

Interview with Mel King by William Blastos

Tuesday, November 8, 2022

Length: 56 minutes and 10 seconds

This interview was conducted as part of the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project, and covers a wide range of topics ranging from Trans and Queer identity to Jewish conversion. Mel King describes in detail his search for a “spiritual home,” his relationship to Kolot, to Rabbi Emerita Ellen Lippmann, his transition, his conversion, as well as his past work on the board and his work at the Equality Federation, among many many other topics. This interview is, in many ways, a love letter to Kolot Chayeinu. Clips of this interview can be found on the [Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project website](#).

This transcript has been minimally edited for readability. Some filler phrases have been removed, but Mel's speech has not been edited into traditional English grammar structure to preserve the oral quality of the interview.

William Blastos [00:00:04] Is it recording? Cool. So it says we're recording now. And so my name is William Blastos and this is Mel King. And we are doing this interview as part of the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project. It's Tuesday, November 8th, 2022.¹ I'm in Middlebury, Vermont, and Mel is in Brooklyn, I believe.

Mel King [00:00:26] That's right. Yeah.

William Blastos [00:00:28] Awesome. So I guess I'd like to start by asking if you would tell me a little bit about how you came to be a part of Kolot and just talk about that experience, what brought you in?

Mel King [00:00:40] Sure. Yeah. So I graduated college, I went to NYU in 2010, and at that time I knew that I was interested in moving closer to Judaism. I had had a lot of Judaism in my life in a lot of different ways. At that point, I'd been celebrating high holidays and Pesach and a lot of a lot of other Jewish holidays for years. And so I knew I had a feeling that I was probably on the journey toward conversion. And so I started looking at synagogues. I'd been to a number of synagogues because I was friends with a lot of Jews in college, I'd been to a lot of different synagogues in New York. So I started going more for Shabbat services and went to a number of them in New York. Shul shopping is what I like to call it. And it really wasn't until I found out probably through. My guess is that my first time at Kolot, it was probably through a JFREJ² member. I actually think that I went to high holidays at Kolot that year in 2010. And that was really what did it for me. It didn't take me very long with Rabbi Ellen Lippmann³, rabbi emerita at this point, to know that I had found a place that was very special, that had a very diverse community in all kinds of ways, and that that might be the right place for me. So started going more. And then by that Fall, I had contacted Rabbi Lippmann and told her that I wanted to start my journey towards conversion. And so we wound up meeting for about a year, a little over and eventually completed that process. But that was that was the beginning. That was the beginning of my cult story.

William Blastos [00:02:42] Awesome. You mentioned JFREJ, and I wonder if you might talk about what that is and...?

Mel King [00:02:49] Yeah. Yeah. So Jews for Racial and Economic Justice is a nonprofit organization advocacy here in New York City. They mostly specifically focus on the New York City area and community. So I had some people in my world who were JFREJ members, and a lot of them went to

¹ November 8, 2022 was the 2022 Midterm Elections in the United States.

² [Jews for Racial and Economic Justice](#)

³ Rabbi Ellen Lippmann is the founding rabbi and Rabbi Emerita of Kolot Chayeinu

Kolot. It's funny because now a lot of people who find Kolot there are many radical leftie Jews who find Kolot through JFREJ, and it's some people joke that it's the unofficial synagogue of JFREJ where it is in some ways because there's a lot of overlap in the in the communities. So I knew some folks who are involved in JFREJ activism work. And yeah, I think that was that was part of it.

William Blastos [00:03:35] Awesome. And so would you talk about the process of conversion at Kolot with Rabbi Ellen Lippmann and kind of how that went? What motivated you to convert to Judaism? That kind of thing.

Mel King [00:03:49] Yeah, sure. So I'll start with the motivation cuz I've been kind of circling closer and closer to Judaism. I grew up with close friends who were Jewish. I have a Jewish aunt who married into my mom's big Irish Catholic family. And so, like Judaism had been around, like, had been around me and I had been around it from a very young age. But then I started I dated kind of a series of progressively more observant Jewish people. And as I got older and got more serious about what I wanted my future to look like, I hadn't been affiliated with any religion for a very long time. I left the Catholic Church in 2002, not long after I'd come out as queer. I came out as queer very young, I was probably 12 when I came out for the first time knowing that I liked girls. And then as I got a little older, I just it became clear that Catholicism and queerness were not going to mesh for very long. And so I left and then came out as trans a few years later. And so it's really like feeling spiritual homeless in some ways. And I'm homeless, like, without a home. But I think so, so there was this kind of was kind of like a confluence of different factors that I was like feeling like I wanted a spiritual home, feeling like I had this affiliation and kinship in Judaism and these people in my world who, for many of whom had very different relationships with Judaism, some of whom went to Shabbat services, some of whom just did Pesach once a year, some of whom were like "Jew-ish." You know? And I think for me, what I realized at that point when I graduated from college was that I wanted Judaism in my life, regardless of who I was dating. And that became very important to me. So that was part of it. And that was part of starting my, my journey towards conversion was feeling like I had I had not had a spiritual home. And I really did have, like, a love of organized religion, like a structured space, like I had been doing it, kind of doing it on my own for a long time. Like gone to Shabbat's at people's houses. Like, kind of done, like, holidays and various forms. But having having a space, having a community, it made it feel really different. And so I started meeting with a rabbi on that, and I emailed her not long after those high holiday services. And she said, okay, like, let's, let's set up a meeting, like let's start talking. And at that time, in like Fall 2010, there were a number of us who were kind of starting or interested in the conversion journey. And some synagogues, like have a, a clear pathway towards conversion that like you follow this step and you follow that step and Kolot's a little, little less like that. I think they the general sense is that like everybody kind of makes their journey, but that there is some element of of learning that happens along the way. There's meetings with the rabbi. And so I wound up taking a bunch of classes through a lot of different spaces, took a like a like an intro to Judaism class through the JCC, took a bunch of Hebrew classes, one through Kolot, a couple through other places. So I did a lot of like learning over the like time period from like when I began my conversations with Rabbi Lippman to when I actually converted. So that that was a big part of my process. And then just getting more enmeshed in the community. In that year before I converted, I started going to Shabbat services a lot more regularly. Started becoming closer and closer to people. And yeah, so that formal process was that we've basically spent a year in close like communication. We would be up in coffee shops and talk about both like what the Parshah was that week and kind of like how I was feeling and like what I was thinking about different things. And eventually I got to the point where I felt like I'm as ready as I'm going to get. And she felt the same way. And so she had me write a paper that was about God, Torah, and Israel and that like that was the structure which was like on these three subjects, like whatever form I wanted as long as I wanted it to be. And that paper then went to. So the process of conversion is that you at the point that you decide that you ready and that the rabbi that you're working with decides you're ready. You go before a beth din, which is I mean, and traditionally it's like a sort of like a like a tribunal or like a court. Jewish court. But it was three rabbis. And so part of the process for me was that it's very you immerse in a mikveh and that's that's part of any conversion process. It's like it's that

milestone marker that's like marking a before and an after. That's kind of always mikveh and immersion is about. But as a trans person, there aren't a ton of places to go where it would feel good and certainly not at that time. Immerse NYC is a wonderful project that is, I think, trying to do their best to make mikvah more inclusive and more available to more people. But we decided that we're going to go Mayyim Hayyim outside of Boston because they're and they're really wide open place. It's actually it's co-founded by Anita Diamant⁴, who wrote *The Red Tent*⁵, which is a very cool, cool sidebar. But so we went I like took a bus out there and Rabbi Lipman met me there with the other two rabbis, one of whom I'd met before or the other of whom I had not. And so they had my papers, they had my writings on what I was thinking about God and Torah and Israel. And, yeah, we had a good conversation that I was absolutely nervous about, but they were very kind and warm and loving. And then I got to immerse. And then it was just this beautiful, wonderful moment. And then I had a Shabbat at Kolot. That was kind of I got to do the 'drash' for, which was really fun and lovely. And I had people there and yeah, it felt very special. I mean, yeah, it's sort of like what you would imagine, like a like a B'nei Mitzvah to be like. Yeah. So that was, that was my process of conversion and that was many moons ago at this point. I mean, it was actually like ten years ago at this point. So yeah, it's been a it's been a minute.

William Blastos [00:11:17] Certainly. Well, I was wondering I know that I read some of your work online that I could find doing research for this project, and I know that you write a lot about Mikveh as a really important... Excuse me. A really important part of your conversion to Judaism and kind of..

Mel King [00:11:34] Yeah.

William Blastos [00:11:34] There was one moment in a piece I read where you were talking about and it was related to your transition as well, I believe.

Mel King [00:11:41] Yeah.

William Blastos [00:11:42] A vision of yourself immersed in water. And I was wondering if you could maybe talk about that connection, because that was something at felt...

Mel King [00:11:46] Yeah, yeah, totally. As I say. So as Rabbi Lipman and I were talking about, like, where was I going to immerse? Like, what were we going to do about this kind of situation? Because a lot of the. So there are actually like so many Mikveh⁷ in New York, like Mikveh Hauth⁸ in New York City, and that it's very frustrating that there aren't more that are inclusive, but they're they tend to be run by like orthodox communities. And so we were looking at different options, like there is one that is not gendered, but it's like outside of the city and it's like not super warm and lovely. And so Rabbi Lipman said, what about what about my Mayyim Hayyim⁹ in Boston? And I said, What's that? I've never heard of it. So she sent me the website and when I went to it. It was it just looked beautiful. It looks like a gorgeous space. And I was like, this sounds amazing. I would like to go here. And then when I went, it was it was only really the n like being there and in that space. Then I was like, I feel like I've been here before. And I had. So when I before I had top surgery, I had a dream that was kind of me at a different moment in my life, kind of a few years down the line, being able to be shirtless and just like in this place that was beautiful and sunlit and like being in water. And it was very it was a very strange, like, kind of full circle moment to actually get to be there at Mayyim Hayyim and feel like it

⁴ [Anita Diamant](#) is a best-selling author of both fiction and non-fiction.

⁵ *The Red Tent* is Anita Diamant's best-selling 1997 novel that tells the story of Dinah, daughter of Jacob and Leah, sister of Joseph.

⁶ Abbreviation of "midrash"

⁷ Mikveh is a Jewish ritual practice that involves immersion into a pool of water, traditionally used for cleansing, purification, or transformation.

⁸ This seems to be a specific place or organization, but I was unable to find it online.

⁹ [Mayyim Hayyim](#) is a progressive mikveh in Boston which is "rooted in ancient tradition, reinvented to serve the Jewish community of today."

was it was like I was doing the thing that I had already done and immersing it and getting to be my full embodied self. Yeah, it was. I'm glad that you point that you said that because it's a it's a special memory for me. And it was also it was it was incredible because Mayyim Hayyim, knowing that there are people who come there of all different gender identities, have a variety of mikveh guides and they paired me with a trans mikveh guide and that was just like that was also like such a magical moment of like being like, okay, like I am getting to be my full, full and authentic self in my body, in Judaism, and like, here's this person who's like here to help that process along. Just really incredible. Yeah, it was very special.

William Blastos [00:14:11] That sounds like a really important and special moment.

Mel King [00:14:14] I want more people to get to have that experience. I want. It's a dream. It's like a long dream of Rabbi Lippmann and mine to, like, find it. Like, what is like that space for, for, like, people who live in New York because it's it's a schlep to go all the way to go all the way to Boston to go to a mikveh.

William Blastos [00:14:33] Totally. And in doing my research also, I know you worked, work, or currently, worked in the past or currently do as a mikveh guide I believe?

Mel King [00:14:44] I had. Yeah. So pre-pandemic I was I trained with ImmerseNYC¹⁰. So they're a project that was on their own and now they are a part of.... Somewhere. They were like taken in by, by another organization, which is good because they were just like a kind of dream of a rabbi to do this. But it's a it's a cool project because it trains mikveh guides to go with people because often I think what happens is that people don't know about mikveh until they like are at a moment where they're like standing on a precipice in their life, whether it is transition or conversion or marriage or having a baby. And they're like, I want a Jewish way to mark this moment. And it's it's an I find the practice just to be really transformative and beautiful. And I think there are a lot of folks who kind of make their own way, like using the ocean or kind of other spaces. But what a Immerse was doing was training people to be mikveh guides in a really inclusive and open way. So I went through the training and I got to I got to do it for a few folks, which is lovely. But then pandemic happened and it made it not, less possible. But yeah, I think it's an incredible practice.

William Blastos [00:16:08] Awesome. That's really cool. And so I'm kind of curious too about your writing life and your creative life and how Judaism and spirituality and sexuality and queerness and transness kind of informs it. And I was wondering if you could talk about that a little bit?

Mel King [00:16:25] Totally. So I'm a writer. I have been writing all my life, and I got my MFA in fiction from Rutgers, Newark, but I primarily write nonfiction, and I think I've always been I think the reason that I write nonfiction and the reason I'm interested in nonfiction is because I think there's something really powerful in telling true stories and in claiming space in this world and saying like, this is my experience and it's real and these things are true for me and this happened to me. And so that's I think that's sort of it for me. And I think and as a queer person, as a trans person, as a Jewish person, like all of those intersections and all of those are, they come together for me in a lot of different ways. I think that they're sort of inextricable in a lot of ways for me. I think that I couldn't find a Jewish home until I found a place that I knew a trans person had walked through the door before and had been welcomed and taken in. So that was that feels like a part of it for me I think, yeah, I think I never, we are all always like our whole selves. And I think that when there can be more stories that tell, that talk about that. That talk about all of the complex, nuances of our identities. I think that's important. Yeah, I'm always writing about, I write a lot about queerness, about my transness and Judaism, to think it all comes together for me in that way. Yeah.

¹⁰ [ImmerseNYC](#) “is a pluralistic, feminist, community mikveh project of the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan that facilitates deep ritual experiences and educational programs.”

William Blastos [00:18:10] Cool. Do you think that there's a connection between your spirituality and your queer identity? Is that something that you feel connects in your life?

Mel King [00:18:18] That's a great question. That's a great question. Yeah. I mean, I think it definitely. I think that there is incredible joy in embodying, in like full embodiment. And I think that there is something really magical about spaces that make room for all of who we are. And I think that Kolot is a is, I wish it were it didn't feel as rare as it does in the world. But like, I think you can walk through the doors of Kolot and feel like you can be your full self. And I think it is it's rare to find in the world those places. I think to get my experience was that it was rare for me to find a place that felt like like a Jewish home, before Kolot, yeah. So I think that it all comes together. Like, I don't think that I ever, want to, yeah. I don't ever want to have to... hide any of that. Like, I don't ever want that to be on the backburner. Or, like, it's less important. Like, it all feels like, yeah, they're all equally important and they're all equally who I am. Yeah. And I think that we've got I think that there's a, there's something really cool happening right now where like, I think in part because of the rise of authoritarianism, I think we are in a moment where it is it's a scary time to be trans. It's a scary time to be queer. It's a scary time to be Jewish. And so, like in that, like, there is like beauty in people and a lot of people saying, like, here I am all I'm this and this and taking up the space and like kind of leaning more into their communities. That feels really important to me. I do so I work at an LGBTQ+ organization. It's what I do for work. And so I'm always thinking about like kind of the political moment that we're in. Yeah. So I think it it all feels very important and I don't think that I would be happy in a, in a synagogue where like there weren't other queers and trans people and people of all different kinds of races.

William Blastos [00:20:45] Totally.

Mel King [00:20:45] Yeah. Yeah.

William Blastos [00:20:47] How does Kolot kind of foster that environment of openness that you're talking about?

Mel King [00:20:53] It's a great question. I think that Kolot has opened its doors to such a broad diversity of humanity, of like humans and Jews that like it, it feels very unique because it really feels like it embodies the the big tent, right? Like if you come into Judaism because your spouse is Jewish and like you're not really but you love your spouse and you've got a child or something like that or you're, yeah, I think multiracial, like, I just there's just so many people of different experiences who come through the doors at Kolot and stay. And I think that there because of that and because Kolot, it really embodies the spirit of that, like open door. You know, Kolot has an open door policy at High Holidays, but I think that like that open, it's always felt like that is like who Kolot is, Is that open door. Yeah, I think that. And I think knowing that. Whoever comes to the door like they're not the first person, you know, like I wasn't the first trans person. Like, when I got there. Like, there were already gender neutral bathrooms, you know, like, I didn't have to, like, worry about that. Yeah. It's a it's a really incredible place in that way.

William Blastos [00:22:28] Totally. Totally. Yeah. And so, I wanted to ask you about your work and kind of what you do. Talk a little bit about the organization because it's interesting and kind of related to that openness that we're talking about now.

Mel King [00:22:48] Yeah. Yeah. So I work for an organization called Equality Federation.¹¹ It's a national LGBTQ+ organization. And our work is working with state based LGBTQ advocacy organizations. So almost every state has an organization that is doing like political work in service of

¹¹ The [Equality Federation](#) works “collaboratively on critical issues—from advancing workplace fairness and family recognition to defeating anti-transgender bills and HIV criminalization laws—that affect how LGBTQ+ people experience the world from cradle to grave.”

LGBTQ+ people. So, passing good bills, trying to beat back the bad bills. And we are seeing, more specifically, anti-trans bills over the past two years, really. I mean, there's been a rise for a while, but like the way that it has been on the rise in the past couple of years has been really dramatic and stark. And I think that we're seeing more of those bills pass, which is scary. So we've been around for 20 years. That's right. 20... Oh, 25, I think. I think this is our 25th year. And it started with we are we are founded by our membership, which I think makes us really unique as an organization because there were national LGBTQ+ organizations at the time in 1997, but nobody was really thinking about state policy and how states, like how bad bills would get introduced in a state. And then that bill would just get copied over like a bunch of states and it would be the same situation. But so those organizations came together and said, we need someone to be at the national level and advocating on our behalf. And so that's how Equality Federation kind of came to be. And I've been there for almost seven years, which feels like a very long time and makes me feel a little old. But I I've been I've done a lot of different kinds of jobs. But mostly what I do is grants and like internal operations. I help, help make sure that all of the all the people have what they need to be able to do their job and the funding to do it. Yeah. So it's, it's a very it's a it's a super it's a very unique organization. I really love it. I think this is how we win is at the state level. I think that like investing in state work and people on the ground in states who know their communities feels like an important political tool. Yeah, that's why I have been there for as long as I have, I think is because it still feels like politically meaningful to me that like that, especially, I mean, it's election day. So like today of all days, like also feels like it is on my mind, like the importance of the work that we do. And I know that we are going to have a long road ahead of us because we are we are in a moment of turmoil and tumult. And, yeah, it's it's a good time to be doing good work.

William Blastos [00:25:49] Totally, that sounds like a really important and interesting organization to be working in, especially given the political context of everything right now.

Mel King [00:26:00] Yes. Yes. Yes.

William Blastos [00:26:01] Interesting moment to say the least.

Mel King [00:26:05] Yeah.

William Blastos [00:26:05] Yeah, and so in kind of, it sounds like in your spiritual life, in your work life, and in your personal life, this, your queer identity, your trans identity, is really, really important.

Mel King [00:26:14] Yeah.

William Blastos [00:26:15] And I kind of, I'm curious if you don't mind if you would talk about maybe your transition and your how you came out as queer, how you came out as trans.

Mel King [00:26:23] Yeah, totally. So I, I came out for the first time when I was 12 to, to my mom and then to my dad and then later to friends. But I, I just knew really young that I knew that I liked girls. I knew that that was that was true for me from a very young age. I just didn't have language for it, until I did. And then and when I did, I said, I claimed it. And I think that is true for my trans identity as well, that. So, I had a friend when I was in high school, I was about 16 and she gave me "Stone Butch Blues"¹² and said, "I'm trans and I think you might be too. You should read this book and tell me what you think about it," which is a heck of a way to find out. But it was incredible because I think I for a long time had felt like. Something was, was, was mismatched or something. Like I think that I knew that liking girls and that like the queerness was part of my identity. But I like it, just didn't feel like it was the full picture. And having language around gender and gender identity felt transform... I mean, it was totally transformative for me because basically as soon as I learned the word transgender, I was like, okay, well, that makes a lot of things make a lot more sense. And I didn't know what it was going to

¹² "Stone Butch Blues" is Leslie Feinburg's 1993 historical fiction novel about a butch lesbian living in America in the 1970s.

look like. I had no idea like what physical transition was going to look like, if that was even possible or on the table for me. I grew up in Albany, New York, and there were there were trans people who are like out or out and about. And I got to meet some of them at a very young age. I got involved in GLSEN,¹³ which is a national LGBTQ organization for students, because I was like, okay, this is who I am. Like, I want to make a difference in my immediate community. So I joined the local chapter, joined the national organization, as like a youth leader. And because of that, I met someone named Huck Stone, who is a cool therapist, trans person in in Albany, and he was like the first trans man that I ever met. And it was really incredible. I mean, it was like he was probably, trying to think, think he was probably like in his forties and fifties when we met. And it was it felt like a very far jump to go from like me at 16 to like him very like deep, like had been out and like had physically transitioned years and years before. It felt like, I have no idea how to bridge the gap between me and you. And it wasn't until I moved to New York. So I moved to New York for college and my freshman year, a friend of mine from school, I went to Brooklyn College then NYU, but my freshman year a friend of mine said, I'm going to go to this group at the center at the LGBT... The New York City LGBT Community Center.¹⁴ You should come with me. And I did. And it was a drop in group for like trans masc of center folks, kind of like all along the spectrum from like non-binary in like a masc-adjacent way to like, like fully transitioned folks. And it was very, it was really eye opening. And I was like, oh, like actually it might be possible for me to transition in a different kind of way. Yeah. So I started in NYU, went on hormones and actually the only reason that I was able to have top surgery was because NYU Student Health Insurance started covering it Spring of my senior year of college. So just under the wire there. And it yeah. I mean, it made my whole life possible. Yeah. Yeah. I think that's that's a that that's the short story. Long short story. Yeah. I mean, it just feels like central to who I am in the world. And it is I think it's interesting now being in my mid thirties and you know I've been married for five years, my wife and I have been together for eight. And I think, yeah, and like in the world I may not be read as as either, queer, uh I don't know. I think probably folks read effeminately enough that I probably get read as some kind of queer, but maybe not as trans. But my work, I mean, like all of me humans in my life that I spend the most time with are queer and trans and yeah, that's my world.

William Blastos [00:31:21] Totally. So you, it sounds like you have a strong kind of chosen family base of, like, queer and trans friends and family. And it sounds like that's a really important part of your life. Do you want to talk about that a little bit? The people that are important to your life, like names?

Mel King [00:31:39] Yeah. Sure. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I feel very lucky to live in the queer Mecca of Brooklyn. The queer and Jewish and trans Mecca of Brooklyn. I actually think that, like, it feels very, whenever I think about leaving the city, it feels like, how could I ever leave this place where there are so many queer folks and trans folks that are so near and dear to me, but also just like Jews also and like that are at that intersection along, like with me. Like queer Jews and trans Jews, like I'm sure they are elsewhere, but maybe not in such a such dense, dense population. So that yeah, I think that that feels so important to me. Yeah. I try to think of who I would call out specifically. I don't know. And I've got, I think, the queer family that I think of immediately. Our two my friends that I've been friends with since I was 14, I met them when I was 14 and they're like still my best buds. Julia and Alex. And Jules lives here in Brooklyn and is a lawyer for the city, and Alex lives in Baltimore. And the three of us kind of came out, came of age together, and all came out were sort of out at the same time. And Alex and I kind of transitioned around the same time. So that feels really important to note. And yeah, I think I think of my friends, Zachary and Lucian, a couple that I set up and feel very proud to have set up, as like, yeah, queer Jews. Yeah. I think of who else I would specifically name. I'm trying to think? Yeah. I mean, that feels like an important part in folks to name. Yeah.

¹³ [GLSEN](#) is an American LGBTQ+ focussed education organization geared towards ending harassment and discrimination in K through 12 schools.

¹⁴ [The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center](#), colloquially known as "The Center," is a nonprofit organization serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population of New York City and nearby communities.

William Blastos [00:33:44] Cool. Well, thank you for sharing that. So I want to circle back to Kolot for minute.

Mel King [00:33:51] Yeah, totally.

William Blastos [00:33:53] You were on the board, correct?

Mel King [00:33:54] I was, yes.

William Blastos [00:33:56] And would you talk a little bit about the work that you did while you were on the board? Just, yeah generally.

Mel King [00:34:03] Totally. So being on the... Yeah, it was funny. It was a funny thing to be to, to like, convert and then join the board, like pretty quickly. I, I had done, I had been involved. I'd been taking on like kind of more, bigger volunteer roles. I was on the membership committee. I was on the membership committee is like a non board member and then and before that I had done Sukkot and basically like I joined Kolot and they were at the time, I mean we've grown in numbers and I think this is maybe less true with a different rabbi and different leadership. But at the time it was very like, okay, you're here and you're interested and you're excited about the community. Let's put you to work. And so immediately I was, they, I got roped into putting out like helping organize Sukkot. And so that was my kind of first intro into doing something at Kolot. And then a few years later, yeah, I was asked to join the board and I was happy to do it. It was, I had been I was going to it was a very regular Shabbat like goer to a given many a 'drash. So it felt like it made a lot of sense to kind of step into that role. Yes, I was chair of the membership committee, membership and welcome committee. And so we were always trying to find new ways to engage members and engage new folks as well. Yeah, it was a great group. I really I love that it was again, a good moment in my time at Kolot. I left the board when I went to grad school because I, I had to move to New Jersey for two years. That felt like exile. And then I immediately moved back afterwards. But because I was like very much immersed in my, my grad school life, it was hard to like try to balance being on the board also so that this moment that I stepped away. But yeah, it was a it was an interesting moment, I think, in Kolot's trajectory also because Kolot had kind of been a very scrappy volunteer-run in many ways, like there was the rabbi. And at the time when I joined Kolot, our beloved cantor, Lisa B,¹⁵ was not even a cantor yet. She was still are hazan, which hazan is like, it could be like a song leader, but it's not necessarily like a clergy role. And so which I love, I love that Lisa B's story is also a little bit like getting volun-told to do something and stepping up and stepping into leadership. And I think that's it's a, it's a microcosm of the Kolot, the Kolot way. But so yeah, so it felt like it was very like there was Rabbi Lippmann and then there was Lisa B stepped into the c antor role, like got ordained while like not long after I joined. And but there had, there wasn't really staff. There was the folks who ran CLP and the Children's Learning Program and they were like sort of part time. And so when I joined the board, it was the first time we hired that Kolot hired like a coordinator person who was like sort of in like an operations role and it wasn't exactly like the executive director model, that Kolot eventually like moved into. But it was, yeah, it felt like a moment of like professionalizing in a way. And I think because Kolot's, strategic work and sustainability has just kind of grown and grown. I think that the organization like the kind of like functional nonprofit-y side of Kolot has really, really grown and changed. But it was it was a very cool moment to kind of be in that. Space of like, okay, we've been a little scrappy. Like, what happens next? Like, how do we grow? How do we, like, step into growth? Yeah, I was really glad to be on the board at that time. Yeah, it was a it was a wonderful time. That's a great group of people that and I'm always still glad to see them when I see them like at services.

William Blastos [00:38:42] What's it been like, since you've been at Kolot for a while now, what's it been like watching it grow from kind of some small, scrappy, like you were saying, into this, I mean, going last weekend, it's much bigger and a lot more involved.

¹⁵ [Lisa B. Segal](#) is Kolot Chayeinu's Cantor.

Mel King [00:38:55] Yeah. Yeah, I think it's I it's it feels good. It feels like I think at the moment that I was on the board and like at the moment that I stepped away to go to grad school, I was like, like this really is like a turning point where Kolot could either get bigger and really hire staff, invest in its own future. And ultimately, like, that's what happened. But I think that like in that, like, do we do we get bigger or do we stay where we are? Like that decision, like inflection point, I think that it could have gone the other way. And I feel very, I'm so glad that there were people involved who understand, like the inner workings of kind of like how to how to make it functional and how to make it sustainable. That really understood all of that because it's it makes it feel like it's going to be here for a long time. Like, I think at that moment, I was like, what would happen if it went away? Like, that would be that'd be terrible. And I think that enough people really believed that this was a community and an idea and a space that was worth not only preserving, but sustaining and growing into an organization that would both allow the people who were running it to thrive but also allow the community to thrive. And there was the whole process that they, that Kolot went through with called Our Journey Forward, where there was like a real, like investment in Kolot's, like financial future, like asking people to make like multi-year gifts or pledges toward multi-year gifts. I think the way that Kolot has done sliding scale dues has always been like at the heart of like, like doors being open to whoever it is and letting folks kind of choose their level of involvement and engagement in that way. But yeah, I think that that's a it's I'm I'm very glad that Kolot is like the strong and growing and thriving community that it is. Like I loved going to pandemic, to I mean, pandemic services were very challenging in a lot of ways and it was so hard to not be with people, but it was amazing because the community grew like there are people that came to high holiday services who had only ever been to a Zoom service, which was it's pretty amazing. I think it's really cool to see that like, that there is there's something happening at Kolot that is, it's really special and people want to be a part of it. And and I think that that is that has always been true. And it's cool that it continues to be true and that it was true even in a zoom way.

William Blastos [00:41:47] Awesome. Well obviously this is preserved, being preserved in an archive.

Mel King [00:41:51] Mhm.

William Blastos [00:41:52] And so, obviously we're in a pandemic, coming out of kind of, hopefully the worst part of the pandemic. And so would you talk a little bit about being part of Kolot in that context and what that felt like and how being part of that community felt during the pandemic.

Mel King [00:42:11] Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's. I'm so grateful to Rabbi Miriam¹⁶ and to Cantor Lisa B for, for doing all that they did to, to really I mean, it never felt like Kolot was like on hiatus or on pause, even even when it felt like the whole world was. Like we they were just so open and honest about, like, this is really hard and we're going to keep doing this and people are going to show up or not. And like, that's going to be what it is and really making space for people to engage in a virtual way. I mean, high holidays during, I think about like high holidays, particularly during the pandemic, during like the heat of the pandemic and in 2020 and 2021, because it was it was really like that first year when we were like, wow, okay, we're going to be on the zoom for high holidays. Like, what does that even mean? Like, can we, can that even happen? And they did like they really did it like they made it happen in a way that felt incredible and devastating in its own way. But like, that allowed for people to engage Jewishly in the way that they would want to around high holidays. I think 2021, the return to Zoom like that was that was hard. To know, like I thought we were going to get to be in-person and we're still not. But I, they still found a way to make it. I mean, I think this is a testament to the staff and to the clergy that they found ways to make it both engaging and mean- and spiritually meaningful, that hit the moment and really felt like it was meeting folks where they were and holding people in that space and in that time. And I yeah, I feel really grateful to Kolot as, as an anchor for me and during the pandemic, because it felt like even when the world was, the future was uncertain. Like we had no idea what it was going to look like. It felt like Kolot was still holding the community, and that's pretty magical.

¹⁶ [Miriam Grossman](#) is Kolot Chayeinu's Rabbi.

William Blastos [00:44:40] Okay. Awesome. So yeah, and obviously this is for the Kolot archive. This is, we've been talking a lot about Kolot, but I'm also kind of curious, I know you're married. I know that, I believe your partner is a Kolot member as well.

Mel King [00:44:56] That's right.

William Blastos [00:44:57] Would you tell me just a little bit about that?

Mel King [00:44:59] Yeah. So it's funny because when my partner, when my wife and I started dating, she was not not Jewish, not interested in Judaism, really didn't know a whole bunch about it. But because it was so important to me and so important to like how I am in the world, like we we had Shabbat services like we did high holidays, like coming to high holidays that first year that we were together was like a it was a big, it was important to me. And I think she realized like how, how special Kolot was then. And we, we got married in 2017 and our rabbi was not a Kolot rabbi. We have, we have the fun blessing of like Jewish Brooklyn and Jewish New York. Is that having lots of rabbi friends. And so a good friend of ours is a rabbi who married us. So when we were meeting with her, she thought, you know, like it would be great for the two of you to, like, do like a Jewish, Intro. to Judaism class for Audrey so that, she can learn more. And like you can think about, like, what your Jewish life looks like together. Because even though like we had a Shabbat practice and we had like practices around holidays, like there was still, it was, there was still learning to do and that was really amazing. And Audrey entered that class thinking that she had no desire to convert. There are there are people in that class who were like on the road to conversion, and that class was like a stepping stone on that journey. And there are people who are like, no thanks, but I'm here to learn. And I missed the class that was on conversion because I had to be out of town for work. And that class was a real turning point for her. And it was a moment where she was like, Oh, I actually think that like. And at that point we were like it was almost like the end of the class cycle. And she was like, I think that maybe that's in my future. And so we got married and she had not converted. And then she wound up converting like, like six months later, like almost a year later. And yeah, so we like both wound up converting, but I'm very different timelines and it's always, people are always very interested and how that, how that all worked because I think sometimes when there are converts they either convert together or like somebody converts for the person or. But now that was, that was not our journey. But yeah. So I think. And Audrey converted. Not. Also not she not at Kolot. But yeah, we found a we found our way. And she loves the community as much as I do. And so that's it's a very special part of our part of our life as well. Yeah.

William Blastos [00:47:52] That's really beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. And yeah, is there anything else that you would like to have preserved in this oral history record or anything else that feels kind of significant that you want to share with me?

Mel King [00:48:07] It's a great question. You know, I think that when I first joined Kolot, there was something called "Locally Grown," and it was a group for twenties and thirties. Some of the first Shabbat that I ever went to. It's Friday night, Shabbat, down in the basement. And it was lovely. And it was very like potluck and lots of lots of friends, people that I knew from different spaces. And it was a great it was a wonder- it was a wonderful, wonderful thing for a long time. But I think why it didn't last very long was that. Kolot is really multi-generational and it's something that I really love about it that I have made friends at Kolot that are people that I never would have met because they are closer to my parents age than they are to me. But they have become good friends and like real friends, and I think that is really special and it doesn't happen very often. I think there are not a lot of spaces where multi-generational friendships and family friendships can kind of come out of. But it feels yeah, it feels really unique to Kolot. And I think that, the, the way, that Kolot kind of opens its doors, but also just like fosters relationship that like, okay, like you come in your Shabbat regular, like I see you and I'm a Shabbat regular and like that becomes the bond, and yeah, so one of the, one of the people that I'm

thinking about is Shelly Weiss,¹⁷ who may be on there, maybe another interviewee. I don't know. Perhaps, she's been around a long time, but she I met Shelly because I was going to Shabbat and we would see each other and she was always very friendly. But then she she had to have surgery. And, you know, we were thinking about her and praying for her. And when she came back after she was recovered, I gave her, I had, I knew she was coming back, so I like I came with a little card and I gave her like, I'm so glad you're like on the mend. And that really became the very beginning of a friendship that has I mean, that was we probably started becoming friends in like 2011. So it's, yeah, it's been a long time. And she comes over, we hang out like we yeah, we're like we're just friends now and Kolot made that happen and I don't think we ever would have met otherwise. But I'm so grateful for, for the friendships like that, for the relationships that in my life that I wouldn't have without Kolot. Yeah. Yeah. So I think that's that feels like a really important thing to say. Yeah, I, I, I think that Kolot is, you know, there's so much lore around Kolot with like starting around a table, a kitchen table and being a very small group of people who were not really even interested in like starting a synagogue, but like wanted a Jewish community in a different way. And I think that, the warmth and heart that started Kolot is like still, it's still so alive and so vibrant. I also think the other thing that I'd say is that I remember when Rabbi Lippmann was planning to retire, there was a long process toward finding the next rabbi. They were very intentional about it. And Rabbi Lippmann gave a very long lead time. And I got to be like there were a lot of like community conversations with the rabbis who were being interviewed. And Rabbi Miriam was a student rabbi at the time. And I felt so grateful that Kolot made the choice in, in Rabbi Miriam, because she just she has that heart. And from the very beginning, it was so clear to me that she embodied, like, the Kolot spirit. And she, I think she's a, a she's a wonderful rabbi. And she brings a different energy than Rabbi Lippmann did. But I yeah, it just feels like there's something something here. And I trust the community to to keep to keep finding the people who will move it forward and bring it into a new generation. I hope that, I hope that whoever watches this many, many years from now like that, they're those next people who are who are still opening the door and having the heart and believing that this little community, that that could, can be can be big and can be powerful and can be, can hold whatever is happening for that community in the moment.

William Blastos [00:53:14] Totally. I just, I guess my final question, final kind of wrap up, is just kind of when you think of a memory of Kolot, something specific or that, what is something that brings up strong emotions, positive emotions, a happy memory you might want to share, that really embodies Kolot's spirit, if you... Sorry that might be...

Mel King [00:53:38] Yeah. No, I mean, it's hard to pick just one. But I think something that comes up for me is we used to have high holidays at this, this church, this like kind of rundown church in Park Slope. It hasn't been there in a while. And part of that is because the pews were broken. It wasn't big enough. There are people sitting on the floor. There was no air conditioning. So there was like a lot of, like in those, like, scrappy days. Right. But there's something about it. Like at that time, especially, there were the idea of like high holiday services where you didn't have to buy a ticket or you didn't have to RSVP. You could just show up and attend, were really rare. I think that there are more synagogues have kind of taken Kolot's lead or are doing, are doing that in a different way which now which is good. But being in that space with that kind of overflow of people and and just people who wanted to be there and who are we're like, I will sit on the floor. I will sit on the corner of the stage. I will share a masor with the person standing next to me. Just to be in the space with these people and people of all kinds and talking about important, meaningful, uh, passages. But I also think, like, Kolot has never shied away from talking about real life and making old, old words very meaningful and real and true for where we are in this moment. So, yeah, I think that is that's it for me. I think that those and I'm glad I'm very glad that we are now in a place where we have high holiday services in places where people everybody gets a chair and there's air conditioning and it's comfortable. But I think that at its heart, like that, like, kinda scrappy overflow of humans who are all just clamoring to be in a room together. Feels like Kolot to me.

¹⁷ Shelly Weiss is member of Kolot Chayeinu.

William Blastos [00:56:00] That's really beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing that. I think that concludes the interview, pause the recording so we can do the boring stuff off the recording.