

## **Peter Kleinbard**

Interviewed by zev york

November 11, 2022

Length: 22:49

*The following paragraph was written in collaboration between narrator and interviewer:*

In this conversation, Peter Kleinbard recounts his participation in Kolot's founding. His involvement grew out of his long prior relationship with Ellen Lippmann. He was seeking a congregation to provide a Jewish education for his children, and a community in which he could participate. He had explored other congregations in Brooklyn, and found the openness, freshness and broad participation in Ellen's approach far more to his liking. While Peter did not consider himself a very religious person, he had a strong identity as a Jew. Both his parents had taken pleasure in celebrating religious holidays and in weekly Shabbat prayer and candle-lighting. Connecting his faith to his childhood education at Germantown Friends, the interview offers an insight into how different faiths can collaborate to deepen spiritual understanding. He finishes by detailing his extended family's connection to many disparate Jewish identities, giving the listener a sense that Peter's personal journey of working to discover his complex connections to Jewish identity is reflected in the lives of those around him.

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*This transcript was lightly edited by the interviewer (doubled words and 'filler' interjections have often been removed). Subsequently, the narrator edited the entire transcript for cogency. This document does not match the recorded oral history at all points: red and bolded words were added to the document and blacked out words/phrases were redacted by the narrator. However, the original conversation is preserved in its un-edited entirety in both audio and video formats.*

**zev york** 00:00

We are recording! Wonderful.

A lot of the ways we've been talking about starting these interviews— or these conversations— is just briefly saying where we are. I am currently in Bed Stuy<sup>1</sup>, in Brooklyn, with my cousins, and today is Sunday, November 6. My name is zev york. Would you like to give your name and where you're—

**Peter Kleinbard** 00:32

I'm Peter Kleinbard and I live in the Kensington<sup>2</sup> section of Brooklyn. I'm here with a cat and my wife in the other room.

**zev york:** 00:41

Thank you. I really wanted to— I know, we've spoken about this while we hadn't been recording— but I'm curious to hear and to share with other folks what your childhood education looked like.

**Peter Kleinbard** 01:00

My childhood education?

**zev york** 01:01:

Yeah.

**Peter Kleinbard** 01:03:

Well, I mean, the most relevant part was my start in eighth grade, joining a Quaker school— Germantown Friends<sup>3</sup>— which is an extraordinary school in Philadelphia. And, you know, GFS— Quakers have this notion that there's God in every man. They practice that in part by the quality of **their** listening [REDACTED]. In their formal religious meetings<sup>4</sup>, but also in other informal **interactions** [REDACTED]: **making certain** [REDACTED] everyone is seen and heard.

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<sup>1</sup> [Bedford-Stryvessant](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Kensington](#)

<sup>3</sup> Germantown Friends School is an independent Pre-K through 12 school founded by the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Philadelphia, PA. [REDACTED]

[Website](#)

<sup>4</sup> [More information about quaker meetings](#) (pg. 8)

I was involved in a very good Jewish congregation in Philly, **Adath Jeshrun**. I was *Bar Mitzvah*'d there. My dad was reasonably religious, and my mother was before her loss. But the Quaker experience was probably my most spiritual experience in the sense that it made me feel a connection with other people through the notion of a relationship to another being, you know, to a God-like being. [REDACTED]

Now Kolot, you know, was a whole other thing. I came to Kolot, really to get my **children** a [REDACTED] religious education **and to participate in a Jewish community myself**. [REDACTED] In Kai's case, a *Bar Mitzvah*. Leily didn't want to do it, and I backed off. Kolot is a wonderful community. They've done a great job— Ellen Lippmann who founded it and then picked up by Miriam Grossman<sup>5</sup>— in maintaining the culture of a caring, attending culture. And that has meant a lot to me. [REDACTED]

**zev york** 04:02:

It's interesting that you mentioned Torah study as one of the ways that you've continued to learn in the Kolot community. It makes me think about the ways that you were learning about Quakerism also in your academic institution. And I'm curious if there's a particular way that through literature there is this door opening that allows you to see similarities in both [your] Quaker upbringing and in your Jewish life at Kolot.

**Peter Kleinbard** 04:39:

[REDACTED] GFS was a caring, gentle and [REDACTED] academically rigorous community. And Kolot has been a very warm kind of community **which is serious about Judaism**, but I don't see them necessarily as comparable. One aspect of Kolot which is very important to me is the aesthetic of it, which is the beauty of some of the services. We've been [REDACTED] fortunate to have a wonderful Cantor— and Ellen— Lisa Segal<sup>6</sup>. Music is a very powerful attraction in

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<sup>5</sup> [Kolot Chayeinu Clergy page](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Kolot Chayeinu Clergy page](#)

my life. That has been one of my reasons for wanting to be part of Kolot. And the people also: [so] many [redacted] thoughtful people. [redacted]

**zev york 06:25**

I also was hearing earlier the ways that you were talking about the new rabbi, Miriam, holding this torch from what Ellen started: this community of care. And I'm curious what it feels like to watch something that you are so intimately part of; as a listener; as a community member. I'm curious what it feels like to watch that community of care perhaps continue but through different hands.

**Peter Kleinbard 07:05**

Well, I think often, institutions, when they're transitioning— when leadership transitions - they can lose elements that are important. And I think Kolot did a [redacted] good job in holding on. Part of it, of course, is that Miriam was the student rabbi, so she had experienced the community. But we still voted. I mean, there were a number of people who also wanted the job. And Miriam was chosen. And [redacted] it's not merely the rabbi at Kolot— there's very broad participation. [redacted]

Many people contribute: [redacted]  
[redacted]: a community where people feel that they'll be respected and listened to and treated as though they matter. I think Kolot has that. And I think Ellen [redacted] set that. Ellen was interested in who people are. And, she responded to people as wholes. Not **solely** as [redacted] a member. There are not many places where [redacted] we feel that in our lives.

[long pause]

**zev york 08:43:**

I'm thinking again, about something earlier we've spoken about, which is your time when you were living in New Haven.

**Peter Kleinbard 8:49:**  
Yeah.

**zev york 8:52:**  
Working with kids in schools.

**Peter Kleinbard 8:53:**  
Yeah.

**zev york 8:54:**  
I'm hearing you talk about not 'a community of care.' I really liked that distinction, of a 'caring community.' I hear about Kolot being this community of care— a caring community rather— and I'm curious if you have been part of other caring communities besides GFS and Kolot.

**Peter Kleinbard 9:23:**  
And Kolot?

**zev york 9:24:**  
Yeah.

**Peter Kleinbard 09:27**  
Well, of course, family is important. I mean, I was part of, there were five of us— five children, and two, parents and we were close. **And remain so among my siblings.** I was fortunate to have other places **as well.** You know, I've run a couple of schools and I have certainly tried to make them— where people felt that they were cared about. So hopefully, I was successful. I mean, I wouldn't be the one to judge that.

I'm trying to think...

I ran— for thirteen years in the city— a very tough school for youngsters who had dropped out with very low academic skills. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Many [REDACTED] had been in prison and some [REDACTED] were heading for it.  
[REDACTED]



██████████ It was a nice bunch of people. And there were no negatives about it— they were all positives— and that's probably the most important thing. It met my need as a Jew who— I had a lot of doubts about Judaism, [and it] accepted that— it was very accepting of who we were. ██████████ was ██████████ clearly stated. And it also was true on a financial side. ██████████

██████████ Unlike many synagogues, you didn't have to pay to be part of it.<sup>7</sup> And we had a hard time at first. There were several other synagogues in Park Slope. And they made it hard for her in the beginning. They tried to undermine us ██████████ getting a student cantor, and there were other things too. And she rode with it. She didn't, she didn't try to fight. And so that worked out, and now ██████████ Kolot's established— the synagogue is established. But my role was limited. I had a very demanding job at the time. ██████████  
██████████

**zev york 14:14:**

I proposed the starting point of the dinner, but perhaps that's not the starting point that feels important to you. Is there a different starting point of your Kolot story that makes more sense to tell?

**Peter Kleinbard 14:30:**

No, it was just Ellen invited to meet and talk around her— I think it was around a kitchen [table]— but honestly I don't remember that clearly. And, a community of committed people grew out of that. And that's what got it started. ██████████  
██████████  
██████████  
██████████

**zev york 15:05:**

If I'm not wrong, you were working with the Youth Development Institute<sup>8</sup> at that moment. Is that correct?

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<sup>7</sup> Most synagogues in the so-called United-States are run through mandatory membership fees for all congregants. Some of these organizations additionally sell tickets for services during the High Holidays (*Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah*). [Another synagogue trying out an alternative payment model.](#)

<sup>8</sup> The Youth Development Institute is a nonprofit organization that endeavors to “advance the positive development of young people by promoting the principles and practices that enable them to thrive. The organization has been engaged with the NYC community for over 25 years. [Website](#)

**Peter Kleinbard 15:13:**

█ I don't remember exactly the timing, but the Youth Development Institute was much later. I was probably running the school: The Young Adult Learning Academy<sup>9</sup> for dropouts.

**zev york 15:25:**

Right. Okay, that was before—

**Peter Kleinbard 15:28:**

██  
██

**zev york 15:33:**

Okay. Understood. I was just wondering if, if the background of what you were working on [influenced you]. I think you've said a few times that you weren't bringing a very strong Jewish background— but as as a whole person in the way that Ellen accepted you— and I'm sure cherished you in a lot of ways, I'm sure you brought a lot of other experience and other kinds of connective understanding of what it means to be in community.

**Peter Kleinbard 16:05:**

Who knows. I mean Ellen and I had a long relationship and therefore there was a bond. And I wanted her to succeed. I wanted this program to succeed because it was a place for my █ **children and me** where we could feel comfortable.

**zev york 16:26:**

So maybe that's something that I would love to hear about: what were you looking for— for your children that Kolot could provide?

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<sup>9</sup> The Young Adult Learning Academy was a school created by the NYC mayor's office to serve high school dropouts in an attempt to support this population with further state-sponsored education. [Website](#)

**Peter Kleinbard 16:36:**

[Slightly chuckles] Well, a Jewish education. A Jewish education, [REDACTED] a Bar Mitzvah, **and a Jewish community and schul** [REDACTED]

[pause]

**zev york 16:50:**

Cool, wonderful. Upon reflecting on that: if that was the thing that drew you into community, do you have a sense of how Kolot may have shaped either your relationship with your kids or their relationship to their Judaism?

[pause]

**Peter Klein 17:22**

It's hard to say. I mean, Kai, was *Bar Mitzvah'd*. He's maintained a relationship with Ellen, [REDACTED]

And Leily, you know, [REDACTED] walked away from it. I wouldn't be surprised if **they come** [REDACTED] later. Leily's [REDACTED] got a very demanding job now and— it would be hard to make any demands upon that. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Kai also does [have a demanding job]. I wouldn't be surprised if one or both of them came back later. I hope they will [REDACTED]. I think it's an important part of life.

But to the extent that they're not more engaged, I take responsibility for that. I don't think I I gave them a way to do that. So I think that was me, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I didn't make enough of a Jewish life at home. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

**zev york 18:44:**

I'm curious— what would a more Jewish life look like as we're thinking about how Kolot continues to expand and change?

**Peter Kleinbard 18:54:**

[REDACTED] I think it depends on the family. I mean, you know, Kolot can only do so much. And I think they do a lot to provide. For example: when we were going, we would go to the Friday night services which were very full of music, and that made them very appealing. And they had food too sometimes. [REDACTED] There was **an** [REDACTED] effort to bring people in and to make it appealing to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] And that certainly had some impact for me.

**zev york** 19:28: Lovely.

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

**zev york** 19:53:

Yeah.

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

**zev york** 19:57: [overlaid speech] Sure.

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

**zev york** 20:06:

You mentioned—I think—that you are one of five earlier.

**Peter Kleinbard** 20:10:

Yeah.

**zev york** 20:14:

What happened to the identities of, of your siblings, their Jewish identities?

**Peter Kleinbard** 20:20:

Yeah, well, my, my older brother David still is involved. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] He follows services, certainly at key times and periodically more often [than that]. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Jonathan, my brother who's deceased, became an Orthodox Jew. He had been the Vice President of the University of Chicago. When he moved back to Philly, he joined an orthodox congregation. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. [REDACTED]

My two sisters: Alexa, she's an artist, and [REDACTED] and Polly, my older sister., [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Alexis' painting<sup>11</sup> is all about environmental issues which reflects a caring for a broad community. And Polly– she's too old now– but for many years was a teacher. And so even though they're not practicing [their Jewish values come through.] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

So I'm gonna have to cut off in a few minutes because I have somebody coming. So are you going to try to draft something from this? How do you want to proceed?

[recording ends]

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<sup>11</sup> [Alexis Kleinbard's Instagram page](#)