Talia Ruxin
Interview Transcript
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TRANSCRIPT

Talia Ruxin: Hi, I am Talia, and today I have the privilege of speaking to Beth Levin as part of a project for the Middlebury winter term class, Hate, Love, and Reconciliation in the Public Sphere. Beth is the cantor at Temple Shir Tikvah in Winchester, Mass. Beth’s role also extends to tutor for the coming of age ceremonies, the bar and bat mitzvahs, in which Beth guides young adults through the process of learning a torah portion, leading a congregation in service and prayer, and reflecting on the torah portion in the d’var torah. As tutor, Beth fosters relationships with each young adult as he or she grows to become full members of the Jewish community. As a community member myself, whom Beth tutored for my bat mitzvah, I believe that Beth is a bedrock for the community because she nurtures, cares for, and connects with every member, both young and old. Love, as Krista Tippett said, is a way of being, and I believe that Beth embodies this way of being.

Ms. Ruxin: I’d like to start out by talking about love. In her book all about love, bell hooks cites psychiatrist and author Scott Peck definition of love “as the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.” It is this definition that brought you, Beth, to mind immediately. I believe that your role in our congregation cultivates self-love because you nurture the spiritual growth of the members. This cultivation of self-love and the connections you establish help to develop a conscious, thoughtful, and supportive community. I’d like to know how you define love, and how you see the intersection of your role in the community and your purpose with love?

Beth Levin: Ok. First of all, thank you for that description of my work, and how you experience our time together, and what happens in our community as well. I just really appreciate that insight that you have having come through it. And the reason I have found myself loving community work so much, loving being part of a community and Shir Tikvah in particular, is because of the opportunities there are to put love into action in everything that we do. And so whether it be this conversation that we are having right now, reconnecting with you, Talia, after periods of not seeing each other for a long time. This, this, is part of my definition of love and connection and the way we all connect with each other in all kinds of ways in time and space throughout our lives. Being on the phone with you, being interviewed for this class, is my definition of love. The way connections are made and sustain us throughout our lives. So, I feel blessed to be in the position that I am of knowing generations of children who grow up and become people in the world and who turn the experiences they have into ways to reflect and make the world a better place. That’s a partial definition.
Ms. Ruxin: That’s really beautiful. I think what you said about just being able to connect with others and how love is really an action you do when you connect with people and when you form this community – I think that is really special.

Ms. Levin: Yeah, and I think that love is really what we are. I mean I don’t think it is outside of us. I think it is organic. I think it gets covered up by a lot of other things throughout our childhood and adulthood, and I think a lot of factors play against the expression of love. But I think that within us all, that it exists. That we are just kind of made with it.

Ms. Ruxin: Yeah. There is a quotation by Krista Tippett that speaks exactly to what you are saying about this innate love that is in all of us. She writes, “We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible once again and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world…This task is called tikkun olam in Hebrew. It’s restoration of the world…It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all the healers of the world.”

Ms. Levin: Woah that is so beautiful. Yeah that she nailed it – that is beautiful. That is so beautiful.

Ms. Ruxin: Yeah, and I actually remember attending a bar mitzvah at Shir Tikvah of someone who had a learning disability. And I thought that the way you conducted, the way you guided this individual and made the service – it wasn’t choppy, it wasn’t clear that this boy had a learning disability. In fact, the service was really beautiful and I feel like there was so much pride and happiness that flowed from the bimah. To me, this was one example in which you “involve all people” to contribute – the way in which you perhaps ignite the once “hidden flame” and “lift up and make that light visible.” And I think that that boy, he really had this light inside of him, and I think you were just really able to believe in his capacity and find his light. And I was wondering what tools you believe we can use, or perhaps what processes or emotions we can harness, that will allow us to “find the hidden light” in ourselves and in each other?

Ms. Levin: That is um. That is even the question itself is so beautiful because it acknowledges that we do have this light and similar to what I was thinking about love, it is what we are, it is organic to us, and how so many things can obstruct that access to it. I think that happens because I’ve worked with children for so long and especially with children who are at twelve years old, thirteen years old, are a pretty – it is a difficult time for so many and there are so many things changing. And the child you were thinking of when a person has challenges, no matter what they are, that can make the light harder to find because discouragement may happen, and when given the opportunity to be who we really truly are, I have found that people of all ages are eager to step into that. By just giving myself and others the space to just say ok let’s work with your strengths, who are you what do you want, and the ability to work toward becoming the wholest and the best version of ourselves that we can
possibly be that is what in some ways so many people are just waiting to do. And that I have
the framework of you know 6-9 months with every child in the community to just say “who
are you? And who do you want to be when you are standing and leading the congregation,
and how can I help you get there?” is such a gift to me. And I have witnessed transformative
moments in the lives of kids for now many many years and that translates to adults as well. I
mean adults are harder because there’s more years there’s a little more hardening sometimes
towards believing that there is that light inside of us and believing that there is that space
inside of us. I feel my role is to create the space – to create the container for each person
in our congregation to feel safe, to access their light, to figure out what it needs to shine
as brightly as it can. So I am the very lucky person in this because I have never wavered
in thinking that that light exists. And I mean we live in a very dark time now and
sometimes it is challenging to believe that is really true but I have seen it happen too
many times to believe otherwise. My faith is pretty clear on this one.

Ms. Ruxin: That is a really beautiful and hopeful way of thinking about our community
and how we can bring out the best in each other and make each other believe in the power of
ourselves.

Ms. Levin: Yeah

Ms. Ruxin: And I think that music definitely plays a big role at Temple Shir Tikvah. I mean
my earliest memories at Temple Shir Tikvah are of singing with you and the way that you
bring music into just about every part of Shir Tikvah, and I was wondering if you could speak
a bit about what music means to you and how you use music with the community and just
what the importance of music is?

Ms. Levin: Yeah I think music—it’s transcendent and it can go places that words cannot.
And so, the melody, melody has power and the melody can almost start to feel like home to
people because we sing often the same melodies or at least the same words with different
melodies. So music provides a sense of belonging, it provides a sense of safety, it provides,
people don’t often get to sing in their lives. Or people have been told that they don’t have a
good voice or I’ve heard so many traumatic stories of people being told they are not singers
that they are not musical. So in our community anyone who wants to sings with great
abandonment and great passion. So within that community to hear your voice among others
in songs that touch the heart and touch the soul, I think it’s empowering. And because we are
often singing in a language that a lot of people don’t know exactly what we are saying we are
sort of loosely interpreting it. In some ways, there is something beautiful about that too like
you can kind of bring your own interpretation to what these words mean and find a phrase
even a sound that is really resonant and hold onto that. And I’m also aware that some people
don’t particularly feel the power of the music or are intimidated or that’s not the way that
they are drawn in, and I’m aware of that too. How is it feeling for the person who doesn’t
really like the sounds or doesn’t really feel like singing that day or the child who has a lot of
sensory stuff and it’s too noisy and too rambunctious and it can be alienating as well and so I
am always holding that in a balance too. Trying to be aware of the diversity of the people who are sitting around me and creating as many doorways in as possible.

**Ms. Ruxin:** Yeah I think a lot Temple Shir Tikvah’s mission or the overwhelming sense that I get when I am in the sanctuary is just how Temple Shir Tikvah is – it’s a joyful and spiritual place but it is also really accessible. I think that music is definitely a way that you cultivate community that might be difficult when you have people coming from really diverse backgrounds in terms of their religious experience in terms of what they want from a temple. And you know some people, you know, know Hebrew, and other people don’t, and I think a lot of what Temple Shir Tikvah is about is *Hinei Ma Tov* – how good it is to be together. I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about the style of Judaism at Temple Shir Tikvah and the way and what it means to live and be a part of a loving community?

**Ms. Levin:** So I think the yeah the style of Judaism, the flavor, is one of inclusiveness. And yeah I have now been there for I think nineteen years and I still there are people who I don’t even think about who was born Jewish who is not Jewish and who is in some process thereof. It is a community in which all people can feel that they have a place, that they have a voice in the community, that they have agency in the community that they can make things happen. It is a very, in terms of an organizational structure, it is very flat so we have our small staff of the rabbi and me and the educational director and then you know the custodian who is a beloved member of our community and the two people who work in the office and that is it. And the small staff just tries to enable people to make what they want to have happen happen. And so it is not hierarchical. Our committees are very very active. Our board is very active. So there is a sense that when you walk into the place, your story is important. We try to create as many opportunities for people to tell their stories. We have about three or four Friday nights per year that are devoted to one person telling their spiritual journey and also on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. So we believe that the fabric is there on knowing who each other are and once we know each other’s stories, they go from a one or two dimensioned person to a fully dimensional person. And we are so lucky to be in each other’s presence and to be endlessly learning from each other. The Judaism part is varied. Some people come to us from a conservative background, some come from church, some come from a deeply reformed background, and so we are all merging our ideas about what the tradition has to teach us in lots of different ways. Shir Tikvah is feminist and LGBTQ-inclusive from the very beginning, its roots are there. And of course interfaith. I believe that 75% of the congregation or something like that is interfaith and it is a nonissue for us. It is welcoming and we use the tradition to make our lives more meaningful. Wrestling with it, innovating it, learning about it, and it is centered around our Friday night Shabbat services as the ritual center of the community. So it is a pretty rich brew of Judaism and progressive values and inclusivity so that everybody has a doorway to walk through.

**Ms. Ruxin:** Yeah I think that is really special how we can have this religion and this tradition to have as our basis but we can like feel free and able to modify it, and not modify it in the sense of like degrading it any way but rather make it grow and expand and open and accessible and welcome to everyone. And how we can learn from everyone’s spiritual
journey and how that can enhance Judaism. Rather than detract from it even if we are not adhering to all the strict parts of Judaism that might be other people’s custom and that is great. But I think it is great that Temple Shir Tikvah is open to making these changes as times change and as we want to really accept everyone and relish and find that hidden light in everyone.

Ms. Levin: That is so right. So right. Also something that might differentiate us between other congregations is that there is an active an actively doubting acceptance to many people whether they flat out don’t believe in God or some divine power in the universe, and other people are struggling with it, and other people are very God-language comfortable people and there is room for that too. And acknowledgement even within services that we are speaking in a God language that you know our ancient prayers have very male, that are full of male language, that doesn’t speak to a lot of people, that that is ok. That we can use this and keep ourselves connected while acknowledging the need for everyone to find the language that really speaks to them.

Ms. Ruxin: Yeah, absolutely. I’d like to transition a little bit to talking about another one of your roles. It is another undoubtedly challenging role that you play, and just thinking about healing and support in times of mourning or helping someone when a loved one might be ill. Kate Braestrup is a Unitarian Universalist chaplain to game wardens in the parks and forests of Maine and articulates in her interview with Krista Tippett that when someone asks where God was in the face of a tragedy, she responds that “God was in all the people that came to try to help…The question isn’t whether we’re going to have to do hard, awful things, because we are. We all are. The question is whether we have to do them alone.” And I was wondering how you see Shir Tikvah community embody these loving and caring principles in times of death or tragedy and what role you see Judaism and your personal role playing in times of death or mourning?

Ms. Levin: I think that this sort of ties in everything that we have been talking about. I mean you said that if there was a theme to Shir Tikvah it’d be Hinei Ma Tov – how good it is to be together. We use that a lot. The community is, at the heart of the community, is our caring committee. And what I hear probably more often than anything else is when someone is having a hard time – illness or death or loss of a job or you know just layers of that. First of all, how hard it is to reach out and ask for help. And then when we can encourage people to do that the power of being cared for by people you may not even know in our community, it moves people to the selves of their being that they can allow themselves to ask for the help that they need and then receive it is a phenomenal thing to witness over these years. So it is at the heart. I mean to mean nothing else that we do as a community matters if we can’t be there for each other in times of need. So I am very proud of who we have been in that way. I think we can always be better and stronger and we are always working at it but being vulnerable and some of the loneliness that can come from both grief and illness is one of the things that can obscure that light that we were talking about at the beginning and that love. As our community is aging, we are trying to become ever more accessible – we are live streaming our services so that people who can’t get out of the house
especially in the winter can access that community, we are trying to arrange rides for people. So all of that is the love in action piece. And the rituals we have around deaths are so brilliantly like psychologically brilliant. So we can thank our ancestors so much. So sitting shiva for however many days, one day, five days, seven days sometimes, and being surrounded by people who care for you and being fed and being outside of the flow of life is so healing. So we enact those ancient rituals because they seem to be exactly what we need in times of grief and in times of loss. So it is powerful. It is powerful to witness that and it is powerful to be part of that. And if we can – the Talmud says that by visiting someone who is sick we take away 1/60th of their illness which isn’t a lot but it acknowledges that it is lonely when you don’t feel well, it is lonely when you’re sad and when you can’t access the energy that the other people around you have. So to always be aware that slowing down and taking time to be with people – it heals. That in itself, that presence that we can bring to each other, that is the healing force that the heart needs anyway if not the body.

**Ms. Ruxin:** Continuing this theme of healing and connecting with others and with love even in hard times, I’d like to turn to looking at injustices. Injustices in the world, in this country, in you know, the state of Massachusetts. I mean everywhere people are facing hardships and cruelties and human rights violations. And I think when we look back on history, movements like the Civil Rights Movement that were committed to using love and committed to using nonviolence to face these injustices can be really powerful. Congressman John Lewis who was a core leader of the Civil Rights Movement talking about what was at the center of the movement, and he said that love is a force that “opens its arms to help heal the pain of another’s suffering…Love that meets the separating action of violence with forgiveness affirms that our ultimate and eternal unity is transformative. The nonviolence of the movement was an act of love because it enabled an entire society to awaken to the truth of human unity.” He had extreme faith in the transformative power of “love to overcome hatred,” and he believed that if everyone nurtured the light that we were talking about that is in each one of us that we could light up “a path of freedom for others.” And I am wondering what role you see love, faith, and forgiveness play in reconciling injustices and perhaps even reconciling injustices as extreme as the injustices and assault on the Jewish people whether in the Holocaust or earlier or even acts of anti-Semitism now. And as a follow-up, how you think these principles extend out to other marginalized groups, and how we at Temple Shir Tikvah can engage in tikkun olam to help support other marginalized groups?

**Ms. Levin:** That is a huge question and one that I am currently struggling with because we are in, in my lifetime, an unprecedentedly hateful time. And every act, all the hate crimes, the way we are divided as a country. I have never walked in our world, in America, with this kind of worry and fear and pain for what is happening. And the children in our community are experiencing for the first time that I have heard in a long time fairly regular anti-Semitic acts of varying degrees whether it be a comment or a swastika on the wall, and I am hearing about it more and more. So we are in an evolving time right now, and I myself am hurrying to catch up with the time and figure out what it is our community needs in this particular time, particularly the children in the community. And so it is a little harder for me now, I am actively struggling around this and how to combat the hate that has been unleashed in
our country. I do believe that the way that I spoke about creating the container and the space for that light to shine that that is the way in whether it is through conversations with people who feel differently than us. All of this hate comes from love being obstructed so that needs to be hear that needs to be seen a space needs to be made for that because I do believe that even acts of hatred that have been happening around us that there is a core of obstructed light and obstructed love in there. And it needs to be cleared out so that we can be who we really are.

Ms. Ruxin: I think you are absolutely right. Lewis says that “Darkness cannot overcome darkness only light can do that. Violence can never overcome violence only peace can do that. Hate can never overcome hate only love can do that” (187). So I think that part of what is very hopeful even in this seemingly dark time is that everyone does have this light in us, and the more people who can see their own light and the more people who can nurture others and connect with others and get others to see their own light, then the more we can ignite this path of freedom for others. And if we can all see each other’s light, then we can harness the transformative power of love that can help us reconcile injustices and help us combat unfairness and inequality and help everyone feel welcomed and loved.

Ms. Levin: Yes, exactly. That’s exactly [it], and it takes a long time. And an element of love is patience and an element of love is listening and making space in your heart for others. And that takes, that is hard, that’s painstaking, and I think that is where or that is where I need to be right now.

Ms. Ruxin: Yeah I think change definitely requires patience and sometimes it is hard to, you know, think of balancing patience with wanting action and progress. But if we sort of have patience and we listen then I think our actions become stronger and we can be more conscious and more thoughtful about the way we want to act and the changes we want to make.

Ms. Levin: That is well said – yes yes.

Ms. Ruxin: So I know it is not the Jewish New Year but it is a new year, 2018, and one last question is sort of what you hope to see this year both in the world or maybe at Temple Shir Tikvah or what your hopes are for the new year?

Ms. Levin: I am looking for, I am craving thoughtful dialogue. I am looking for people, I think that I see around me and feel in myself enough seeds of fear that I worry about my own reactivity to things. And I am looking to sort of soften myself, soften my heart, and come into a more balanced place so that I can myself understand how things have become the way they are. So both in my world in my own self and in my family and the community that I am so lucky to be a part of, is to cultivate those seeds of love and peace toward each other knowing that we all, hopefully on this planet, are looking for a world without this kind of pain in it. And if we can hopefully hear each other then we can act towards our own best impulses.
towards peace and love and that balance can begin to be restored. And that is my greatest wish.

**Ms. Ruxin:** I think those are some wonderful hopes, and I think it is important to think about hope isn’t just, as Tippett says, it is not “wishful optimism,” it is really a firm belief that these things can happen and we have to face reality but facing reality doesn’t just mean facing darkness. And I think just what you said about these hopes are really beautiful, and I think these hopes for next year, I hope they come true as well! So I really just want to thank you so much for this conversation, and for your work and your role in our community, and really your whole life I guess!

**Ms. Levin:** Oh Talia thank you so much, and this has been so deep and meaningful to me so my gratitude to you.