ: They were not.

IK: No.

JJ: So, it sounds like – just going back to the Jewish identity piece for a bit, they did not celebrate holidays?

IK: No, we did.

JJ: Yeah.

IK: But we did in a – I mean, in Israel, secular Israelis will have a big meal at Passover, and it’s no different than another big meal, except maybe there'll be some matzoh on the table, and it's because of Passover. So my parents, too, were impacted by living in the American Jewish community, and they joined the local synagogue –

JJ: They did.

IK: – which was where my mother taught Hebrew school. When I was in public school, I was the only Jewish kid in my class, so my mother would come in and do a little Chanukah lesson at Chanukah. So they observed them because the holidays are part of the calendar –

JJ: Right, right.

IK: – in the Jewish community, but certainly not religiously, in terms of looking for chametz before Passover or anything. I mean, that definitely didn't happen.

JJ: Did you participate in any other kind of Jewish-related activities, like summer camps or organizations, as a young person?

IK: Yes. I actually went to three different Jewish summer camps, Camp Jori, Camp Yavneh, and Camp Ramah. I never really got into the summer camp groove. Because we spent every other summer growing up in Israel. And as I got older –

JJ: Oh, you did?

IK: – and we could afford to spend more time there, we would spend every summer. So, most kids I knew at Jewish summer camp had been going since they were the youngest age. So, the first time I went, I was already in fifth grade, and that was already old [laughter] to be starting summer camp.

JJ: Or any other organizations, like a –?

IK: Yeah. Let me think. I mean, I did some, like BBYO and USY [United Synagogue Youth] stuff in high school, but it really wasn't – I mean, I went to some dances, but it certainly wasn't important in my life. I thought that it was pretty lame. A youth organization that I did get involved with that was very significant in my life is – the

summer after my junior year of high school, I went to Israel on a program called the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel. It's a program that was founded to bring together twenty-five potential young Jewish leaders from widely ranging different backgrounds – Jewishly, culturally, blah blah blah – together for a summer of learning and community in Israel. That, for me, was the first time that – I think, most importantly, that intellectually I felt like – I mean, it was the first time that I felt fully understood and like it was okay to –

JJ: What age were you then?

IK: I was sixteen.

JJ: Sixteen.

IK: And like it was okay to be smart and that that was a good thing and that I wasn't weird because I read Molière or whatever I [laughter] was doing at the time.

JJ: Yeah.

IK: I made incredibly close friends, who are still amongst my closest friends today. It was also the summer that really politicized me. Well, I'd say it's the summer that took me from right to left on Israeli politics. I grew up in a pretty typical Israeli – looking back, I would say center-right. But it was a typical Israeli: yes, everyone should be treated equally, but there are terrorists, and there's no such thing as a Palestinian people. I mean, this was how people talked in the ’80s.

JJ: Right.

IK: And that's what I grew up thinking. Then I went to Israel on this youth trip and heard Naomi Chazan speak, and, I mean, just that [laughter] one hour completely transformed –

JJ: Oh, that's interesting.

IK: – my position. So, in my family, everyone says that I came back from Israel a leftist. In retrospect, I think –

JJ: As a teenager. Yeah.

IK: – of course, I always was.

JJ: Yeah. Right, right.

IK: But in terms of knowledge, that was when I gained the knowledge to identify with the left on Israeli politics.

JJ: I see. So would you say that your relationship to Judaism has changed over the years? And if so, how?

IK: Yes. I mean, I'd say it's evolved. I'm not someone who has experienced really radical changes in identity. Like I said before, I think I started out a secular Israeli kid, but at a pretty young age entered Orthodox Jewish day school and fell in love with Jewish text study. I mean, later on, I majored in literature in college. I think part of it was appreciating it as feeling like it was my intellectual history that I was studying and it was my intellectual tradition. But I think more of it was that the kind of interpretive work that we were doing in my Chumash class in third grade was much more advanced [laughter] and sophisticated and interesting than what we were doing in my English class. I always say that that's where I kind of learned – in third grade, when my Rabbi explained the process of commentary on text and introduced me to the idea that there were multiple commentators on the same text and, therefore, multiple, often conflicting perspectives on the same idea – they always say that that's when I was first introduced to postmodernism. Okay. So, back to my Jewish identity.

JJ: Just wondering if you've seen any kind of –

IK: Yeah. So, I mean, one shift is that growing up, I really didn't identify as an American Jew. It wasn't actually until I got to college and started becoming active in the Hillel at Yale that I kind of begrudgingly admitted that I had been completely shaped by growing up in the American Jewish community and that, had I grown up in Israel, I hope that I would have been a secular Israeli who was tolerant of religious people and open-minded to the notion that there might be something of value in the Jewish religion. But I don't know necessarily that I would have. I might have been completely hostile to religion and the religious, as many secular Israelis are. And they have good reason to. So acknowledging that, I think, was critical. That's certainly a change that happened very slowly throughout my life. I went through different periods of being more observant and less observant. But again, that didn't see any kind of extremes.

JJ: And going back to the political part. I have one – I'm jumping around. Where would you say –? So it sounds like this trip to Israel when you were sixteen was kind of pivotal in a certain way. Where would you say you –? When and how did you become active?

IK: Well, I mean, the impetus for me becoming political or – I mean, the way I kind of think of it is as feeling like I needed to do something to make a difference in the world. The impetus for that happened when I was four-and-a-half years old on the day my brother was born. That was the day when a great aunt of mine, who incidentally is married to my father's uncle, who's the reason we're living in the States, to begin with – [laughter] so it's all just interconnected. In any case, I was spending the day with her because my parents were at the hospital, and my brother was being born. All of the older people in my family had blue numbers on their arm but – and I'd noticed it before but just, for whatever reason, hadn't asked. That day, as she bent down to pick up a toy that I had dropped, I saw the numbers and thought to ask. So, I asked her what those numbers were. She said that when she was eighteen, bad men took her away and that they put the numbers on her arm. I asked her why. And she said because they were Jews. That was all she said. She quickly changed the subject. Yet somehow, I felt this

depth of sadness and fear from her that I thereby felt. I felt really scared because I knew that I was a Jew too. My brother was born on May 11th, and it was a beautiful spring day, and I knew that the front door was open, and I thought to myself, "We have to close it so that the bad men don't come."

JJ: At four.

IK: Yeah. So I told her that I needed to go to the bathroom, but I didn't go to the bathroom. I went, and I closed the screen door, and then I closed the front door. I kind of leaned against the wood, sort of feeling the heft of the wood, thinking, "Okay. We'll be okay." And then I thought, "No, they can get through this," and I thought, "Okay, I'll have Daddy put in a thick steel door." Then I thought, "No, they can get through that." Then I felt this just incredible terror and sense of vulnerability, and just I think, really being faced with the knowledge for the first time that there was bad in the world. People I knew had suffered at their hands because they were Jews, and I was a Jew too, and therefore I was also at risk, and they could come get me too. I was completely convinced that that was inevitable, that at some point, they would come to get me too. I have a very vivid memory of standing there in front of the front door with the stairwell behind me, vowing with all of a four-year-old's ferocity that I needed to do whatever I can do to change the world so that there wouldn't be bad men. I really see that moment as kind of where my commitment to social justice and my sense of empathy and connection to other people who experienced persecution and suffered from discrimination and prejudice growing up, where that came from.

JJ: So, were you involved in any political groups? Did you consider yourself an activist as a youth?

IK: I'd say once I got to eighth grade or something like that, I started. I mean, initially, the first things I was active on were – the first campaign that I was active in – "active" [laughter] – that I did anything, as an eighth grader, was the whole Free Soviet Jewry

campaign. The first demonstration that I ever went to was the – I think it was 1989. There was a mass demonstration on the mall to free Soviet Jews. That was really an incredible experience for me, just feeling the power of numbers and feeling the sense of personal power that comes from being with many other people who feel the way you do. So there was that. In high school, whenever there was an issue at my high school – like the local department of education was cutting teachers' stipends for being advisors to extracurricular clubs. So me and a friend of mine organized a student walkout in the middle of the day and a rally in the football stadium next door. So, I would do those kinds of things.

JJ: And what about college? You said you got involved in Hillel?

IK: I got involved in Hillel and also in the Women's Center at Yale. I mean, there wasn't any one thing that I ran or really focused on, I'd say. I mean, I did a lot of Jewish programming and Israel-related programming and peace process stuff and various Women's Center activities. Then, when I came out my senior year, I got involved with the – then it was just the GLB [Gay Lesbian Bisexual] group on campus and started doing work within Hillel to raise GLB issues within the Jewish community at Yale, where that hadn't happened before. And so, I mean, [laughter] one of the first times that I feel like I had to push myself to dare to do something was the fall of my senior year when I came out to the – I was on the Hillel executive committee since second semester of my freshman year.

JJ: Oh. So that's a leadership role that you had.

IK: Oh, yeah. I had a lot of leadership roles. [laughter] I can tell you them if you want.

JJ: Go ahead.

IK: So, I decided that I needed to come out to the Hillel executive committee and needed to say why I no longer felt completely safe and at home in the Jewish community that had

always been my primary home at Yale and how painful that was and what I thought needed to happen. I mean, now I look back on it, and it's surprising to me how terrified I was. But I was really terrified. I remember my voice was shaking, and it felt like a really big deal. And people responded like it was a really big deal because it hadn't happened before.

JJ: So tell me a little bit about Keshet and like [inaudible] and how it got started. I know you were a volunteer with the organization first. So you can tell me a little bit about the history and how it evolved.

IK: So Keshet was founded by a few gay Jewish men who saw a Jewish community that was completely silent on gay issues and did not recognize them or affirm them and, in many cases, actively excluded them. These men were people who grew up very involved in the Jewish community and, in all cases, actually, were being professional Jews. They were all working in Jewish education. So they founded Keshet with the goal of creating change in the Jewish community, creating a Jewish community that was fully welcoming to – again, then, I think it was just GLB. At a later point, we added transgender.

JJ: When was this again?

IK: This was in the fall of '96.

JJ: '96?

IK: And from 1996 to 1999, Keshet was run entirely by volunteers and had experienced kind of the usual ebb and flow in activity of a lot of grassroots, volunteer-run organizations. I got involved as a volunteer pretty soon after I moved to the States, which was in 1997.

JJ: Okay, so you had been in –

IK: I was living in Jerusalem.

JJ: – in Israel for a while, came back.

IK: Yeah. And something that I did a couple years after I came back to the States was I participated in a community organizing program called the Jewish Organizing Initiative, which is a community organizing program for young Jewish community organizers who primarily don't do organizing in the Jewish community, who primarily work for social justice in the broader world, like work for unions and various community centers, whatever. So I was the exception in that when I applied for the program, I said that I wanted to learn community organizing in a – I mean, I'd always done community organizing and did a lot of organizing, particularly in the lesbian community in Jerusalem when I lived there. But I always felt like I never really got any kind of real training. I just kind of did stuff as I went along and had a good amount of insecurity about my real abilities as an organizer, and certainly didn't call myself an organizer because I felt like I didn't really know what I was doing. I think that there was a really gendered component to that. So, when I heard about this program, I knew that it was something I wanted to be a part of. It was through the Jewish Organizing Initiative that I came to the decision that Keshet really needed paid staff in order to grow. Well, I came to two decisions: Keshet needed to utilize community organizing methods to build a strong organization, and I thought that we needed to hire paid staff. So, I ended up raising money to hire our first part-time staff member, who participated in the Jewish Organizing Initiative the following year. That was Keshet's first staff member.

JJ: This was ninety –

IK: This is '99. So, she worked part-time for Keshet as a community organizer – 1999 through Spring 2001. She's, incidentally, the person who mentored Shulamit Izen, who got the –

JJ: Oh, right, right.

IK: And Shulamit Izen actually refers to her on her website as one of her most important mentors. During that time, I was the volunteer chair of the board. Annie, the former staff member – I mean, she and I often joke that we felt like, between the two of us, we were sort of an executive director, but not really. I mean, I was in grad school full-time and in Amherst. I wasn't living in Amherst. I was living here. But I commuted to Amherst –

JJ: Would be –

IK: – which was, you know, pretty difficult, [laughter] needless to say. But during that time, Keshet started to grow, primarily, I would say, in terms of membership and in developing leaders. But it happened very slowly. And Annie also was part-time, so there was a limit to how much she could do. And she really invested a lot of time in working with [inaudible] and the other – Queer Jewish Youth, who got connected with Keshet, which was great. Then she moved to New York, actually, to become a teacher. [laughter] I was finishing grad school. We were at a point then that Keshet really could have dissolved. It was clear that we were at a turning point –

JJ: Crossroads. Yeah.

IK: – yeah, a crossroads – and that we either were going to dissolve – I thought we either were going to dissolve or we really needed to do it and we needed – we hadn't had a real office. All these years, Annie's office was at Jewish Family and Children's Service. Just nothing was really done fully. There wasn't an effective organizational infrastructure. So, initially, actually, after I finished grad school, I went to work as an organizer at an environmental justice organization in Boston and felt like, "I don't know what's going to happen to Keshet, but it's not going to be me who saves it this time. If it dissolves, it's going to dissolve. I don't know."

JJ: You were still the volunteer –

IK: Chair.

JJ: – chair.

IK: Yeah. And then, within a short amount of time of work in this environmental justice organization, I just kept feeling like I wasn't doing what I should be doing. And so I quit that job and –

JJ: What did you do there?

IK: Well, I was only there six weeks because it happened pretty fast, but I was supposed to be leading a campaign related to toxicity in low-income neighborhoods that led to increased asthma rates in kids – a good thing, but I would be sitting at a meeting, and I would be thinking – I would be strategizing as to how I could do this and that with Keshet, even though I had said to myself, "You really need to step aside from Keshet and focus on this job." I mean, I was pretty new to environmental activism, and so I felt like I had a lot to learn. So I went, and I just took a leap of faith, I guess, in myself and went to the board – at that point, the board was just me and two other people. It really had dwindled. I proposed that I work for Keshet full-time and said that I would raise the money to make that happen and that if it didn't happen, then I was prepared to work half-time or to be laid off or whatever, but that I thought – so, in the fall of 2001, when I started working for Keshet, we had about $30,000 in committed funds. But the budget that I presented to the board was a little more than twice that. We decided to do it, and I started working for Keshet out of a room in my house. I would say the first six months were kind of amazing and exhilarating, and I felt so just astounded and grateful that this was my job. I mean, because I'd done it for so long as a volunteer – that I was being paid to do this. I had so much energy, and people really responded to that. It felt like a lot came together really quickly. And then, after about six months – it was February. I don't know. It was winter, and it was dreary, and I was alone in my apartment, and there was so much to do, and I was the only person. I felt just totally overwhelmed.

JJ: Overwhelmed, yeah.

IK: I had a mountain of thank you notes that needed to be written, a campaign against whatever was going on, and this workshop to do, and I just felt like, "I don't know how this can happen." So, there were a lot of those periods early on. I mean, the first couple of years had tremendous moments of delight and triumph but also a lot of real lows and a lot of feeling like, "I'm not going to be able to do this. I can't pull it off. I'm not going to be able to do it. It's too much. It's too much. It's too much." And I was fortunate to connect with people like Enid Shapiro and others in the community here who gave me a lot of encouragement, and at really critical points, and was fortunate to get – I got a fellowship a year-and-a-half after I started working for Keshet, called the Joshua Venture Fellowship, which is a two-year fellowship for – their thing is for Jewish social entrepreneurs, for people who are doing innovative work in the Jewish community, and it gave Keshet $60,000 over two years. Plus, it gives each of the eight fellows a bunch of money that we can use for our own professional development. Plus, it provides a couple several-day retreats a year. And so that was really a salvation – [laughter] for me and for the rest of my cohort, in a lot of ways.

JJ: So there were eight people that were –

IK: Yeah, we're actually – it's just about to end. Yeah. We're in the last few weeks.

JJ: Oh, okay.

IK: Yeah, so there are eight people in the country.

JJ: Well, you mean, in the country, across the –

IK: That are part of this fellowship cohort. So, I really can't say enough about how significant that fellowship has been in my life and for Keshet. I mean, obviously, just on a financial level, it was – given that in the fall of 2001, we had a $30,000 budget, and then

in the fall of – well, late fall 2002, we were told we were going to be getting $30,000 that fiscal year. I mean, that was significant. But more so, I think, the connection with seven other young executive directors who were all doing what I thought was really amazing work, who all thought, themselves, that they were totally struggling and completely overwhelmed and how could they do this.

JJ: Isolated. [laughter]

IK: What?

JJ: Isolated, maybe.

IK: Right, yeah. And completely isolated. So that was really critical, just to hear my thoughts and feelings coming out of other people's mouths, and to feel affirmed in that way – and to get all sorts of support and professional development resources, through trainings and talks and whatever that we got through the program. The personal funds that I was given through Joshua Venture that go to me, not to Keshet, have enabled me over the last two years to go to conferences and accept an invitation to go speak somewhere, even if they're not covering my travel expenses because I've had this funding. I feel kind of silly to say it. Still, I feel like, having had – and this is soon ending – but having had the money to take advantage of those kinds of opportunities and when I go to a conference when I'm presenting, be able to stay in a hotel room, by myself, as opposed to sleeping on couches or [with] acquaintances' friend somewhere, I feel like that was really important in showing me like this doesn't have to be so hard. It doesn't have to be such a struggle so much of the time, and you don't always have to be scrounging, and you shouldn't be. I always, of course, intellectually knew that the scales of compensation in the world are monstrously skewed [laughter] in terms of how people are reimbursed for the work they do and that people who do social justice work and education and whatever shouldn't be financially struggling. But on another hand, it is part of the culture in the social justice world, of – people kind of talk about how hard they work

and how little they're paid and how little sleep they've gotten, how stressed they are, and not having health insurance. I think it's changed somewhat. But I think there used to be a time when that was almost kind of a point of pride, and it was just kind of accepted that, if you did social justice work, this was how –

JJ: Right, this is how you're going to –

IK: – you got treated. And you see it still in a lot of – unions will hire people who are twenty-one and just out of college and dump them in a town somewhere where they've never been, where they sleep on the floor and eat peanut butter for three months because of how little they're paid. We see the negative consequences of that because how many of those twenty-one-year-olds are still doing social justice work a few years later? I mean, most of them are in law school or –

JJ: Computers or – yeah. [laughter]

IK: Right, or something. Again, even though I knew intellectually that it doesn't have to be so hard and, in fact, it shouldn't be so hard or it won't be sustainable, many of us – I got a chance to – that was kind of an idea in my mind of how I wanted it to be, but the reality wasn't. The reality was that I was buying Keshet office supplies [laughter] out of my own money or getting office supplies from my father's factory. [laughter] So getting Joshua Venture and suddenly –

JJ: Was huge. Yeah.

IK: – being able to – yeah, for some reason, just being able to stay at a hotel was [laughter] –

JJ: Yeah.

IK: That's just because I hadn't been able to do that.

JJ: Yeah. Right, right.

IK: And really, in the last couple of years, it's just been an incredible luxury that my participation in conferences of interest to me has really only been limited by my time and how much time I feel like I can take away from work here.

JJ: And maybe it feels like a luxury, but it honors the work.

IK: No, no. I know. Right.

JJ: Just being able to stay at a hotel or something, [laughter] it's –

IK: Right.

JJ: That's important. Yeah.

IK: Right. And so I feel like having had the opportunity to experience that myself allows me to kind of hold that up as a model of how people doing social justice work should be treated – and should expect that others respond to their work in such a way.

JJ: Yes. I have a bunch of different questions about Keshet. But can you talk about the programs now?

IK: Yes.

JJ: And then we'll kind of go from there. Then, I want to hear about – and you've talked about some of the challenges. Tell me about some successes.

IK: Okay. So Keshet essentially has two primary spheres of activity, community-building work amongst gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews and working directly for change within Jewish institutions. The two are definitely interdependent in that some people initially come to Keshet because they're looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend or because they've been really hurt by some experience of exclusion in the Jewish

community. It's through getting involved in community events or some group that they remember or experience for the first time their real sense of connection to the Jewish community and remember that they care or experience that they care, and therefore feel invested enough to want to work for change. That was really kind of a paradigm shift that occurred for me within my first six months working for Keshet. Because when I started working for Keshet, my vision – or my focus, really, was on the change work –

JJ: When you took on a paid position or –?

IK: When I took on the paid position. I was doing workshops in Jewish schools and in synagogues and working so that social justice organizations like where we're sitting now, the Jewish Community Relations Council, would take on gay civil rights issues as important issues on their political agendas, as they did other sociopolitical issues. But what I found was that time after time, someone would call me and say they were interested in Keshet's political work or education work, and then within two minutes of talking to them, it would be clear that they were looking for friends or looking for a romantic partner and that that –

JJ: Community or –

IK: – community and connection, and that was really what people needed. And so before, I'd had this sort of almost disdainful attitude towards our sponsoring social events because I felt like, "Oh, that's not real social change work," and da-da-da. So, that really changed for me. I grew to see and embrace this idea that the only way, at this point, I think, that an organization like ours can be effective as a change agent is if we're also engaging in really intensive community-building work. So, we sponsor a lot of different kinds of social events. I have flyers from stuff that will give you –

JJ: And what about the dating?

IK: Right.

JJ: And was it Quick –

IK: Quick Dates, yeah. I mean, just witness the success of Quick Dates. That's been our most popular event. That's what people love the most, this dating event. It's almost like I hadn't noticed before. People responded with such enthusiasm that there actually wasn't anything like that in the Jewish community, that there are so many organizations and for-profit businesses that focus on bringing young Jewish men and young Jewish women together so that they can establish romantic relationships, and there was nothing like that for gay Jews. Many of us, too, are interested in finding Jewish partners and having Jewish families. So there are those kinds of activities. Then there are a few different identity-specific groups, like the youth group. There's a group for Orthodox GLBT Jews. There's a group for transgender Jews.

JJ: And when you say group, it's set up like a support group, where people come –? Do people come to the office weekly?

IK: It ranges. And it's changed over time, depending on who's in the group. Like, when Shulamit was running the youth group, it was much more political than it is now. Right now, the youth in the youth group just want to talk and talk about what's hard at school, and things like that, and hear from other people how they cope with harassment and things like that. The Orthodox group primarily has been a support group. And the transgender group, I'd say, has been more of a social group with some political work. They've done some work just within Keshet and the GLBT Jewish community in Boston, raising awareness around transgender issues, as well as working with people who do Keshet's work in the Jewish community, who facilitate workshops and make presentations, so that people don't just say GLBT, GLBT, with T being meaningless, but that an understanding of the very different issues facing transgender Jews is also integrated into that analysis. So, yeah, those are all the community-building programs.

JJ: Is that –? What were you saying?

IK: I was going on to talk about our change programs.

JJ: Sure, yeah.

IK: Oh, okay.

JJ: Go ahead. I was just trying to remember all the –

IK: okay. So, I have a list.

JJ: Yeah, yeah. You can just mention them briefly.

IK: So within the arena of working for change, we have a Jewish Safe Schools program, which provides trainings to primarily teachers and administrators, but we are also starting to do some with youth on what it means to create a safe space in the classroom and to create a safe school environment for GLBT youth, faculty, and families. We provide technical assistance to Jewish organizations and synagogues that want to address GLBT issues in their agendas, if it's an organization like this one or if it's a synagogue that wants to become welcoming. We're producing a documentary video, actually, about the work that Shulamit did at the New Jewish High School and to establish the Gay-Straight Alliance. God willing, that will be completed within the next six months. And there's already been significant demand for –

JJ: The video?

IK: – viewing of what we have edited so far. [laughter] I mean, a professional filmmaker is working on it. When I say "we," that's loosely – [laughter]

JJ: Yeah.

IK: But so, I mean, we've already shown it at many different workshops, both locally and around the country, and actually in Argentina, recently, when I was on a trip. So it's

exciting to see how much interest there is in it. It demonstrates what I thought all along, which was that there's really a need for the voices of Jewish GLBT people who are living integrated lives and don't feel a painful contradiction internally. I mean, a film like *Trembling Before God*, I think, is really important and powerful, but it tells the story of a certain segment of the population, and it doesn't speak to everyone. I think what's exciting about the film that we're producing is that it shows young GLBT Jews who saw something that they didn't like in their community and set about trying to change it, and took risks to change it and how because there was a community organization – being Keshet – that existed, they were able to get the support and the mentorship that they needed to make change happen. So, it's a story of hope and change, and that's going to become a much bigger project because our other work has, so far, officially been just within the state, but that's going to be a national project.

JJ: When that show goes out.

IK: And it's going to pull some of our other training and technical assistance work into the national sphere. And then the last project is organizing for equal marriage in the Jewish community, meaning working to educate people in the Jewish community about the issue of same-sex marriage and why it matters, and why and how the Jewish community should take a stand on this issue, and in support of same-sex marriage and against the proposed constitutional amendment in Massachusetts. I don't know if you've been here long enough to know about –

JJ: Yeah.

IK: Yeah. So last year, for instance, when the legislature first considered the proposed constitutional amendment, we, working in very close cooperation with the Jewish Community Relations Council, did a lot of organizing in synagogues across the state that were located in key districts, meaning in districts whose legislators had been identified by MassEquality, the statewide coalition that's working to defeat the constitutional

amendment, so synagogues in districts whose legislators had been identified by MassEquality as legislators who possibly could be moved and who had indicated so far that they were going to vote for the amendment but maybe could be shifted. It was really extraordinary to see how, in a very short amount of time – and this was not just in the Jewish community, obviously, but throughout the state. When we first – "we" meaning the progressive community that was working on this in Massachusetts – first started working on this, we had, I think, eighteen legislators who were with us, and four months later or so, we had eighty-four. A handful of them, according to what they told us – they probably tell everyone, "You're the reason why I changed my mind." So who knows? But a handful of them said that they changed their vote specifically because of lobbying from people in the Jewish community that we helped make happen. So, that was really exciting. It was a time, for me, of really appreciating how incredibly well-organized the Jewish community is. I mean, even though there's so much infighting and discord, the fact is that the Jewish community is really well organized, and that I could look at a map of the state of Massachusetts where the – [Recording paused.] – where key districts were identified and say, "Okay, there's a synagogue with a supportive Rabbi here, here."

[Recording paused.]

JJ: This is a recording of the Jewish Women's Archive, the Women Who Dared project, with Idit Klein, interviewed by Julie Johnson on February 25th, 2005. Do you want to just finish what you were in the middle of talking about, which –?

IK: Equal marriage.

JJ: Yeah.

IK: Yeah. I mean, you understand.

JJ: Yeah. So, back to a question that I had asked before, and you've already kind of talked about some of the successes. Is there anything in your mind that's kind of like – I

don't know – just overall, what to you has been the one or more of – was a big accomplishment?

IK: Well, I'd say our biggest accomplishment is something that can't really be quantified. I mean, I can point to quantifiable achievements, and I'll mention a couple of them. But I'd say the most significant impact we've had is that GLBT issues are now firmly on the radar screen and the community agenda in the greater Boston Jewish community. That was not the case before we started doing our work. The notion now that creating an inclusive Jewish community, which people talk about all the time – that creating an inclusive Jewish community also means creating a community that's inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. That's now part of the consciousness of people who are in leadership in the greater Boston Jewish community. One example of that that I'll share that illustrates that kind of change is that last year – there's a rabbi named Dan Judson, who's a good friend of ours and supporter of Keshet. He organized an effort to gather signatures from nearly one hundred rabbis throughout the state for an ad that was published the day the constitutional convention last year in the statehouse convened. There was a big ad prominently placed in the *Globe* that said, "Massachusetts rabbis support the freedom to marry," and there were several columns of names of rabbis. It was a big deal, and people really noticed it. Dan tells the story of how he had rabbis calling him apologetically and with great discomfort [to] explain why they weren't going to sign, why they didn't feel that their congregation was ready, da da da, basically why they didn't have the courage to do so. So, Dan and I had a conversation, really, about just how remarkable that shift is. I've experienced that too. I mean, when I was calling rabbis asking them if they would urge – if they would talk about this issue in their Dvar Torah, the Shabbat before the constitutional convention, or whatever. I didn't have a single rabbi – I mean, I wasn't calling Orthodox rabbis. But amongst Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and nonaffiliated rabbis, I didn't have a single rabbi who was outward with his or her discomfort or opposition to the issue. People who said no had some kind of tone of – I mean, shame is probably too strong of a

word. But unease. And they definitely – yeah, they were not at ease, and they were not proud of the fact that they felt like they couldn't raise this with their synagogue. So that's been a real shift. In terms of more concrete achievements, things like the fact that there is a place in Boston now for Orthodox GLBT Jews to go to find support. I know that – I mean, very concretely – I know that the existence of this group has prevented a couple of suicide attempts. The fact that people are talking about transgender issues in the Jewish community and that we have teachers in schools talking about how should they respond when a boy comes to school with pink nail polish, and people are making fun of him, but he says, "This is what I want to do." I mean, just all those kinds of questions, that there wasn't any space for that kind of dialogue, and teachers weren't being supported in how to respond to it. And then, on a similar note, in terms of the trainings and discussions that we're facilitating in schools around the whole safe schools idea, that finally that work has been done in public high schools in Massachusetts now for years is finally happening within the Jewish community. So the reality of a kid who goes to a public high school where there's a strong gay-straight alliance and where once a year they have some kind of gay-focused diversity day, and then this kid goes to his or her Hebrew high school, and there's no mention of anything gay related – and as some kids have said, and it's like what you're shown is that you can't be gay and Jewish at the same time. That has very much changed. Again, of course, that's not only a result of our work. I mean, it's the result of changes in the world and a lot of other organizations and other people's efforts. But there are specific instances of people and institutions that I know were affected by us.

JJ: Yeah. Because another question that I was going to ask is how the work that you're doing has impacted the community. So you're sort of answering that now. But also – and this is a big question – how has it impacted the world or globally? Do you have a sense of that?

IK: Well, I was asked to be on a panel at the General Assembly of – I mean, it's just called the General Assembly – I think of – International Jewish Communities, or something. Every year there's something called – in the Jewish community, they call it the GA, the General Assembly. It's people from all the Jewish federations, in the States, in Europe – all major Jewish community organizations gather. Two years ago, I was flown to Israel by them and put in a hotel [laughter] to participate in this panel with a couple of other people. That hadn't happened before, that talking about inclusion of GLBT people in Jewish life. That hadn't been part of the agenda of the establishment of the Jewish community. I see that as a major change that's happened in the world, and that, again, is not at all just due to Keshet. I mean, there are a lot of people who are working on this in the Jewish community and outside of the Jewish community. But it's something that we touched – touched us. Sort of similarly, a former intern, who was a Jewish Organizing Initiative fellow at Keshet for a year, who's from Argentina, he returned to Argentina after interning with me for a year and sought funding to establish a similar kind of organization in Buenos Aires and six months ago got a $10,000 grant, which is a lot still in Argentina, and established what he called a Keshet Buenos Aires.

JJ: Yeah, I read all about that.

IK: Yeah. So, his work is starting to have really regional impact throughout Jewish communities in Latin America.

JJ: That's great. Yeah.

IK: His work has gotten a lot of attention. So, I see this issue as more and more on the radar screen in the consciousness of mainstream Jewish communities throughout the world. I like to think that, as a result, we as a people throughout the world will think about inclusion and what it means to create a truly just community in ever broader terms so that we talk about issues raised and ethnicity and class and things that are far less discussed in the Jewish community than GLBT issues. So that, I'd say, is my more kind of far-

reaching vision and hope of what kind of effect this work could have.

JJ: Yes. Can you talk a little bit about how it has affected your life personally, going back to that – and globally?

IK: Well, I'm working in my community of communities. I'm working in the gay Jewish community, for the gay Jewish community. Actually, I mean, there's a certain – I don't know if this is the answer you want, but there's a certain amount of struggle that I continue to have with that, actually with feeling like I'm working to make things better for me. Of course, anyone who does social change work you'll find the self-interest somewhere. And you have to, or it won't be genuine and won't be long-lasting.

JJ: Or inspirational.

IK: Right. But I have my own other issues that I care deeply about, I mean, like important work that's going on in Israel that I also long to be a part of. So I'd say, and part of how it's affected me is that I've experienced an ongoing struggle between feeling like this work is really important and that this is really good, we're seeing real change happen, and it can have a ripple effect that leads to other kinds of change that I care about and feeling like I should be working on more important issues, or I should be working on something that benefits people outside of my immediate community. I should be working to end the killing in Sudan, whatever kind of most horrifying current event is going on. I think a lot of activists will experience that, obviously. So, part of it is that. Another huge impact it's obviously had is it's made me be completely, completely irrevocably out. There's totally [laughter] no way to go back. And I wrote about this in this little piece that was published in this journal that I brought. But that actually was – even though I was totally out when I thought about taking this job, considering taking the job made me think about how being a queer Jew as my job would change being out in pretty essential ways. I just thought about how much your professional identity is a part of your everyday identity and is a piece of information that anyone feels comfortable

asking. I thought about the myriad daily circumstances in which one's asked, "What do you do? What do you do for work?" Still, after all these years, I still have to take a breath inside before I tell people what I do. It's not a huge thing, and I don't think it's noticeable to anyone else, but I still notice coming out. I mean, I think it would be hard to find a gay person who would say that they don't. Because you know – or I know that something is going to change in how they see me.

JJ: Right. Homophobia. That's not going –

IK: Right. So that felt like – for some reason, I kept thinking about getting into a cab after arriving at the airport, and the cab driver saying, "So, what do you do," and having a conversation with some cab driver from South Boston or in Israel. And knowing how horrible it would feel not to say what I did. There have been times for safety, really, either physical or psychological, that I've said, "Oh, I work in the Jewish community," or, "I do social justice work." But most of the time, I don't. There have been times when it's been uncomfortable or times when it's been – I mean, times when it's been more than uncomfortable when I've gotten really hostile, frightening responses. Most of the time, it's fine. But I think it was knowing that taking this job would create this charged moment, even if only internally, for me when asking the simple question, "What do you do for work?"

JJ: Yeah, yeah. How do you think being a woman has impacted your work, your activism?

IK: Well, I mean, I'd say just from a young age, I had a sense that being a girl, being a woman, could limit what I could do in the world, and was very aware of the messages that I got to the contrary from my parents. I mean, my parents, who are so secular, when they saw how much I loved Jewish text study, would talk about – telling me that –they wanted to make sure that I knew that I could be a rabbi, even though my Orthodox rabbis wouldn't tell me that. So, I was aware that those messages were definitely in

contradiction with what I saw around me. As a young woman in college coming into feminism and starting to get involved with the feminist movement, that for me was one of my earliest experiences of really feeling empowered and noticing the difference that made and what I felt I could do.

JJ: Right. Along the lines – a little bit of what you've been talking about, have you had particular role models in your life? And if so, who have they been? I just have a couple of other questions.

IK: Yeah. I've had a lot of teachers who were role models. One of my rabbis in my day school was a – his name was Rabbi (Jacobowitz?). We called him Rabbi J. [He] was incredibly supportive of my Jewish learning, and when I won this – we had something at our school called a Berachot Bee, which was –

JJ: What is that?

IK: – a blessing. It's like a spelling bee but – like what's the Jewish blessing – what's the blessing to say over an ice cream cone, what's the blessing to say over an asparagus, what's the blessing –? So, when I, in fifth grade, won the "Berachot Bee and beat the Orthodox boy who was two years older than I was, that was a big deal. So, people in the school were upset that a girl won and that a secular girl won, da da da. I mean, he kind of defended me and quieted those voices. He was also, incidentally, the first person who encouraged me to think of myself as a Jewish leader when I was in seventh grade. So he was someone who I might say was a mentor, in the way that I saw how – in the openness that he had and how his life experiences hadn't limited his ideas and his views of others in ways that were surprising. When I was in high school, I really had just a wealth of teachers who were really important to me, two different French teachers and an English teacher. They were all women who were very spirited and articulate and empathic and warm, and people who I thought really demonstrated what it meant to live a fully engaged life, to do work that was really meaningful, and to have an emotional life

and a social life and connections that mattered. And I say, just professionally, one person I know early on who became – I mean, I don't think she knows that she was a mentor [laughter] to me, but this woman, Sari Rifkin, who was the director of Shatil, which is an organization that provides capacity-building assistance to social change organizations in Israel. And she's now the executive director of an organization called Yedid, which does work with low-income Israelis throughout the country. She built this really – she was the founding – I think she was the founding director. In any case, she totally built the organization. The social change sector in Israel would not be what it is if Shatil didn't exist because they provide just so much support, on all sorts of levels, to social change organizations. Sari is someone and was someone who I saw as a really powerful leader who got a tremendous amount of really good work done and who, no matter how stressed out she was, no matter what was happening, no matter how busy we were, she always took a moment to thank you for your work and to tell you that she appreciated your work, and in a way that felt real and with a smile that felt real. That was something that I didn't see other people doing and that I really felt like that's how I want to be.

JJ: Right. And last question. You sort of touched on this theme, but just how would you say that Jewish values have affected the work that you're doing now at Keshet? I know you talked about your experience when you were four. But how would you say sort of values and Jewish traditions have impacted your work or your thinking?

IK: Yeah. I mean, I would say that everything that I do and think is so strongly embedded in my identity as a Jew and my sense of the values that I inherited by being born into this identity.

JJ: Which are?

IK: Which is [laughter] a commitment to justice and to a society where people aren't marginalized and values that embrace the possibilities of radical transformation. That, I

think, has been really key. Essentially, the key ones are about social justice and community and the real interdependence between achieving social justice and community that you see manifested very concretely in the Jewish community, like the requirement to have a minyan in order to do certain kinds of prayer. So, I think that there's a lot of wisdom in that and that that is something that subconsciously shaped my own ideas about community building growing up.

JJ: Okay. Is there anything that you want to add that we haven't touched on that you think will be important?

IK: I guess maybe the only thing is that I didn't talk about what I did when I was in Israel for a few years after college.

JJ: Yeah, yeah.

IK: And I won't go into all of it but –

JJ: Oh, but that's good to get the timeline–

IK: But something that was significant for me as an activist and that definitely affected me in my sense of what was possible in working for Keshet was that –

JJ: And – sorry – this is right after college that you were–

IK: Yeah. I moved to Israel six weeks after I graduated and was seeing how the work that I did in the lesbian community – or in the queer women's community in Jerusalem – seeing how I saw real, direct, concrete changes as a result of that because it's a small community within a larger but still small community, within a larger but still small country – when sixty women started coming to meetings that I organized, that was a huge number there. We got national media attention. I think it was amazing, as a young person, to see how hard work sometimes could actually lead to real change and to see

that before my eyes within a time span of just a couple of years.

JJ: Yes. What did you do there, exactly? I mean, what did those meetings look like?

IK: Well, I founded a – I mean, it really just started as a support group for lesbian and bisexual women in Jerusalem. It grew into – it sparked the formation of a number of different initiatives, like a counseling hotline. It partly led to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals in Jerusalem talking to each other – because the communities had been totally separate – and started the conversations. I was there for the beginning process of this. That led to the formation of the Jerusalem Open House, which is a GLBT community center in Jerusalem which is thriving and is really successful and is actually hosting an international pride event this summer.

JJ: Oh, wow. How long were you there, again, in Jerusalem?

IK: Two-and-a-half years.

JJ: Two-and-a-half years. Then you came back, and that's when you went to graduate school.

IK: Not immediately.

JJ: Not immediately. Yeah.

IK: I worked with homeless men and women in Boston for a couple of years before I went to grad school.

JJ: Okay, good. Anything else that you think –?

IK: I think I talked a lot.

JJ: [laughter] Yeah, you did. Great. Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]