

Cantor Lisa B. Segal, interviewed by Alexandra Dobin, November 5, 2022, Brooklyn, NY.

Length: 1 hour and 44 minutes

In this interview, Cantor Lisa B. Segal shares about the beginning of Kolot, how her role within Kolot has changed, and her journey to becoming Cantor. She talks about her relationship to music, her personal prayer practice, and how her creative approach to ritual informs her pastoral work. She talks about co-creating modern rituals for congregants during meaningful and difficult times of their lives and about showing up for people during the pandemic. She speaks to the transition of rabbis, and her unique dynamics and relationships with Rabbi Ellen Lippmann and Rabbi Miriam Grossman. Towards the end, she reflects on doing this interview on Shabbat and what future listeners might get from the project, sharing her hope that Kolot keeps existing and changing. Quoting Pirkei Avot, she notes that “it is not on us to complete the work, but neither can we desist from it.” She ends the interview by sharing a *nigun* (wordless melody) that she first heard from Rabbi David Zeller and which she often sings at Kolot.

*This transcript has been minimally edited for clarity and readability, with care to preserve the oral quality of the interview. Additionally, you will notice that there are footnotes to provide context or elaboration at certain moments in the interview.*

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Alex Dobin: My name is Alex Dobin. Today is Saturday, November 5th. It's about 3:30 p.m. and I am interviewing Cantor Lisa B. Segal for the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project. Would you like to introduce yourself? [Laughter] I guess I just did.

Lisa B. Segal: I think you just did.

Alex Dobin: That's true.

LS: And we're in Brooklyn, New York.

AD: Oh, yeah.

LS: Just a few blocks away from Kolot.

AD: That's a good addition.

LS: And we just spent some time together this morning at the Kolot Saturday morning Shabbat service.

AD: Yeah.

LS: And we had Friday night dinner last night.

AD: Yeah.

LS: So nice. Thanks for being here.

AD: Thank you. Thanks for having me. Umm, yeah I was wondering - so you've been with Kolot sort of since the beginning.

LS: Mm hmm.

AD: [00:00:51] I was wondering, could you tell me that story about the beginning of Kolot?

LS: Ah, yeah. [Laughs] It was 30 years ago. So it was around 1992. My husband, my partner, Arthur Strimling and I ended up meeting Rabbi Ellen Lippmann<sup>1</sup> through an event that I was working on with an organization that she worked for. The organization was called Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger.<sup>2</sup> It was a national organization and she was, I think, a regional director of some sort. And so we met her because we did a fundraiser for Mazon, and I was on the committee, and it was just like sort of love at first sight. The event was to raise money for hunger projects around the country and around the world. It was called 'Dinner Without Dinner,' and it was a fancy black tie event with no food whatsoever. Just fancy waiters serving tap water and bringing awareness to hunger issues, which was Rabbi Lippmann's, you know, passion. So after that event - and we, you know, hung out and we had a great time together - she said, you know, I'm starting this sort of synagogue thing and I've had a meeting, but I would love you guys to come. Would you be interested? It's in Brooklyn. And we were like "Sure, we'd love to come." So we were at what, you know, is— I guess this was like the second meeting of that group of people that was part of her vision of starting something. And I don't think she really was planning on starting a synagogue exactly, but some kind of community. So that's how we really got involved. And we were really, you know, hooked and it was around the table at her and her now-wife's home. And just talking about what kind of...what kind of our goals were for having it, you know, living a Jewish, a Jewish life differently than how we may have been living it at that point. So that was kind of the very beginning. And there's, I mean there's—I don't know how much more [laughs] there's so many things—

AD: Yeah.

LS: but okay, so—

AD: [interjecting/overlapping] As much as you want!

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<sup>1</sup> Founding Rabbi of Kolot Chayeinu

<sup>2</sup> Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger is a national organization fighting to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel. Read more at <https://mazon.org/>

LS: [00:03:20] All right! Well, so we started having these meetings and then pretty quickly, I mean, Ellen will speak to this probably more than me, but, um, we started figuring out, you know, ways to gather. So, we would have these dinners in people's homes, Friday night dinners, and do a little bit of prayer and just really break bread together because that was really her thing, right? She just felt like – and it's true [laughter] – that food brings community together. Right. So her vision, it really at some point was what she called – she said "a coffee shop with a bima,"<sup>3</sup> to really just have a gathering place where—where Jews could explore being Jews and being in community together and eat together and make, you know, make connections that way. So it was really appealing, and we were involved with that for quite, you know, a while. I think within that first year I think, I can't remember exactly, but there was—so, you know, the timeline would, I don't have the timeline in front of me—but I think we had that first year we kind of put ourselves together, we came up with a name. We were at that meeting, and I think – and I, I being a closeted singer at the time, but being a musical person, came up with the idea of 'voices.' So that turned into *kolot*. And 'of our lives,' *chayeinu*. And so we, we incorporated sort of as that name. We had a high holy day services in a church basement somewhere - a different church. And um, we really just—

AD: Is this the first year?

LS: Like within the first year, yeah.

AD: Oh, cool.

LS: [00:04:54] Yeah, we had a, we had some high holy days services. It was funky and fun and just really great. And so yeah, so that doesn't speak to, really, to my journey to it. But that's, you know, that was my involvement at the beginning – and I was not the cantor.

AD: Right.

LS: Nor did I sing, but that's a whole other story.

AD: Yeah. No, you said you were sort of like a 'closeted singer'—

LS: [laughs]

AD: [00:05:19] and you mentioned, your husband didn't really know that you sang? Or your, [overlapping] you weren't married at the time—

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<sup>3</sup> On the "Our History" page of Kolot's website, Rabbi Lippmann writes of her "unformed idea to create a café like the old Garden Cafeteria on the Lower East Side – overcooked vegetables and the liveliest conversation among and between tables that I had ever seen." Open 24 hours a day, The Garden Dairy Cafeteria (1941-1983) was a center of Jewish intellectual life on the Lower East Side, where people would come to eat, talk, and argue. You can read more about the Garden Cafeteria [here](#).

LS: [00:05:22] Well, I mean, you know, he knew I was musical. I sang quietly on car trips to the radio [laughs] and, you know, he knew I came from a musical family and we used to, you know, hang out – we liked singing together, so that was kind of fun.

AD: Yeah. About how many people were at those meetings in that first year?

LS: [00:05:40] Oh, what a good question. Um, I think, you know, early on it started with like, you know, ten people around a table.

AD: Mmhmm.

LS: [00:05:48] and then you kind of get 15, and, you know, it was that for a while. And then these dinners where people would bring friends or spouses or kids or whatever, um and it just started to build as a thing. We wanted to be together. We wanted... -- There weren't so many places to go, I think, because there's so many people who were, [sighs] you know, either had no background whatsoever being Jewish, or weren't Jewish, but mostly at the beginning it was mostly folks who were Jewish by birth and maybe growing up that way. But, um, there weren't so many choices, you know? And so I think, um, in the nineties in the early nineties and in lots of different times, there was kind of in the air, kind of a spiritual...a desire for spiritual path and searching. And so I think people were looking for something that, that kind of fed that hunger I'd say, a little bit. And maybe they didn't find that in a more traditional setting, either in a denominational setting or they grew up with that and that's not what they were interested in. Or some of them grew up like more Orthodox, especially women who really had no access to Torah or to kind of learning in a certain way. Um, so this really interesting range of people who were interested in kind of just exploring their own Judaism and spirituality. Um, and that just started to grow. It started to grow, but sort of slowly at the beginning.

AD: [00:07:30] Yeah...When did you move to New York?

LS: I moved to New York in 1988.

AD: Okay.

LS: In September of 1988.

AD: And when did you meet Arthur?

LS: [00:07:40] Ahh. So I met Arthur in December of 1990. [laughs] Long time ago, 32 years ago. And we got together shortly after and we were together for about four years before we got married. By Rabbi Lippmann. And so we were sort of the first Kolot wedding.

AD: [00:08:07] Mmhmm. Had you been involved in, like, did you go – did you or Arthur go to services before you became involved with Kolot? Or did you have any sort of Jewish life in New York?

LS: [00:08:18] I mean, I grew up – I grew up in Minneapolis. I was very involved in my Reform synagogue growing up. I went to Jewish camp. I have two Jewish parents. We celebrated holidays. I became a bat mitzvah, um and was involved in, like youth group and all that kind of thing. And I, and I also went to 'Talmud Torah,' which in the Reform world wasn't so common. But my best friend was a conservative Jew, and she was going so I had to go [laughs]. So I went–

AD: Summer camp?

LS: [00:08:56] No, this was like an after-school program for five years. So I actually learned, you know, a lot more Hebrew and Torah and things that I probably wouldn't have learned at the time in my sort of Reform Sunday school from the sixties.<sup>4</sup> But um, I, yeah, so I grew up in Minneapolis and, and we all, you know, we went – our families were involved in temple, Temple Israel and um, and then later, like in, you know after high school and college I mean, I always sought out places — I would come home, you know, for holidays, the big holidays and Passover and stuff. But I wasn't a regular Shabbat attender, you know, it wasn't something that was part of my weekly life. Shabbat really wasn't, and really, I—I lived abroad, I would go and check out synagogues and check out things, but I just, it wasn't a regular part of my life. I felt very Jewish. And I never, you know, I never questioned that aspect of things. But I wasn't, I wouldn't say I was like particularly, um, observant, right? So other things you know interested me I think at the time. And so it really wasn't until, you know, we met Ellen and we...I think – yeah. So Arthur and I met two years—just about two years before we met Ellen and by that time we had decided that down the line we did want to get married. And actually that's a part of the story I didn't really say, which was, so two years into our relationship we decided we wanted to get married, but we wanted to do it within a Jewish community and kind of do it right for us. And so, but we didn't have any. We didn't have any place and we didn't have anyone. And then it was sort of I don't know, do you know this term *besheret*? which is like–

AD: I've read it a few times.

LS: [00:10:58] Yeah. I mean, it's often associated with, you know, the love of your life - finding the love of your life. 'It was meant to be.' So *besheret* means it was meant to be.<sup>5</sup> And so we were like, we want to get married, but we really want to do it in the right way, and we need to find some kind of community and like really soon after that is when we met Ellen. So that actually kind of jumpstarted the whole thing. And then, then we did start to create some kind of Shabbat

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<sup>4</sup> The Reform movement is a liberal denomination of Judaism, widely practiced in the United States. Historically, it has emphasized the ethical aspects of Jewish tradition over its ritual requirements, though in recent decades it has begun to re-embrace some of the religious practices it once dismissed.

<sup>5</sup> in Yiddish

practice. And it was really funny too, because at the beginning, you know, people can listen to Arthur's story on this, on these recordings, but [laughs] we would start doing Friday nights and say the prayers and he was like, "Well, what does that word mean? And what does that word mean?" And I'm like, *I don't know*. I just, I just know the prayer, you know – too much pressure. And, because I had been raised Jewish and, and it was sort of—he sort of assumed I would know all those things. He had two Jewish parents, he just wasn't raised with a lot of traditions. So um, we both started realizing we had a lot to learn. Um, me sort of understanding what things I had taken for granted in some ways, and him, you know, on a journey to learn more. So we started, you know, making Shabbat pretty quickly.

AD: [00:12:20] Yeah. Do you want to tell me about how you sort of, I guess how Ellen realized that you were a singer and how you sort of became...I guess your musical journey with Kolot or how your role—how your role has changed, I guess? Over time?

LS: [00:12:40] Right. Well so of course, you know, I'm the cantor and I've been the cantor, I can't exactly say exactly how long I've been the cantor, but the journey to it was so interesting because, you know, as you sort of alluded to a little while ago, like, I loved music - I always loved music. I was very musical, sang lots of things over the years. But I was kind of shy about it and so, in 1982, you know, as Kolot had really gotten going for a while, um I would sort of get involved and help us find people to lead services or occasionally like sing a song at Shabbat or something, but I was like helping facilitate other singers come in and do stuff [laughs] because we needed them and I just wasn't prepared to do any of that stuff. So Ellen kind of knew I liked music, and Arthur did too, but when we really started planning our wedding, which was, eh you know, something like a year before we got married, um it started just becoming clearer that over time that I really I wanted – I wanted to sing something at the wedding. So, you know, sort of cut to the chase there, in October of '94, when we got married, I sang a song with The Klezmatics<sup>6</sup>—

AD: Oh!

LS: who are, some of whom are friends and Frank London who's the bandleader said—I said, "You know, Frank, I think I really want to sing something to my, you know, husband-to-be, serenade him." And he's like, "Oh great!" So we figured out a whole thing and, um you know—

AD: And this was a Klezmer band? [Overlapping] So it was Jewish music! Okay!

LS: [00:14:17] They're an amazing – [answering the question] yeah! – they're an amazing Klezmer band<sup>7</sup> and um, Jewish music, which we you know, by that time we were really into all this stuff, but I still wasn't singing at Kolot. So I learned a song from the amazing Adrienne

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<sup>6</sup> The Klezmatics are a well-known Klezmer band, based in New York City. <https://www.klezmatics.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Klezmer music is a style of Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jewish music. A klezmer band may be made up of several different instruments (including clarinet, violin, accordion, trumpet, tuba, bass drum, cymbals, and hammered dulcimer) and can include Yiddish vocals as well.

Cooper, who was kind of the queen of the Yiddish music scene in New York and really internationally—she's an American New Yorker, who unfortunately passed away some years ago—but she was a friend of Arthur's, a friend of Frank's, and I called her and she suggested a really beautiful Yiddish song. So I learned this Yiddish song and then I serenaded and sang kind of in front of my whole family, obviously, and friends and Arthur and—the Rabbi! So, it was beautiful. And then, um – and I felt really good about it [laughs] – and right after at the reception of the wedding, she just sort of came up to me – kind of in a small fury [laughs] – and she said, "What? Wha-What's happening? Like, why? Why aren't you using your gifts?" Right? That's what she was saying, just like, "You need to be singing at Kolot," and I said, "Ahhhh, okay..." I was just so – I was so shy about it. But the truth is, at that moment I'd kind of come out and there was no going back in the closet [laughs] in the closet after that. She's like, "You need to sing at Kolot."

AD: Mmhmm.

LS: "Okay." So, I started doing more little things and Shabbat things and—holiday things here and there - just little, little things and trying to just come out of my shell a little bit. But then it really wasn't until *three* years later that she said—that the High Holy Days<sup>8</sup> were coming, and she asked me if I would sing a piece for High Holidays. "Oh, okay," I said. So she said, "How about Kol Nidre?"<sup>9</sup> You know, only the most holy prayer, most ancient, difficult thing. I didn't know it really. I'm like, "Okay." Because we all joke that if Ellen Lippmann asks you to do something, you just do it. You just have to do it. That's just who she is. So I did it. And that was just – that just was everything. Because I really, by that time, felt like my, my *in* – my kind of connection to to really feeling and being Jewish was—

AD: [referring to the laptop] I know it's kind of whirring...

LS: Um –Yeah, it's whirring, I have a little stand for that in a second– my connection was really like, my entry point was really through the music. Because that's where I felt like, Aha. Like that feels connected to me, Jewish-ly. I didn't know what exactly, but it really did feel like the right place for me. And so that was kind of an amazing...like a gift, really.

AD: Mmhmm.

LS: [gets up to retrieve the laptop stand] Here I'm just going to grab this.

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<sup>8</sup> The High Holy Days refer to Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as the Ten Days of Awe or Repentance, during which Jews perform the ritual of *tashlikh*, symbolically casting away their sins by throwing breadcrumbs into a flowing body of water. The Hebrew month of Elul is a month of repentance and reflection leading up to the High Holidays.

<sup>9</sup> Kol Nidre is the service that takes place prior to sunset on the evening of Yom Kippur, considered the most important holiday or the holiest day of the year in Judaism. Kol Nidrei is also the name of the legal formula chanted at the beginning of this service.

AD: Oh yeah yeah yeah.

LS: We can pause it.

AD: Yeah, that sounds good [Pauses recording].

AD: [00:17:27] [Re-starts recording]. Oh, okay, there we go. I think we're back on both recordings.

LS: We're in a digital world.

AD: Yeah.

LS: Making sure all the machines are working.

AD: Yeah. Yeah.

LS: There were no cell phones at the beginning of Kolot Chayeinu [laughs].

AD: Yeah, that sounds nice.

LS: Really, truly it's amazing. That's - that's how long ago, right? 30 years.

AD: Yeah, like 90s.

LS: I think I saw my first cell phone in '94 in Italy. Anyway, very funny.

AD: [00:17:50] Yeah. Yeah so music was your way in—

LS: Mmhmm.

AD: [00:17:53] Did you connect to, like, Jewish music and prayer? Or was it more so music in this, like...Has that changed? Like how connected you feel to that or how much you wanted to sing that type of music?

LS: [00:18:08] It felt like something was happening for me, like some spiritual shift. I mean, I like all music. I'm very eclectic in my, you know, in my tastes. But I think, you know, I think I'd been a pretty spiritually-oriented kid. And then when I was in Jewish camp and in like sort of junior high school, high school courses and things like that, I really felt like a deep connection to being Jewish through singing - but I had not felt that in many years. And so I think...but then, but then I'm here many years later - I'm not a child, I'm not a teen, you know? And it just started to feel like, yeah, for me, um, whatever exploration there was to be done about [pauses, speaking slowly] finding a way to experience God, the divine, some collective oneness, um, some spiritual connection. It was, it just really, really was the music that was like the—the window to all of that.



You know? So yeah, I think the answer is 'sure, all music' because I think you can feel – one can feel – spiritual and like connected to the world through lots of kind of music that's transcendent and, you know, a beautiful symphony or a beautiful voice or incredible lyric or some beautiful sounds. Um, but it was—it was bringing me back to, like, traditional things. And when I say tradition, I don't just mean what was before, just the—the text that we Jews have been praying with and grappling with for years in one form or another. So it was really an opening experience for me, for sure.

AD: [00:20:06] Yeah. And as you started, um you were getting more involved with leading the music and prayer at services. But you didn't, at that point you didn't want to be a cantor, right?

LS: Oh, my gosh. No.

LS: [00:20:16] What changed?

LS: [00:20:17] It was very funny because there were a few people, some of whom are probably being interviewed for this. But, um, like, "Oh you should, you should go to Cantorial School and you should be a cantor." And I'm like, "I'm not going to do that." [laughs] "That's not something I'm going to do." It just didn't occur to me. I mean, and people were suggesting it left and right, but I was I was like, no, no, no. I, I was interested in my own kind of path and career. And I was working in the arts, and I was making my way through that. And this was really um, you know, personal, but it didn't feel like it needed to be professional in anything. So it was really, truly... um '97 and the first Kol Nidre, you know, like three or four years later that I really started even thinking at all about it. I started, you know, I was regularly, once - in '97 - once I did High Holy Days, then I did them every year with a partner with a wonderful, early um cantorial leader at Kolot whose name was Elliot - is Elliot Pilshaw. He moved away since. Wonderful singer and wonderful leader of prayer, and he taught me lots of things. And so we partnered for a long time. And then it wasn't until a couple of years after I did the Kol Nidre, maybe - I don't remember exactly - '98, '99, 2000 - maybe 2000? He moved away and then we were looking for, you know, somebody to replace him and Rabbi Lippmann said well – I said, I think I went to her and I said, you know, "Well what if I did it? What if I just did it?" She's like, "Alright, go for it." So, that's what I did. But still, I was—it was my weekend, it was my Shabbat thing. It was my weekend thing. It was not all the time, and I didn't have any inkling that, in any other aspects of what it means to be Jewish clergy, it would be something I was thinking about doing. Pastoral work, life cycle work – all that stuff, that just didn't—that wasn't in my—in my mind at all until I think really a few years later. And I think I said this to you in our early interview that, I think like so many people after 9/11, the world had shifted so much. We gathered a Kolot that night. I mean where we're sitting right now, out my window, we could see ash falling into our yards. I mean, it wasn't, the cloud wasn't over this neighborhood but we could see – there was ash and people were, you know, wandering, stunned home from having walked here. And we were here. We weren't in the city or anything. But that—that night we all phone-called each other and we opened up space at

Kolot and together with the Park Slope Jewish Center to just...come over if you wanted to, just like – I can't use the word process because nobody was really processing – but just to be together. After such trauma in song and prayer. And so we were there for hours and hours.

AD: Where did you go?

LS: Park Slope Jewish Center.

AD: Park Slope Jewish Center, oh.

LS: [00:23:43] Yeah, just down the street from just two blocks from my house here. And the two synagogues, basically, we opened our doors and just people came in and...you know, it was really a thing. And so I think, you know, you know, the trauma of that day, you know, obviously for all the other reasons, but also just the...holding space like that with music, and...where we all – nobody had words to understand really why it happened and what it all meant and what was the future. And just to be in such a moment of confusion and fear and all those things...that we could gather together and sing, and, you know, did it make everything alright? No, but it created a safe refuge and space. And it really...that's I think in many ways like...I started thinking about like what the deeper power, for – not just for me – but for lots of people, and how that could be something else.

AD: [00:24:45] Yeah...So what did it look like, you applying to school and then going to school? Like, did you quit your job? Like, were you – you were coming back to Kolot, you were doing both? What did that look like?

LS: [00:25:00] So, in 2001, after 9/11, I was working at a wonderful arts organization that's not called St. Ann's – well it was just–just was opening as St. Ann's Warehouse down in Dumbo in New York. And we opened up the space after 9/11 for musicians and artists to come in. And I was on the administrative end of things and fundraising, and it was really beautiful and um and then we started our season and it was really great. I worked a lot on Fridays and Saturdays–

AD: Oh, wow.

LS: So I actually didn't go [to Kolot services], because it was an arts organization, we had concerts and theater and stuff. I would be really tired on Saturday morning if I had worked Friday night, and Arthur would say, "Let's go over to Kolot and do some prayer and sing," and I'm like, "No, I'm tired." So I–he was going regularly, I really wasn't. I was more like a 'holiday Jew'<sup>10</sup> at that point, for me. But um, I started feeling the tension of wanting to be in that space and wanting to go to Shabbat. So like, when I didn't work, when I wasn't tired, I would go. I really liked it. Um and then I was in a show – actually at St. Ann's warehouse – which was, which we produced, and it was um with a wonderful band–these sisters named The Roches.

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<sup>10</sup> Often refers to Jews who only go to synagogue/services on High Holidays

AD: [00:26:19] Oh I know them!

LS: [00:26:19] You do? They were really popular in like the 1980s and nineties. And they're New York based, they were. They were three sisters, but they were two sisters at the time. And they created this project called "Zero Church: The Prayer Project."<sup>11</sup> And so it's a long, amazing story, but, even though I was the development director, I ended up being in the show because they were interested in Jewish music and the artistic director told them I was kind of the cantor at this synagogue and they wanted to know about it. And so I sang them all kinds of songs – they came over here. It was really cool, and they were like “You should be in the show.” My boss was like, "Uh, you're the development director. You should – you can't be in the show." And I'm like, "Well maybe I could be in the show." So we had a two week run where I was in this show – it was really beautiful. I was kind of like the Jew in the show [laughs]. And I sang Avinu Malkeinu,<sup>12</sup> but I also sang in a lot of their other songs as like a backup singer and in other kind of featured things. It was two weeks and it really was like, 'Huh, I'm on the stage, for like a very spiritual show, on weekends – I'm not going to my own synagogue. What would it look like? What could it look like if I did this more? And took this feeling and this kind of...I mean, some of it being performance-feeling, but most of it like—just being like, this is the place I want to be. Like, this is what I want to do.' And so, by that time I had really gotten more and more involved in Kolot. It took another year or two before I just thought, you know, I really—I feel that tension, I really want to pursue this more. And so I took a few classes and I checked some things out...um—

AD: Where did you take the classes?

LS: [00:28:04] I took some classes at HUC, the reform school.<sup>13</sup> Then I took some classes at the Academy for Jewish Religion, which is where I ended up going to school and where I was ordained from. I wasn't sure I liked it yet. You know, I was checking it out. But then I went back and I um even though I had grown up as a Reform Jew, I just at the time - their requirements were spending a year in Israel and I wasn't prepared to do that um just where we were in our lives and her marriage and just. Also, Kolot was so independent, it just felt like the AJR<sup>14</sup> was the right place for me and I really loved it. So, I went to school there in 2005 and matriculated — and I continued to work. Uh, no, I left my job - I'm sorry, I left St. Ann's. I left St. Anne's, took the - I went into the school like sort of part time. And I was working at Kolot by then. So then I was leading services, started really leading services like pretty much every Saturday and Friday

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<sup>11</sup> For more on Suzzy and Maggie Roche's album, Zero Church (2001):

<http://www.roches.com/discography/zerochurch.html>

<sup>12</sup> Avinu Malkeinu is a prayer recited throughout the Ten Days of Awe or Repentance, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, as well as on fast days. It is a beautiful and powerful melody.

<sup>13</sup> Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion is the main seminary for training rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators and nonprofit professionals in Reform Judaism. HUC has campuses in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, New York, and Jerusalem.

<sup>14</sup> The Academy for Jewish Religion is a non-denominational and pluralistic seminary that ordains rabbis and cantors for all Jewish communities. It is located in Yonkers, NY. Read a profile of Cantor Lisa on their website here:

<https://ajr.edu/2012/04/cantor-lisa-b-segal/>

nights like once a month. And still again, the High Holy Days were big and other - and just super involved in the community because we just did so many things together. So then I just was more and more involved and eventually kind of worked with the Board of Kolot to pay me, pay me something.

AD: Yeah.

LS: [00:29:26] And, you know, it's tricky because I was like coming up organically. But, it really was - it became, you know, it became more of a job. But I was in school, so I was in school. For, and then I was, I was ordained in 2011. Which was amazing. And all kinds of Kolotniks came to my ordination, that was really amazing. But I mean, by then by - really by 2005 and then it just grew and grew and grew. I was like, this is where I want to be. This this is, I mean, it's really like a feeling of service, right? And a feeling like this is the work I'm going to be doing. And so, all of this time, all the time I was working with Kolot was really under the mentorship of Rabbi Lippmann and...and I just, you know, just picked up as much and everything as I could do. Just part-time for a very long time, but it was, you know, we began to be more and more partners, certainly on the bimah and some off the bimah<sup>15</sup> as well. Um, you know, doing the work of Kolot.

AD: Yeah. So you were in school for like five or six years?

LS: Yeah.

AD: [00:30:32] And you were starting to sort of get paid for your work—

LS: Yeah, oh, yeah.

AD: —in that time.

LS: [00:30:36] Yeah yeah yeah.

LS: But you were part time?

LS: Yeah, part-time pretty much. Yeah that's all— [laughing]

AD: Yeah, logistical, I'm just curious.

LS: [00:30:45] I'd have to look at the calendars for all those things, but yeah. Yeah. But I felt like I was — I wouldn't say defacto is quite right because I was the cantor but I also, like even when I was in school, I was reluctant to be called Cantor, because I wasn't ordained and. Some called me the cantorial soloist for some years, which is kind of a thing people would get called doing this

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<sup>15</sup> The bimah is the podium from which clergy and members of the community read Torah and lead Jewish services in synagogue.

kind of work. Rabbi Lippmann started using the word *chazan*,<sup>16</sup> which is used interchangeably truly with cantor, and really um it's a real sign of of honor and *kavod*,<sup>17</sup> which is beautiful...but maybe, but almost a little heavy for like – I didn't feel like I quite had earned it yet, even though I think I did, I did the work well and I felt really good about it. So really, when I was ordained and I really had that laying on of hands with the *beit din*<sup>18</sup> and the rabbis and cantors that were ordaining me, then I really felt like I was fully—like I had the mantle on of being Cantor, you know? And so that was...12 years ago.

AD: [00:31:58] Yeah. After your ordination, did you start sort of taking on more roles like that pastoral, clergy role?

LS: Yeah, for sure.

LS: Had you started that before? or it was sort of—

LS: [00:32:06] You know, I had done some of that. Um, for sure. And I'd certainly been...like done many hospital visits. I'd done baby namings, you know, weddings. Mostly with, like with Rabbi Lippmann or sometimes with other people as, you know, co-clergy or co-officiant. Um, I'd say I wasn't doing so much of the pastoral work. I mean, we were a smaller community. Rabbi Lippmann – that was more, you know, her area. But I was also really well known and people did come to me sometimes. But I would say not as formal of the pastoral, but lots of life cycle work and, you know, very full holiday work and certainly, and again, holy days and Shabbat and really having a great [time] with that.

AD: [00:33:04] Can you tell me a little bit more about Rabbi Lippmann's mentorship and what that has meant to you?

LS: [00:33:11] Oh, everything. I mean, I really feel, I feel lucky. And I think that, you know, a great mentor is somebody who really sees you, you know, and she is just like one of those most amazing people who just sees and sees the thing in somebody that they don't even know is there. And she's able to – she's a little bit of a magician in that way – and really able to draw it out and really like...made it happen I think. I mean, I think...I don't know. I mean, I honestly don't know without her, I don't—I don't— and who knows what we would do in our lives, right? Without the people who come along and help us. But she—she believed in me, and she saw this in me and...helped me see it in myself, you know. And then I think with the— I got obviously a lot of great support from the community and all those people who were like ten years earlier, like, 'Why aren't you going to cantorial school?' [Laughs]. One of them, it's very funny, she's being

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<sup>16</sup> *Chazan* or *hazzan* is the Hebrew word for cantor, the person who leads prayer in synagogue services.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrew word for honor and respect.

<sup>18</sup> A *beit din* is a rabbinic court, composed of three individuals (at least one of whom is an ordained rabbi). More information can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

um interviewed now here, too. Judith Kane<sup>19</sup> – early, early member. She's fantastic. She's – every year–

AD: Yeah?

LS: [00:34:25] She's like, you know, “You got to do it. You got to do it.” She was like, “See, I told you,” you know, later. But I – I think Ellen's ability to really just support me and um...just...open up space and pave a path and make room for something to happen, you know. And then, I mean, I just – I mean, there's just myriads of things I learned. I mean, the way I lead life cycle events, the way that I've led weddings, I mean, I've created my own stamp and my own personality on things and everything, but I just...there's so much I learned, you know, from her. And she's just – she's fun and she's patient and she's impatient, too, you know, in the way of like ‘Come on, let's get this going,’ like and, you know, and I think that's just that's powerful because she is – she's a visionary. And I think, I don't know that every visionary could be a good mentor because sometimes they're like, you know, they could be like the kind of visionary where it's like blinders on, and they're like ‘I'm going to my thing and whatever happens, happens.’ But I think she, she really looks for that in people. And so steady, you know, so steady. And deep. It's pretty...I mean, I could go on and on and on [laughs].

AD: Yeah...What kinds of things do you do for life cycle events? And, I don't know, can you describe that? Sort of like, personal style that you've developed later?

LS: I mean...was it Kristen<sup>20</sup> or you who asked me like – oh, it was Kristen I think – who asked me to describe myself and I just–

AD: Oh yeah.

LS: I said something like...what did I say? I said–

AD: Friendly, funny, spiritual.

LS: Friendly, funny, and spiritual.

AD: I like it!

LS: [00:36:29] And, you know, look I'm from Minnesota and maybe it's cliché, you know, ‘Minnesota nice,’ ha ha ha. But, it's probably not actually that true anymore. But I am friendly and I am funny [laughs]. I mean, I can be funny. And I think I put people at ease, and so...I like, I can, it's, so I think when I'm a little bit experimental in like if it's a life cycle where there's, I

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Kane is a founding member of Kolot Chayeinu.

<sup>20</sup> Kristen Morgenstern is both a Middlebury college student and a member of Kolot Chayeinu and the Oral History Project Design Team. She was the teaching assistant for Lana Povitz's Jewish Oral History course in Fall 2022, and she conducted pre-interview conversations with all 14 narrators who represented the first round of interviews for the project. Kristen was interviewing Lisa's husband Arthur Strimling at the same time as Alex was interviewing Lisa.

don't know, there's tension in a family. You know, there's inter-something marriage where maybe some...some relatives of one of the folks getting married might not object to the wedding but might be like having problems or worried about it. Or maybe, 'Oh, I wanted them to marry someone Jewish,' 'I wanted them to marry someone - I thought they would marry someone Jewish who wasn't a person of color' or, you know, like people who've really, you know, families have struggled. I think that when I'm doing something, I make sure when I'm doing the ritual and just make sure that people are put at ease, like we're doing something ancient and we're reinterpreting, like we're taking tradition and we're playing with it and it's real. And, I'm gonna to explain all this to you, and this is why these people are so great together or, you know, like I'll reinforce things through what I say. So that's maybe that's kind of a little bit of an amorphous answer, maybe. But I like to look for kind of alternative, I don't know, language or like or traditions. Bring in personal things, you know, like we do a lot of - I know when we do like a baby naming for any child it's like bringing in pieces of their lives as objects that are meaningful to them or something, and bringing them into the room somehow or weaving traditions together, especially when it's interfaith or those kinds of things. And when - by weaving traditions I also I want to just be clear to say, like, I don't actually officiate...like I don't co-officiate weddings with a person of a different faith. I don't do that. Or I don't do a baby naming and also there's not somebody else doing a baptism or anything like, you know, I don't do those kinds of things. I think within the Jewish - I do a lot of interfaith things but within Jewish, what I'm doing is Jewish, right? And so trying to just find the...the creativity and the openings of what can speak to anybody at any one time. I do think, it's really interesting, we had some neighbors down the street who were just this wonderful couple and they had lived here a long time and then they moved and they were really sad about moving. And there's this wonderful tradition of like, when you move into a house you put up mezuzahs, right? And it's called Chanukat HaBayit. It's like the dedication of the home. You put in the mezuzah and you say the prayers and you go around and you sanctify your living space. And they were leaving this home and they were really sad about it. And so we created, I created a ritual where like, you know hamsa?<sup>21</sup> You know, like the-

AD: Yeah, I love hamsas.

LS: -so, with the hand. So, they had just had their, I think their first child in the house and we, we decided - they were taking down their mezuzah<sup>22</sup> to move, which, you know, you can do. Whatever, like technically you're supposed to leave mezuzahs, but you take them down and

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<sup>21</sup> A hamsa is a symbol that looks like an eye within a hand. Hamsas have historically been used by both Jews and Muslims as amulets to ward off the evil eye. Hamsas are a popular symbol in the Middle East and elsewhere, and can be found on jewelry, wall hangings and other judaica.

<sup>22</sup> The Hebrew word *mezuzah* means "doorpost" and the custom of affixing a *mezuzah* to the doorpost at the entrance to a Jewish home (as well as at the entrance to each of the interior rooms except for bathrooms) fulfills the biblical commandment: "You shall write them upon the doorposts of thy house and upon thy gates" (Deuteronomy 6:9). The *mezuzah* itself consists of a small scroll of parchment (*k'laf*) on which two biblical passages are written (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Deuteronomy 11:13-21) and the container in which the parchment is enclosed. A mezuzah is both a reminder of God's commandments and the covenant with God as well as a visible sign and symbol that distinguishes a Jewish home.

replace them with like a really plain plastic one or something. But they wanted to take that mezuzah with them. They wanted to leave something. And, and so the ritual was about like, where have your hands been in this house? You've made food, you've loved each other, you've made the bed together, you created this baby, you changed this baby's diaper. And so this sort of protective Hamsa piece was...they, they got one and they left it there and it was a whole thing. So it's just, you know, just things like that, like just that aren't in the books anywhere, right? But it's taking Jewish tradition and saying, what can we do with this? This is a flexible, hopefully flexible, religion — enough to bring in tradition where maybe we haven't been able to mark stuff before.

AD: [00:41:14] Yeah. I love that. Like, you're...like, do you do that a lot? Like, create rituals for people? [overlapping] in times of their lives?

LS: [00:41:21] Yeah. I mean, I worked with a couple, who were struggling with infertility and really...really had to mourn, you know, miscarriage, where there traditionally isn't room for that in traditional Jewish practice. I mean, there is more and more now because people are interpreting these things. But to help get them to a place where there was a way to kind of put that – not away and you can't forget, and it's a terrible loss – but they wanted to be hopeful for the future. And, and it was at the moment it was like, God willing, you will have and you do have a family now. But, it was really necessary. They needed to - they couldn't really move on - and they needed something, and there really wasn't anything there. And so I think the creativity, the intimacy of just saying, let's - ritual is transformative, right? And I always say this, and that's what I love about - you know, beyond the singing part? - I really do love ritual [laughs]. Because it really takes you from one place to the other, and it's like...Okay. Arthur and I were living together for four years, we got married, what's the difference? Like. But we went through something, right? We created something and ritualized it. We worked with a rabbi, we worked with our friends. We spoke it into being. It changed, it changed us. We don't often know and understand how we're changed by ritual, but the fact is we are. And that's why cultures have had rituals forever. Because it changes us. It marks us.

AD: [00:43:14] Do you have any personal rituals? Do you—

LS: Mmm. Well, what do you mean, exactly?

AD: I don't know...

LS: Or maybe not exactly [laughs].

AD: Because, I hear what you're saying, with sort of like these almost one-time rituals, like, you know, getting married or the baby naming. But then I also feel like there's these, like, cyclical rituals that maybe—



LS: Well, I would say I, um, the thing that really comes to mind right away now that you said that. My wonderful father passed away in March of 21. And it's been about a year and – a little over a year and a half. My step-brother passed away March of 22. So I've been saying Kaddish every day. I had to find the – I needed the place to say, needed to find a way to say Kaddish<sup>23</sup> every day. For, first for my father...which I did for a year, and Arthur did it with me, has been doing it with me. And we were following – we were trying to find a way to do it – and we were following a kind of a morning ritual led by another local rabbi, a wonderful rabbi. Just some like meditation and a little bit of Torah or Talmud in the mornings and saying Kaddish together, just like with - online - you know, just like a thing to do online. And eventually, when she ended her, you know, broadcasts, which had started at the beginning of the pandemic, so like 800 days after that, she ended it. Hmm, it was last year. We started just like – she stopped but we need to keep going with that. So we carved out together, you know, a time every morning where we sit, and we ring a bell, and we study - we decided what we wanted to study. We studied Pirkei Avot<sup>24</sup> for - we're still on Pirkei Avot actually now um. We, during the month of Elul just recently, we spent the whole month focused on Psalm 27, which is the Psalm you say during the month of Elul - Ahat Sha'alti. And started doing that, um, and we kept that going all through the end of Simchat Torah and everything. Um, and then we would say Kaddish every day. So we have said – so, you know, it's the two of us and not a minyan and everything – it's us – and it's, but it's really like a powerful ritual and it's really deepened our relationship and just our time together. And it kind of frames the day, you know, it's really nice–

AD: [overlapping] That's lovely.

LS: –and it's a place to say Kaddish, you know? And then, when we can, and when I can, and I'm obviously doing it in, you know, services and other spaces.

AD: Yeah.

LS: Well, that's a....that's a big one [laughs].

AD: Yeah, every day.

LS: That's more recent.

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<sup>23</sup> Saying Kaddish refers to the Mourner's Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for mourning. Text of the Mourner's Kaddish can be found [here](#).

<sup>24</sup> Pirkei Avot ("Ethics of Our Fathers") is one of the best-known and most-cited of Jewish texts. For example, "If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not now, when?" (1:14). And, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it" (2:16). It is part of the Mishnah, the first major written collection of Jewish oral law, which forms the first part of the Talmud. Whereas the bulk of the Mishnah concerns itself with case law, Pirkei Avot presents us with a series of ethical principles articulated by the rabbis whose legal opinions appear elsewhere in the Mishnah. You can read the full text of Pirkei Avot on Sefaria, [here](#). Source: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/pirkei-avot-ethics-of-our-fathers/>

AD: Yeah, that's beautiful.

LS: Mmhm. Yeah, yeah.

AD: [00:46:17] Where do you sit, when you do that?

LS: Mmm, right above our heads where we're sitting now [laughs]. Arthur has that wonderful studio space upstairs, so. We put out yoga mats, and we sit on – we have little cushions, we each have a cushion. And, you know, sometimes we stretch and I have tea, he has coffee [laughs]. We'll look out the window, watch the seasons change. And...and we try to do that wherever we are, I mean. We have a place up in Maine, and so we – that's really rural and we're looking out at a very different kind of landscape, but also filled with trees, and just sit on the deck or sit out and do that every day. And that's become a really important, regular ritual.

AD: [00:47:08] Mmhm. [00:47:08][0.0]

AD: [00:47:08] You know, and in some ways it's...I don't know how I might have answered the question, like, what's your regular, like, what's your ritual like? Before my father passed away, because I think in some ways I had...I didn't have so much regular stuff. I mean, I did...I'm part of a wonderful group called the Institute for Jewish Spirituality,<sup>25</sup> and I did a clergy...a mindfulness training for clergy. I was with a cohort for a number of years learning how to, you know, meditate and sit. And I had learned how to sit before, but I'm a pretty fidgety person [laughs] and it was really challenging for me to sit. And it still is challenging...but that, that was – that is a wonderful place. I'm actually going to California for like an alumni version of that retreat in January. And yeah, and I think just the - I'm trying to build up my, how long I can sit. Because I'm such a fidgeter. But it's really — yeah [referring to her mug] this is actually the cup of tea I'm drinking.

AD: Oh yeah, [reading aloud the words printed on the mug] "Ask me about my prayer practice."

LS: It says, "Ask me about my prayer practice."

AD: I did!

LS: Which you were looking at as we talked! [laughs].

AD: Yeah, I was thinking about that.

LS: That's so funny. Yes, I have this beautiful cup from – from that group.

AD: Yeah that's nice.

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<sup>25</sup> Institute for Jewish Spirituality – <https://www.jewishspirituality.org/>

LS: [00:48:43] Because I don't - and I think, and I really. During the pandemic I also started doing, and I did about five and a half months of, like a Facebook Live, you know, morning – we'll open the windows in a second, but – like a Facebook Live, you know – again – meditation, song, and trying to help folks sort of sink in Friday mornings and Monday mornings. Friday before Shabbat, Monday to start the week. I would just focus on a text. And, you know, one of the things about the pandemic was I was leading services right here where we're sitting at my piano, which I really hadn't used so much in, you know, you saw me today at services playing a little bit of piano. But for a long time, I really didn't play that as much at Kolot. But during the pandemic I did. And so I also ended up writing music. You know, one of the pieces you heard me today was mine.

AD: Oh, which one?

LS: [00:49:45] The Elohai Neshama<sup>26</sup> [singing]:

*Elohai neshama –that one– shenata bi, t'horah hi, t'horah hi, elohai neshama neshema, neshama.*

LS: And I love that prayer, you know, and it's – I took the text from our siddur. That's what we say in the mornings, the prayers for our bodies and souls. And so [singing]:

*God, the soul you gave to me is pure. You created it, you shaped it, and you breathe it into me. Someday you will take it from me, take it from me. Set it free.*<sup>27</sup>

And I wrote that. And so it's - and I wrote a lot of other things and so...that was like a different kind of place to be. So I think, I don't know if it's ritual exactly, but it's like carving out time to uh to do more music and to look back in. I think we should pause for a minute and open some windows. It's November, but it feels like August.

AD: Mmhm [recording paused].

AD: [00:50:45] [recording re-started] Okay. So I think we are back, on both of these guys. So far, so good with the laptop–

LS: A little cooler now.

AD: Yeah [laughter]. So you started writing songs during the pandemic? Had you–

LS: I did. I mean, I have written some things over time, but I just – I started doing more. I mean I've...actually, anyway. Yeah, I just think I think the leading services and kind of having my, you know, sitting at the piano having my hands on the keys...I just got more comfortable, you know with, in terms of the, of music, of prayer. And it just became a more creative space for me

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<sup>26</sup> More on this prayer [here](#) and [here](#).

<sup>27</sup> The same melody as before, but in English now instead of Hebrew

instead of just like. I mean, not that it's just performance or anything, but – it's not – but it just got more natural. I just got more comfortable, I guess. So, yeah. Yeah, it's kind of nice.

AD: [00:51:48] Yeah. What was it like being clergy during the pandemic?

AD: [00:51:50] Mmm, hmm. You know, look, I think the...the biggest challenge that we all faced was isolation. And, and certainly at the beginning, a lot of fear, right? We didn't know. Nobody knew what was really going on. You know, we were washing our grocery bags. You know, and every little thing. You know, we just – so much fear. And, and I think, you know, as a *musician*, as a, as a prayer leader, you know, *singing together*? Raising your voice together in harmony? I mean, not to be able to do any of that? For *years*. For years.

AD: They were so strict about singing, specifically.

AD: [00:52:34] Singing, and singing - and imagine, yeah - yeah, like singing, like pushing on your breath like that, was more dangerous than talking, right? So it's like, the thing that's so important for so many people, so many –anybody, bu – so many people who come to Kolot –but any synagogue or church– you know, just not –or mosque or wherever– you know, just not singing together. And so like, the fear of that I think was really awful. And then– And then– So what do you do with that, you know? And we were all like all making up life as we know it was really changing – knew it – was really changing. And so I think, you know, moving to Zoom – I mean, I didn't even I hadn't even heard of Zoom, and two days later, when we were in lockdown, there we were on Zoom leading services. And I think for me...back to the friendly, funny [laughs] accessible thing–

AD: Spiritual–

LS: [00:53:29] Spiritual thing. I really felt committed to like. I just really felt like, I mean, if you could see me now – I mean you're seeing me, in front of me – but I just really want to reach out of that screen and be like, 'Come on, Alex.' You know, like – like 'I see you. I see you.' And so, I mean even today, it's a very different experience, I think, coming to synagogue on Zoom now. Because the rabbi and I are not in the boxes anymore, we're just, you know, we're on the bima. It's a more - people are watching it versus maybe participating as much. I mean, I think it's challenging for folks. They're still coming, which is fantastic. We have this big screen — I like to kind of wave at the camera, I like to look at them. I want to see them. They want to see us. They want to be seen. And I think, that was really huge and so I think just - the challenge of of really being one-on-one with people and caring for people and like listening and being there. And so, pastoral work on the phone or on Zoom. Um, you know, we could still talk to each other, thank God, right? We could still connect with each other. But I think bridging that gap of like what it was for so many people - I mean, of course, felt very fortunate. I wasn't...alone. I had Arthur with me and - somebody with me. But so many people who, you know, family and, you know, people were really alone. And so, how to how to literally reach out through that screen or that phone and

really help people. And, you know, to the extent that we could, you know. Like, you never know. You know, what can what can work, but that was just incredibly, incredibly challenging and incredibly hard to stay connected. Um. You know, as a...pfft you know, as a as a sort of the community leaders, board and staff, it was tough. It's just really hard to to know how to relate - we just, it's all stuff we didn't understand. And so we were all trying to figure that out.

AD: Yeah.

LS: [00:55:34] Yeah. So, it added - and the, and the stress. I think all the layers of stress that people were experiencing and...um. And dealing with folks with, you know, depression. And, and then certainly, I mean. Quickly we saw - we didn't, thank God we didn't lose, you know, members so much. We have recently lost some Kolot members. But really, when we started doing funerals and shivas on Zoom and people, you know, counseling people who weren't able to literally physically say goodbye to a parent or...and so, and then do the funerals. But we were able to do it somehow. It wasn't, obviously not the same. But there was so much, there's so much that was so incredibly moving. I feel like I learned a lot about...what not to take for granted, certainly, but...Um. Just the pathways that are possible to help people, to help people -- to just be there for somebody. Um. You know. And when you take away the hug and you take away the--

AD: Mmhmm--

LS: [00:56:40] The "mmhmm" and all of the kind of back and forth stuff. And the harmony and the singing. Take that all the way, it's...there's a huge loss. But there's a lot of other, a lot of other things, too. And I think that was really...really the challenge. And I really believe that we...that I, you know, I'll just speak for myself, but like that I found ways to create intimacy and connection across, like, digital platforms [laughs]. Sounds crazy, but--

AD: Yeah.

LS: I think--

AD: No no, it makes sense--

LS: [00:57:12] I think I was successful in many ways...and again, not to pat myself on the back. But just because people said, "I felt, I felt that you were there." "I felt that, that you and the rabbi were there." I felt, you know, or, you know if, "I could listen to that music and I could sing harmony with you because - but I'm a terrible singer and so I never would sing in synagogue but I sing with you at home because nobody could hear me [both laugh] and so I got really into singing with you" or, you know, things like that. Really sweet and um...you know, and and of course, sad. And also just like...uh, you know, finding the joy in what we did have was a challenge and it was also [inhales and exhales] you know...would we have chosen that challenge? No [laughs]. But we, we had it. And I think we...we were able to reach up to it and I feel like I...I

mean I'm glad we can be in person, obviously. And I, the truth is I, I miss - sometimes I miss...um, seeing everybody's faces—

AD: Yeah.

LS: in Zoom. And just the casualness of it. Like people, like with their dogs or making dinner—

AD: Very intimate. Like, the home space.

LS: [00:58:25] Yeah, I think, being at home – and, and it's interesting – yeah, that's, you know, I hadn't thought of this in a while, but I think just harkening back to the beginning of this conversation, like that Kolot started in people's homes, right?

AD: Mmm—

LS: [00:58:37] Around a table. No, no synagogue, it wasn't a synagogue. It was a community of people. And so, there's something very beautiful, I think, thinking back about a very awful, hard time – that we're not completely through – of, of what it is to kind of, you know, it's sort of to meet people where they are - literally and figuratively. Because I think, there's lots of different...people are—who who work, not as just as clergy, but different kinds of workers, you know, mentors, teachers, somebody. You know, you want to meet people where they are, right? But I think as clergy, that's pretty vital. And so, there's something really beautiful about. I don't know, about that intimacy of being in somebody's home and just being right there, in their in their ear, you know. And, and them in mine sometimes. Because when we would have some feedback, back and forth, we would be able to open up the lines or something.

AD: No I feel that.

LS: But it doesn't compare - AND it doesn't compare to the in-person experience. But there are beautiful things about it, too.

AD: [00:59:49] How do you feel like you showed up for people in that time?

LS: [01:00:00] Um. I just, I felt it really incumbent on me to, to show up. You know, and I think to push through my own fears and isolation and know that the best I could do – if somebody lost somebody, like – just to be there with them somehow. I mean if I'm on that – I mean I [sighs] man, you know, watching somebody...you know, fill the grave with dirt after we said Kaddish - online, I'm online – but I'm watching and I'm just witnessing and I think just being with people and...even though I wasn't standing there, you know – we were standing there, we were really standing with them. And so, um...but, yeah. Ask me the question one more time, like 'how—?

AD: [01:00:43] Yeah, yeah. How did you show up for people during that time? [01:00:44]

LS: [01:00:45] Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I...I think pushing - yeah - pushing through some of my own stuff, obviously, which we do anyway. But um, just...just showing up. And, and like I talked about a little earlier, about like creative ritual, like, let's get creative. Like, how are we going to get through this or that? And let's create something around it. Let's, you know, we all figured out how to use the chat, or use the share, or use, oh you know, use the technology, I think, to our advantage to – to help people feel connected and to help people show up for each other. And, I don't know maybe...maybe just from, you know, being in my own home leading services or leading ritual, surrounded by what's comfortable for *me* – and I would make like my bimah, as I sort of joke about, down there – it's not totally a joke, I mean, there's Jewish objects I was surrounded by, you know, my great grandfather's melodeon<sup>28</sup> and pictures of my dad and instruments and - things that I just wouldn't normally bring to synagogue, right? Like–

AD: Yeah, that's special.

LS: My - yeah - paintings or um artwork that had Jewish meaning for us or something. And so it's...I think just by - by being surrounded myself and feeling – kind of carving out a safe space for myself – I could show up a little better. You know, I think if I'd have been in a panic all the time, obviously I wouldn't have done much good. I mean I, of course we were all scared at different times, but I think that helped me - like finding ways to ground myself, um, so I could help other people just feel the same, or something. Yeah.

AD: [01:02:50] This is a little bit of a shift, but I'm curious about the transition. And you sort of being a constant through that – through Rabbi Ellen and now Rabbi Miriam. Um, and working with both of them. Yeah. I don't know, can you tell me a little bit about Rabbi Miriam and maybe that?

LS: [01:03:09] Mm hmm. Yeah. So interesting. I mean...We've had two rabbis, right? So, 25 years of Rabbi Lippmann and then we had a...kind of an interim–interim year that wasn't quite an interim year. And Miriam was a constant as well because she came to us as our – our student. And um, you know, we just – I think so many of us saw such a spark in her right from the beginning, um, that it was—that there was a kind of *l'dor v'dor* possibility in her. And so people saw that right away, I think. And so that was a really beautiful thing. Um, and I think that the fact that we...you know, there were challenges because it was difficult for her to be in the role sometimes as student and then as a rabbinic fellow and then be part of like, 'am I or am I not going to be the rabbi' [laughs]–

AD: Yeah–

LS: [01:04:12] You know, I think there was a lot of unknown stuff, and then during a - during a big transition when, when the congregation had really grown and changed – certainly from being

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<sup>28</sup> A melodeon is a type of reed organ (a musical instrument)

around the table, and certainly from even being around a couple hundred members, to many, many, many hundreds of members. It was a different place than it had been at the start. And I think some of the challenges were in, you know, really inviting in what's new and and the challenge of like wanting, I think, for me or for other people certainly like – not wanting things to be the same but wanting – wanting to have continuity, you know, and what the challenges were to have continuity versus – or not versus, but...you know, to bring in the new with a – with a connection to the past. And I think that's just challenging in any, in any setting. And I think we've, over time really, you know, done as - done well with that. And so, um...you know, just [laughs] just this weekend alone, you know, Rabbi Miriam and I are – we did an unveiling<sup>29</sup> yesterday, we're doing a funeral tomorrow. And, you know, we both bring to the table – I bring, I bring I think some of the past of Kolot, or – and also because I like being innovative, you know, we create ritual together too. And do different, you know, we do things...it's hard to talk about exactly. But, you know, we do - we do things as partners, we do things separately and I think we both just try to support each other as much as possible with...kind of bringing what we each bring to the table. Um, but I do think I - I, because of just the fact of my being here so long and having seen so much here that I do hold kind of institutional memory, I hold a kind of ritual memory, I hold a people memory that...that newer members and also even – even after five years, you know – our wonderful rabbi can't necessarily know. So that's...it's just – it's just um...I think it can be a really tricky thing for most congregations because, you know, especially when there's a very beloved rabbi – a founding rabbi. And I think that's, that's always the challenge in different congregations – how do you get through a time like that. Because change, you know, change involves loss. You know, and people process loss, I think, in different ways. You know, 'It's not the same as it was,' 'It's not [like] when I joined it,' 'Things are different,' you know? And, and there's embracing that and there's...mourning it, and then there's all the stuff in between. And some people don't do either of – on either end. You know, there's – mostly it's an in-between kind of thing. Or mostly it's just like here we are, what are we gonna do today? You know, just being really present. I think that's...you know, some of the delight of what I think we're - our hallmark of being flexible and being kind of an open tent and being, um, willing to go into harder conversations and willing to try new things and flexible with tradition – I mean, that – that has been a constant. And that hasn't changed. And in fact I think it's just deepened. So, sometimes it's challenging and sometimes it's just, you know, exhilarating because we know how to do it as a community. Does that get to some of your question?

AD: [01:07:59] Yeah. No, definitely. Can you tell me a little bit more about, like, you mentioned this like *l'dor v'dor*<sup>30</sup> spark with Miriam and, you know, what you bring and what she brings to the congregation. Like, what does she bring to the congregation do you think?

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<sup>29</sup> Within the first year after the passing of a loved one, mourners and their family gather at the gravesite for a ceremony called the unveiling, the placing of the gravestone.

<sup>30</sup> *l'dor v'dor* means 'from generation to generation' in Hebrew.



LS: [01:08:18] Oh, so many things. I think that, you know, she comes from a – well this is hard to, hard to say exactly, because there's so many things. There's kind of a, a joy and an intellectual rigor and kind of—she comes from a reconstructionist background, so some of that comes in. She comes with her kind of fiery desire and push towards justice, which I think is also in line with the vision that Ellen carved out. And a lot of joy, you know. Really, I think, you know, having—even having a younger person on the bimah, who has a little baby right now, you know, and that just brings a whole different kind of energy. So, I think she's—she's doing so many things, I am not even sure where to start with this conversation. But finding just – in this new time where the synagogue is becoming, you know, we're—we're big and so trying to find ways to keep people connected. I think we're drawing in – certainly we're drawing in younger members as well – we had, we had been doing that as well before. I think people are drawn into Kolot for different reasons, and so she I think also definitely brought in a whole new range of folks coming in for that. For, you know, just to be close to Kolot and to find a—to find a home. To feel like...a place that they could be comfortable being the kind of Jew that they needed to be. And so some of that's political, some of that's, you know, Israel-Palestine. Kind of being a place where in theory we can really talk to each other across differences. And I don't think that's that common in a lot of synagogues. Either people are super quiet about it, or there's a lot of tension. So I think, finding ways through—through that. And lots and lots and lots of things.

AD: [01:11:04] Yeah, that makes sense. How does—how does Kolot sort of, I don't know, like, navigate that stuff that can produce tension? Like, for example, Israel-Palestine or other things—

LS: [01:11:19] Yeah. I mean, I think – I'm probably not the best person to speak to all of that, except to say that, I think, creating spaces for people to talk through, work through—we've, we've had for a long time what we call the working groups. So people who sort of, their—sort of the bulk of their time was to really kind of dig in to stuff. And then to hopefully speak back into the congregation and kind of be transparent as much as possible, um to have talk-backs, to have time and space to have open conversation. You know, I think stuff like - in the places that are most intractable, um, just that there's an opportunity to kind of speak up and to be heard. You know, we have challenges – like how do we even get to some of that. I mean we live in such divisive times, and then even within the Jewish community, there's so much division. But I think that sort of a collective willingness to, to be open and to hear and to even the sort of the 'doubt is an act of faith' thing that we talk about so much. It's kind of a –from our mission statement– that we're just willing, that people are really willing to be Yisrael,<sup>31</sup> you know, willing to be God wrestlers. Not Israel the state, but the Hebrew—the Jewish people, the god-wrestlers. And some of that God wrestling is sometimes less spiritual and sometimes more political. But, you know, I just, I think it's challenging as we get bigger to find spaces to do that. But, you know, I think there's a real desire and a need to have a place like Kolot, where people can really show up and be themselves.

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<sup>31</sup> Here, Israel or Yisrael is not referring to the modern Israeli state but the Jewish people. Typically, in Jewish texts and prayer, the term "Israel" refers to the Jewish people and not the state of Israel (which did not exist until 1948).

AD: Yeah that makes sense. Yeah, right, and Kolot has gotten a lot bigger, it's changed a lot. And your role has sort of – you've gone from being a member to being a cantor. Do you ever miss just being a member?

LS: [01:13:39] You know, sometimes a little bit. I mean, it's fun sometimes. I mean one of the things I really love doing is mentoring myself because I was mentored so well. You know, we have someone who's – a couple people who've gone off to you know rabbinic and cantorial school – or rabbinic mostly, actually. And I, really, yeah I really love just sometimes just coming and being–being 'a Jew in the pew' as the saying goes, you know, just sitting. I don't get to do that that much. But it's also nice to just sit back and – I mean like today, when you were at synagogue, like, just to – I can get off the bimah, I can listen to someone give a talk and give a drash<sup>32</sup> and just be like anybody else sitting in the pew. Just be moved by it or, you know, curious about it or whatever my reaction might be. And occasionally, and I think – at High Holidays we see this too, that people come up and do lots of things and sing and do other things. So it's um, I loved – I loved doing that. I don't get to do it so much, because I'm pretty busy on the bimah but yeah. And I think – the other thing I would say like during, I mean, the Rabbi just had her baby several months ago, and so she was out on parental leave for four weeks – uh six - oh what was it, I can't even remember now [laughs] oh my goodness. Like four months ultimately. Yeah, it was four months. But um, so I co-led with a lot of different people – our student rabbi; a lay-leader who's now in rabbinical school, wonderful Hadar Ahuvia.<sup>33</sup> And um, and that was really different too just being able to lead with different people and to just still make some impact and try new things and experiment. And then also just – yeah, what it was like during that time to be there as kind of the sole senior clergy and to deal with all the, you know, all the pastoral things that came up during that time. So that was really interesting, too. I wouldn't say that was during the transition, that was just more recently.

AD: [01:16:30] Is there anything that you wanted to get to or that you feel like is important to being in this archive of Kolot – Oral History of Kolot, or just anything.

LS: [01:16:43] It's so interesting, you know, I jotted down a bunch of things and so many of the things you asked me are things that we talked about–

AD: Oh good.

LS: [01:17:10] I'm just sort of looking [referring to her phone, where she had made a list]. Yeah. You know, I think...I, I'm at a point I think in my life and career where mentoring is important, where teaching is important. Passing things on is important. And I think having seen a transition like this – such a big shift for what started out around a table as we're sitting at now. I think just understanding that, you know, that that wonderful Jewish phrase, like 'it's not, it's not on us to

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<sup>32</sup> a sermon, an interpretation of the text.

<sup>33</sup> Hadar Ahuvia, who was also interviewed for the oral history project, is a member of Kolot who is now attending rabbinical school.

complete the work,' like from Pirkei Avot,<sup>34</sup> but we can't -we can't not do it. 'We can't desist,' right? We have, we can't make—even though we can't make peace necessarily in our time, we have to keep working on it, even though you know, we can't make something you know perfect and wonderful. We just keep working on it. We keep perfecting, and carving out and shaping and reshaping. You know, whatever we are doing. And I think being part of an oral history now in my life, like if you'd asked me about this 30 years ago I mean I couldn't even imagine, right? I can't even imagine. Like, what's 30 years from now? Right? Like, who's listening to this 30 years from now going wow, like, this intimate place – and 'oh wow, some of the things this Cantor's talking about, wow I feel that here now' you know. I don't know. But I think I want – I love – I guess I want to imagine that Kolot will go on existing, and that it'll keep changing. And I think—I think the danger in institution-building is, is this idea that you've made it, and that 'this is who we are,' and this is exactly the way we're gonna be and we're gonna be like this forever [laughs] you know. And that's not who we've been. You know, I grew up in this wonderful, you know, very classical reform temple. And my stepfather's parents - my stepfather's father was the Rabbi - Rabbi Albert Minda - and he was the rabbi in the synagogue. He came 1922 to a synagogue in Minneapolis. And he was the rabbi for years and years and years and the Rabbi Emerita when I was growing up, and he passed away before my parents got married but his wife was the Rebbetzin and she became my grandma<sup>35</sup> – I wear their wedding ring, and we were very close. And, you know, she would walk into temple - and I always called it temple. And in the eighties and nineties, we'd go take her there [sound] I'm sorry, there's kids living here. Um they – she'd come into the space and she'd say, "What's with the yarmulkes?" Kippot, you know. "We fought – we fought to get rid of those yarmulkes"<sup>36</sup> [laughs]. "Wh-Why are they here?" [laughs]. And there's a long story about that, that's kind of wonderful and charming, but it's really like, here she was in her 90s at that point I think, and she – late 80s, 90s – and she was like, "wow, like we—we carved out this—this is what synagogue looked like to me, you know. And she was, she was mad on the one hand, um and she—and she embraced-she embraced change too. I mean, in a kind of classical reform way,<sup>37</sup> but she did. I mean, she was a really brilliant, amazing person. But it's

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<sup>34</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:16 (full text [here](#)).

<sup>35</sup> Grama Frances, as Lisa refers to her. *New York Times* obituary (1977) for Rabbi Albert Minda can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/18/archives/rabbi-albert-minda-81-prominent-minnesotan.html>

<sup>36</sup> *yarmulke* (Yiddish) and *kippah* (Hebrew) both refer to the head-covering traditionally worn by Jewish men. In non-orthodox communities, people may have different customs about when to wear a kippah (generally when praying in synagogue). The Reform movement had historically been opposed to wearing kippot, but in recent years it has become more common and accepted for Reform men and women to cover their heads during prayer and Jewish study.

<sup>37</sup> The Reform movement, which was established in Germany in the mid-19th century, was born of an attempt to reconcile Judaism with contemporary life, leading some Jews to abandon long-observed religious practices (like keeping kosher) in an effort to assimilate more easily into the broader culture. Men and women sat together, rather than in separate sections of the synagogue, and male worshippers prayed without the traditional kippah/yarmulke. Shabbat services were conducted in the vernacular, rather than Hebrew. Historically, Reform Judaism has emphasized the ethical aspects of Jewish tradition over its ritual requirements (*halakhah*), though in recent decades the Reform movement has begun to re-embrace some of the religious practices it once dismissed (such as wearing yarmulkes). Source: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reform-judaism/> Read more about the Reform movement and other Jewish denominations (including, but not limited to, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Judaism) [here](#).

like, imagine if, if – if I walked into Kolot in 30 years like, ‘Well, it was this way, we had to do it this way. And now it’s this way – and how dare they and how dare they change things.’ And I think the idea of oral history is so great because you just say like, ‘Well, this is where we are now, this is where we’ve been, this is where we hope to be, but we don’t know the future, the future is not guaranteed.’ And so we just do our best carving out what–what we can: to connect with people, to build community, to give people a place to pray, to doubt, to mourn to, you know, celebrate all those things in a way that they feel, they can feel like held, you know, and I think...I might not recognize it in 30 years. But I know, I will know maybe somebody listening to this in 30 years will know that we cared enough to create something that–that would last...and that things change. We’re living in a very fast-changing world – faster and faster and faster. And I think actually that’s one of the reasons why a lot of younger folks are joining – is trying to find community and trying to make sense of the sometimes very senseless world [laughs].

AD: Yeah, I feel that impulse definitely.

LS: Yeah

AD: Like, I want community, like I want a space like that.

LS: [01:22:11] Am I allowed to ask you a question? [laughter]

AD: Yeah, you’re allowed, yeah.

LS: I am allowed. Yeah, I mean, well I know you joined this project, what drew you to this project?

AD: [01:22:22] Yeah, well, I don’t know, I think I’ve admired Lana – Professor Povitz – for a long time. This is my last semester, I’m a senior. And I think she started at Middlebury sort of around the same time that I started I think, and I sort of interacted with her a little bit informally, in like a spiritual practice group and like a Torah study and I’m, I’m not a History major and I sort of – this is the first time I’ve taken a class with her, but I’ve sort of, you know, I’ve been a fan from afar. And I, my major is Political Science and I feel like in general, you know, that’s not been the most personal, affirming major. I think I’ve learned a lot, but it’s not necessarily something that like, you know, plays to my strengths or is, you know, is meaningful in the type of way that like, this class<sup>38</sup> has been really amazing. Like, what we’ve been reading, what we’ve been talking about, um, you know, and it’s just – it feels so personal it’s like, I don’t know, it’s like New York and American Jewish history and like, I don’t know, like, yeah, like spirituality and activism, and so I think that really drew me to it. And I also, yeah, I don’t know, I like – I like oral history, and I wanted to learn more about like, the practice and theory and practice and,

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<sup>38</sup> Lana Povitz is a member of Kolot and the lead organizer of the Oral History Project Design Team. A professor of History at Middlebury College, Professor Povitz taught a course in Fall 2022 called Jewish Oral History which connected 14 student interviewers with 14 narrators from Kolot for the first round of interviews for the project.

yeah, I didn't think that we'd be able to like, go to New York, so it was great to meet you in person. I love that. Yeah.

LS: [01:23:53] Is it interesting? I mean it must be, is it interesting for you – did you ever encounter like women rabbis or cantors?

AD: Yeah!

LS: I mean, you're young enough to probably have, but yeah.

AD: Yeah, no – [overlapping] mmhmm.

LS: Or just to talk– I mean, so that's one question, but also just like, what's it like to talk to people who are on this path?

AD: [01:24:10] Yeah, no, I actually – so I went to, I grew up in a, or attending a Reform synagogue. And there was one female rabbi, and then the sort of male head rabbi left and then another female rabbi came, who was also a lesbian. And they, I think they were sort of notable – they were, you know, like co-clergy and they were both women and they had this really lovely dynamic. And then actually there was this student, this – I mentioned, like Emily Simkin, this cantor or like, aspiring cantor who was at my temple and I looked up to a lot and I think she was a real like, I don't know, I don't think growing up I loved attending services, but um, she was someone who was kind of a role model and like I think got me more interested in thinking about like, yeah, Judaism and social justice and spirituality. And sort of, I think I've continued sort of seeking that, outside of classes in college a bit and it's been cool to I don't know have this yeah in a class, too.

LS: [01:25:23] Yeah, I would have loved that. I mean, I just was not in a place like that when I I was your age. I think I was searching for all kinds of other kinds of connections – artistic, spiritual experiences, but not in a synagogue setting, like I just wouldn't have – and I don't know, I mean, I think that there was a certain formality. You know, one of the things – just what you just said a minute ago – about the dynamic with those rabbis on the bimah. And I think that's been a key thing, too. And I will say, just to back up to what you asked about – like, the transition. That Rabbi Lippmann and I had an amazing dynamic. And that Rabbi Miriam and I also have really worked and are at a really beautiful, dynamic place as well, you know, so that we – that there's space, you know, there's space to try things. And that we can sing together and we can pray together and we can, you know, kind of support and bolster the other. And I think that's, unfortunately, not always the case in a lot of synagogues. I mean I have plenty of colleagues who, it's a much more formal situation. The cantor has their role, the rabbi has their role, and never the twain shall meet. Or, you know, here's your cue list for the evening, here's the songs you're singing, boom. And so, I just feel very fortunate to have, you know, certainly been mentored by Ellen and worked in that way. But that's, I think that has also been like a bit of a

hallmark, and that Rabbi Miriam and I are carrying on together. And so anybody who's on that bimah also is, there's a kind of feel for what Kolot feels like – it doesn't feel like a lot of other places. Not that I go to a lot of other synagogues – but partially that I hear about, partially that I've certainly seen and witnessed myself. And there's plenty of wonderful, wonderful communities out there, *way*—and so many more than there were 30 years ago. There's just so many choices now. Minyanim<sup>39</sup> and just like – just things popping up all the time. Again, I think somewhat akin to like the speediness of our world, like things are – people do stuff. But anyway I just wanted to bring that back and um, I don't know if I told you too like – oh, the other thing I didn't get to bring up too is like in the summertime that we started going to this thing we call the Tallis Tree in the park – did I tell you about that one?

AD: No, I don't think so. What is it?

LS: [01:27:45] Oh, well, it's a tree – or two trees actually in the park – now three. Just a few blocks from here, in Prospect Park. Which was, you know, just such a visionary place—park that was designed by these two men in the 19th century - Olmsted and Vaux - who, you know, designed Central Park. But Prospect Park is different because it was like actual - it wasn't a swamp, you know, they didn't build it from nothing. Not that there was nothing in Central Park, but it was built on land that - here - that you know, sort of more—more natural, it kind of went with the natural land, and built up like [difficult to hear] obviously all the man-made places. But the tree thing is that when we, starting many years ago, it got so hot in the church that we would just be like 'oh my gosh, we cannot be inside one more second.' And so we went and did – we said let's do prayer outside on Saturday mornings under this tree. And so we would go to the tree – it was a huge, huge tree, it was a linden tree I think – and enormous tree, huge root system, huge branches, near the ballpark. And we did it for like a month and it was amazing and people would come and we would picnic and, but we did – as you were saying – much more informally, obviously didn't schlep the Torah, for a couple years we did schlep<sup>40</sup> like the prayer books, which was kind of nuts. But it's become this really kind of creative space and just really truly being in nature. And then one year we put up a mezuzah in the tree—

AD: [overlapping] Really?

LS: Like way up high in the tree, it was there for a few years and it disappeared but. And then we realized it was really *two* huge trees. And it's very shady, it's like 10 degrees cooler in there in the summer than it is like outside the tree, in the park in the sun. And then when the rabbi retired, we did a ritual. I arranged to get a tree that we bought – a little baby tree – and near the Tallis Trees. And we called it – well, and so we planted this tree, so there's a Rabbi Lippmann tree like just a couple number of yards away, but it's part of the whole sort of system. And it became the Tallis

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<sup>39</sup> *minyanim* is the plural of *minyan*, which refers to the minimum number of people (10 Jewish adults) required for certain key parts of the Jewish communal prayer service (such as reciting the Kaddish or reading from the Torah). Minyan can also refer to the prayer service more generally.

<sup>40</sup> *schlep* is a Yiddish word, meaning to lug or carry.

Tree because it just felt like that kind of embrace of like the fringes coming down - the branches and everything<sup>41</sup>. And we've done many, many beautiful ceremonies there. We've done [?] for weddings, we've done baby namings, we've done you know lots of just beautiful gatherings. And actually towards, you know, when we were starting a little bit to come out of pandemic or even just be able to be outside in groups, we met under there - you know, because we couldn't go inside, we couldn't be anywhere. So it's, it's a really, you know, [?] we don't own a building, we've been in that same church for almost the whole length of Kolot. And it does feel like home, but the trees actually feel like really like home too, which is beautiful. So I wanted to get the trees in there, so that people 30 years from now can go look for the Tallis Trees.

AD: I'm glad you mentioned that.

LS: Yeah, it's really something.

AD: And then you're out in the community too, like—

LS: Oh, sure

AD: I get the sense that, you know, Kolot is a really – it's like a Brooklyn synagogue. And, I don't know, to be in a public place like that and to get to be a little more informal, that's pretty cool.

LS: [01:31:12] Mmhmm. You know, and I think, I tried to show up – as does-as Miriam and Rabbi Lippmann certainly has been on many boards. And we are, all three of us are very involved in a lot of different social justice spheres and collaborative places. Um, that's really been a special thing, um – that sounds very...that's not really what I want to say, 'special.' I'm a little tired, sorry people listening to this 30 years from now. Um, but just that we're not just in Kolot, right? Like, that we're in the world. So, you know, showing up. And I think so many of Kolot members just show up in all kinds of places. Certainly tons of justice work. And then, because the landscape of synagogue life and religious Jewish life in Brooklyn has changed so much, we do things together. We do stuff like Selichot<sup>42</sup> across Brooklyn, or Shavuot<sup>43</sup> across Brooklyn, and then all the sort of, you know, progressive Jewish communities come together and we do stuff together.

AD: [01:32:21] And what does that look like?

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<sup>41</sup> A tallis or tallit is a Jewish prayer shawl, worn during services. The fringes (strings tied in a very particular way to each of the four corners of the tallis) are called *tzitzit*. More on tallit [here](#) and [here](#).

<sup>42</sup> Selichot are special prayers of repentance said during the month of Elul preceding Rosh Hashana. More on Selichot [here](#).

<sup>43</sup> Shavuot, the "Feast of Weeks," is a Spring harvest festival and a Jewish holiday commemorating God giving the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai. It marks the conclusion of the seven week Counting of the Omer between Passover and Shavuot. More on Shavuot [here](#).

LS: Oh, sometimes it looks like, well, for the last 10 years, like hundreds and hundreds of people dancing at Grand Army Plaza with Torah, for Simchat Torah. Sometimes it looks like we get together and do like Selichot – well we do, every year we do Selichot, which is the– just before Rosh Hashanah and we do a service together and we daven<sup>44</sup> together, and it's conservative and unaffiliated and some—even some modern Orthodox have come and we sing together, and we share and we just like enter the high holiday season together but as a larger community because then we're off in our own different synagogue spaces. That's—that's been really, really great. Um, yeah and I um. Yeah, so I've and I've got, um, I don't really want to end here, but I'm also, one of the things during the pandemic was I worked on - I'm working on an app that's coming out through the CCAR press, with a Kolot member and a wonderful teacher at HUC, Rabbi Lisa Grant. We have a lot of rabbis at Kolot actually. About death and dying, it's called 'The Year of Mourning.' So that book and the app is going to come out. It's really like helping people move through their year with prayer, with writing prompts, saying Kaddish and listening to music on different themes of what we go through as we mourn. So, I recorded some music for that, so that's, working on that- that's coming out. And I'm collaborating with some local cantors to do more singing, more recording – that's really nice. And then this coming—just even this week, we've got a— we're bringing together a singing group, just – not a chorus, just a place where people can come and sing – you know, you heard a lot of singing today at synagogue. People really like to sing and I just want to – now that we can more safely sing together – just create opportunities to do that. So that's kind of what I really want to get people's hearts open with in the next few years especially.

AD: Is there any, like specific sort of like community involvement, work that like you've been, I don't know, that is close to your heart or—

LS: Well...I mean I think we are – Kolot, as a group – have been holding and working on different – in different ways trying to become an anti-racist community. And so that is enormously challenging. And in the face of all the best will in the world, I mean it's so – it's so deep. And so, I think that is something that is an ongoing challenge at Kolot I think. I'm, you know, getting more involved with those efforts as well. I think, um, you know... We've become a place I think where a lot of – well it's always been kind of a place where a lot of LGBTQ+ and questioning folks have been able to feel at home. Trans folks and – especially I think. And so I think, you know, look, I'm – for lack of a better term, which I hate the term straight – but I'm a straight, white, Askenazic woman, and I'm—and I'm of a certain age, so I—I just, it's important to me that we remain a community that is able to kind of look at and challenge and, you know, challenge our own—our own stuff, our preconceptions around issues, around racism, around homophobia, around all of that. And, you know, we are a spiritual community and we say the words that we're a Kehila Kadosha – like a holy, a holy community. Kadosh. You know, we're not—we're not just an organization working on this issue or that issue, but our membership and our community is made up of people who struggle. Some more than others. And so I think as

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<sup>44</sup> Yiddish word meaning to pray.



hard as that can be sometimes, I think finding the balance of being able to pray together, sing together, be in harmony together, have hard conversations like all of that – working together in some aspect of like the woven-ness of all that together can hold, hopefully hold, hold the whole as we sort of say sometimes. And that's – it's not a given, you know, that we can always be those – that we can achieve those things or can... But it's like, it's again – we are not free to desist. So I think that's – those are challenges, and and they're really real. You know, we can't hide.

AD: [01:38:08] How are you feeling? [laughter]

LS: [01:38:11] Well, it's been really fun talking to you. You're such a good listener and you're a good questioner. And you're so thoughtful and... it's Shabbat, so you're supposed to rest. So I'm like–

AD: [overlapping] Yeah, no that's what I'm thinking about, I'm like you must be kind of tired.

LS: “Ahhh, I'm tired.” But um, you know I... It's interesting doing this on Shabbat actually. Because we were going to originally do it on a Sunday and–

AD: That's true.

LS: You know, I guess I'm going to think of this as... as a holy conversation. With you, but also like – definitely with you – and also with... I don't know with the knowledge that, you know, that Shabbat is about carving out separate time, you know. And that there's a kind of palace in time,<sup>45</sup> and it's not time-less, right? It's going to end, it's getting dark, daylight savings time is coming, too. We'll get darker later, I guess.

AD: Tomorrow.

LS: Tomorrow, yeah. But there's something, I don't know I haven't really reflected exactly. But there's something interesting about doing it, because... you know, is it *work*<sup>46</sup> what I'm doing right now? Is it – is it my job to talk to you? I'm talking to you about my job, my job being what for me... is a job and is–it is a calling, you know? I hesitate to say that sometimes, sometimes it sounds a little Christian or something – not to denigrate anything Christian at all, but to say like, we don't say that so much. But I think, when I think of what a calling is, it's like this–this is, you know, when I'm *tired* and when I'm like, ‘ugh, keep going,’ it always–it never feels like I'm in the wrong place. I feel so fortunate to do work that's so meaningful – to me personally certainly, but hopefully to lots of other people. And that's, that's holy stuff, you know? So I feel really, really fortunate. [we hear Arthur and Kristen, having finished their interview, coming down the stairs]

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<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the Sabbath as a “palace in time” (rather than space), whose architecture is built through a combination of intentional abstentions and acts of prayer, study, joyous meals, and interaction with loved ones. Judaism, he argues, is a religion of time. Read: *The Sabbath* by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (originally published: 1951).

<sup>46</sup> On Shabbat, Jews are commanded to refrain from work. More [here](#).

AD: I can hear them

LS: Coming down, yeah. And, um, so that's—that's kind of amazing. So Shabbat shalom to you.

AD: Shabbat Shalom! [laughter] Yeah, and thank you for talking to me on Shabbat.

LS: What a pleasure.

AD: This special day, yeah.

LS: What a pleasure.

AD: Do you feel like this is a good part to end?

LS: I-I think so, I am sure, when we end, I'm going to think of the ten things I didn't say, but, um, I hope not.

AD: We can annotate the transcript—

LS: Ooh, annotate

AD: which I'm kind of— or I think that's a cool idea. Kristen might know more than I do about this, but I think that's a cool idea.

Arthur: Should we come in?

AD: Yeah, you can come in.

LS: Hi!

AD: We can um – yeah I can sort of turn this off.

LS: [overlapping] My husband, Arthur is here with Kristen. Bye everybody from 30 years from now.

AD: [overlapping] They were – Kristen and Arthur were doing the same – goodbye!

LS: Goodbye! [laughter]

AD: Okay [stops recording].

AD: [01:41:19] [restarts the recording] Okay, Yeah. You want to sing something? [Lisa is eating an apple] No, you're chewing, that was a terrible time. I'll pause, or – ready? Oh.

LS: [01:41:31] Well, right before we turn this interview off, I think I'll just sing – I think I'll just sing the song that – the nigan, the wordless melody that Arthur and I heard first from the wonderful Rabbi David Zeller of Blessed Memory at Eilat Chaim, sometime in the nineties. He sat in the corner of a room, and while everybody was busy talking and schmoozing and he just sat quietly singing this little nigan<sup>47</sup> and eventually people were like perked up their ears and gravitated toward him. And he just created a sense of community, like took – just patiently waited everybody out – and they all just, they all just came. And so that's the nigan I sang last night at our dinner and this morning at the beginning of services. And it's kind of become – I wouldn't say – we sing many things at Kolot – but this is one that's really become, I think, very dear to Kolot. So I'm just going to share it with you, people who are listening sometime in the future, in the hopes that it moves you and grounds you.

[singing]:

Ay na na nai na na nai na nai nai, yai dai dai dai dai

Ay la la lai la la lai la lai lai, ya lai lai nai nai

Ay ya la lai na na nai na nai nai, ya nai nai nai nai

Ay dai dai...

AD: [01:44:18] I'm glad we got that. Okay [stops recording].

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<sup>47</sup> a *nigan* (plural *nigunim*) is a wordless melody, a musical prayer or spiritual language that transcends words. In place of words, repeated syllables are used (such as 'ya dai dai' or 'lai lai lai'). More on the history of the nigan [here](#).