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Miriam:

I'm Miriam Cohen and today is Friday, February 3rd 2023. We're in Ellen Lubell and Mike Cockrill's dining room table in Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York. I'm interviewing Ellen Lubell for the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project. Ellen and I are friends and also both members of Kolot Chayeinu. Ellen please introduce yourself.

Ellen:

My name is Ellen Lubell. I've been a member of Kolot Chayeinu for 20... well, almost 23 years and I live a block from the shul, coincidentally, and I'm happy to be able to access Kolot whenever I need to, whenever I want to.

Miriam:

That's great. That's great. Alright. So, the first thing I'd like for you to talk about is how did you find Kolot? Where were you before Kolot? And how did you get engaged and sort of lead that into what has Kolot been for you?

Ellen:

My journey at Kolot started when my daughter was seven, because that was the age that I thought children started Hebrew school. I had been denied the ability to go to Hebrew School or have a Bat Mitzvah, so I was determined that my daughter would not be denied and would have a Hebrew education. So, I grew up without any habit of going to shul at all. We were not very observant or observant at all really growing up. And I went shul shopping. I went to Kolot. I went to Park Slope Jewish Center. I went to Beth Elohim. I went to Union Temple. And sat through services at each of them.

Miriam:

These are all the local shuls.

Ellen:

These are all the local shuls really within walking distance of my house on 11th St. And the differences among them became very apparent. And I really felt that Kolot was the kind of place that my family belonged. Union Temple was a place where everyone dressed up and men were in suits. Park Slope Jewish Center seemed... was much too Conservative for us. On the other end of the spectrum, Beth Elohim was too Reform. So, I enjoyed going to Kolot and tried out a few High Holy Day services at Kolot, which were at Kolot at that time – at Gethsemane. And I was really impressed with Rabbi Lippmann's sermons and it got to the point where I insisted Mike go with me, because I was doing this on my own. And I think at this point we were already committed to enrolling Rachel, our daughter, in the Children's Learning Program. I'm not sure. And, anyway, so Kolot was small in various ways. Shabbat services were in the balcony and High Holy Days were in the sanctuary. And I remember Ellen's – Rabbi Lippmann's saying at one point that she would hope that Shabbat never got bigger than this. I think she really enjoyed the intimacy and the sort of one-on-one closeness that being in the balcony entailed. One part of being in the Children's Learning Program was to attend family Shabbat dinners on Friday nights. And this was parents and children all around a u-shaped table.

Miriam:

These were at Gethsemane?

Ellen:

Yes at Gethsemane. Ellen lit candles. I had never seen anyone light Shabbat candles before. Ever. And she could see – Ellen could see that I was interested and gave me a copy of ‘The Gates of Shabbat’ book, which teaches all about Shabbat. And I really, really became engaged and now 23 years later, we light candles every Friday night, we observe Shabbat in terms of blessing the candles and the wine and saying our gratitudes. And it’s a special time. Now I’m a .. I’ve had a Bat Mitzvah. My daughter had a Bat Mitzvah in 2005. I was a Bat Mitzvah in 2014 along... in a adult B’nei Mitzvah class. And at that point Ellen asked us to each add some practice that we were not in the custom of doing. And I started wearing a tallit. And now I cannot imagine even sitting in my own dining room on Zoom without that tallit. I have to wear it.

Miriam:

The Bat Mitzvah was 2014 – was the mid-point when you started and now.

Ellen:

Uhh. A little closer to now, but yes.

Miriam:

Growing up you had no connection to... I mean you were Jewish in a Jewish family

Ellen:

It was so interesting. In High School my mother and I would sit and have glasses of sherry before dinner. No mention of Shabbat. She would make a special dinner on Friday nights. No mention of Shabbat. On Saturday mornings, we had challah – no mention of Shabbat. On Saturday evenings we had a dairy meal with bagels with smoked fish. Things like that. And it was clearly... now I can see we were following some kind of Shabbat sort of framework, but not acknowledging that it was Shabbat. And my father had grown up much more observant. And he did go to shul on High Holy Days, but we didn’t. And we walked around in dresses, but we didn’t go to shul.

Miriam: [7:39]

You knew in your shul shopping that you wanted to connect.

Ellen:

Yes.

Miriam:

And how did that happen?

Ellen:

Well, basically because I wanted the education for my daughter. And through that, through that search I became more interested. And it’s as simple as that, really. That’s what led me to my engagement. And that engagement has obviously grown and grown and grown. And I’m very happy to be a member of Kolot.

Miriam:

So what was it like to being a member?

Ellen:

Obviously, the congregation was much smaller. And we did not read Torah every week. Torah was monthly, but not weekly until some of us spoke up. And plugged a case for it. I think Ellen again liked the intimacy, Ellen liked the size and it was early. When I began, Lisa B. Segal now the cantor was not a cantor. We had a cantorial soloist named Elliot – I forget his last name. And Lisa was sort of the back-up singer. And there were a couple of back-up singers. And I was pretty... Elliot and his partner got a child and moved to Florida, so Lisa became the cantorial soloist. And obviously, and I mean I know now that Ellen sort of influenced her in to get her on the path to becoming a Cantor. And I did attend Lisa's ordination. It was at AJR. Anyway, so... the early days it was I mean, seeing what it is now, it was much simpler. For example, when Rachel became a Bat Mitzvah and Ronda Zewel's daughter was the next week I think, or the week before, it was so, so extremely bare. It was [coughing] instead of having the family surround the B'nei Mitzvah, she was up there alone. And you know, it was very different. It was very different.

[10:30]

Miriam:

They were in the sanctuary?

Ellen:

They were in the sanctuary. And it feels very rich today and really feels like a family celebration. Then it was very, very simple. And it was sort of typical of Kolot at that time. Things were simple. I'm not sure how invested Ellen was in that kind of event. I don't know whether it was... I never spoke to her about it. Whether it's because she was leery of all Shabbats becoming taken over by B'nei Mitzvah and didn't want that to happen, or is it... I don't know. I don't know why, but she... it was very different then. And I think the structure was simpler at that time.

Miriam:

How did Rachel feel about it?

Ellen:

Rachel... [laugh] Rachel was OK with it. I think at some point her teacher was stressing more of the Palestinian situation than Israeli life or Hebrew and she was a little upset about that, that she didn't feel she was getting what she was supposed to be getting out of it. But I think it was fine. I think it was fine. And her parsha was Lech Lecha and she studied with a woman named Rabin.. something Rabin, who is now a musician and I don't think they got along all that well, but anyway the Bat Mitzvah... Rachel became a Bat Mitzvah and like many Bat Mitzvahs has not stepped foot in Kolot since. So... except on High Holy Days. So, that was that. I... my B'nei Mitzvah: we had a class of seven. Ours was a year-and-a-half.

Miriam:

Of study?

Ellen:

Yeah, of study. And it almost went to two years because we did not do the kind of wrestling with the parsha that we do now in Torah Study. And that kind of forensic, real deep dive into the parsha would have been something I would have enjoyed, but... T. Wise gave us excellent instruction in Hebrew and then Shalva Wise was our Torah tutor. And Ellen was there, not on a regular basis but every few weeks Ellen was there and [word unintelligible] very missing. And there we were! It was April 2014 right in the middle of Passover. So, our portion was that kind of Passover portion that is a little bit of Exodus a little

bit of Numbers, I think. And we each did a little bit of drashing and a little bit of leyning. And I'm very happy to be a Bat Mitzvah. Really quite a turn around from how I grew up. And not only my my engagement deepened, but my husband's has. And he converted – not through any request of mine – but he converted about 4 years ago... 5 years ago, mostly at the behest of Ellen who knew she was going to retire and wanted him to convert before... she wanted to be with him for his conversion.

Miriam:

Was Kolot different for you before and after you became a Bat Mitzvah?

Ellen:

Yes. Yes, because when I first started at Kolot – since I had no history of going to shul – I didn't know anything. I didn't know any Hebrew. I didn't know the songs. I didn't know anything about anything. And I felt really strange, I mean I was truly a stranger in a strange land. I mean, I didn't know anything. And I felt like really an outsider. It got to a point where -- I still didn't know Hebrew at that point – but I sort of memorized all the songs and knew what to expect from the service. And at some point... in 2008 my mother died and Lisa B. Segal gave us a prayer book. I don't know why. Anyway, I have a copy of the siddur and that came in really handy to help me learn more about the service. And I feel much more comfortable with the service now. Obviously.

Miriam:

Yeah. This is great. You've known Kolot through almost its entire history.

Ellen:

Yes. We became members in 1999. So that was only I think 6 years after its founding. And yeah, it was quite small then still I think looking back a project in the making. Certainly Ellen, Ellen evolved greatly over the years.

Miriam:

Oh, talk about that.

Ellen:

Let me think. Her depth increases... increased. As I said, I don't think she was that keen about the B'nei Mitzvah early on and obviously she became much more involved in the Children's Learning Program and other roles for children in the shul. I don't know, she... it's just that she grew. I mean we could tell like what she talked about... when she talked about she was always very political, but... and you know she became sort of daring. I mean at one point I think I can't remember her name... an activist in a hijab... I'm trying to think if it was a Shabbat or the High Holy Days... it was at Gethsemane. A lot of people were not happy about it.

Miriam:

What happened? I don't understand what happened.

Ellen:

She had a guest speaker, which she'd do from time to time, and this guest speaker was in a Muslim hijab... in hijab and her name... I'm sorry, her name escapes me. Anyway, so she spoke sort of... we all knew this woman, we knew who she was... and she didn't say anything radical from that point of view, we knew that she was, but it was sort of radical to have her at Kolot on that day, whether it was Shabbat or High Holy Day. I honestly don't remember. And some people were kind of prickled by that. Over the

years, a lot --- not a lot, but at least a dozen that I know of have left Kolot because they considered the Saturday services to be too political or on the other hand, not pro-Israel enough. I think at Beth Elohim there's an Israeli flag and an American flag on the bima. One of the shuls I think it has two flags and that would never happen at Kolot. Never. Never. [laugh] And Israel is really hardly mentioned. And I know members who have left because of that. And I know people who have left... because of the other way, on the other side of the argument. I mean people, you know everyone has their own bone to pick when they leave, but it is usually around something. Not around something liturgical or the content of the service itself.

Miriam:

And you had made mention that Ellen had become more and more political?

Ellen:

Well.. she became... I mean she's always political. I think she became a little more outwardly political as time went on during services. Miriam on the other hand is political too, but she does not bring it into services as much as Ellen.

Miriam:

But clearly, that wasn't a problem for you.

Ellen:

Umm.... No, I mean, it became clear very early on that instead of like a lot of rich lawyers and [word unintelligible] people, Kolot was a congregation of Social Workers of writers of creators. Right? And a very political side, but all leaning toward the liberal/progressive end of the spectrum. And so having that kind of political content, no, was not a problem for me... a problem for some people. I know people who wouldn't join, you know won't give Kolot their dues because they consider it a political organization, but that's their prerogative.

Miriam:

You have also watched Kolot grow.

Ellen:

Oh, greatly. Greatly. I mean, clearly Kolot outgrew its ability to hold High Holy Days in Gethsemane, then I think at one church that didn't work out, then at Mission for Today for several years where we did fill the sanctuary and the balcony completely. In fact, I think at some point there were two services. And now at Brooklyn Tech, not Brooklyn Tech – New York Tech, so clearly we've grown and since we don't charge for High Holy Day services, we attract a very broad spectrum of people who don't feel like forking over two, three hundred dollars for a ticket but who also want also be part of a service, who want to pray, who want to hear the liturgy for that day. And I think that's important because people aren't there just because they should be. I mean, if you're at a Kolot High Holy Day service, I think you're there because you want to be. You want to be part of it. And that's a very important distinction. You're not there to be seen, which is really the feeling I got at a couple of the other shuls. Beth Elohim – we went to a Bat Mitzvah at Beth Elohim. The cantor sang all the prayers for us. I mean, we're used to saying the Sh'mah for ourselves and the Amidah... and the cantor sang the whole thing, and wait a minute that's my stuff. You know, I thought. It just wasn't right. It wasn't good.

Miriam:

I want to hear more about how -- I mean you have been engaged in Kolot since the beginning. You have been going to services... your family has been involved. And how did that evolve? And you're involved with it now.

[22:52]

Ellen:

Yes. Early on, I was on the Board and that lasted a year because I had been assigned to the head of the Social Justice Committee when I honestly had no idea what to do or how to do that. And they brought on Seth Borgos at some point to help me out and I still really had no idea what to do. I was OK going to meetings, I was OK with increasing my contribution, but I just couldn't handle the community... the committee and working full time at that time 10 hours a day and doing this was just out of the question, so I dropped out after a year.

Miriam:

Dropped out of the Board...

Ellen:

Yeah.

Miriam:

But you stayed at Kolot...

Ellen:

Yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. I gradually became a Shabbat regular. I was not... I gradually became a Shabbat regular.

Miriam:

Talk about that part.

Ellen:

Oh. I don't know, I think that it sort of felt organic. I mean a lot of times I felt like Ellen really should be there together. And I... it just has become part of my life to observe Shabbat in the service. So, whether I participate now on Zoom or in person, I just feel it's really an important part of my Saturday. I don't know... I mean as I said at first I had no idea what I was doing, but I learned more and as I studied Hebrew it became much more comfortable. I sort of... interestingly, at this moment we're studying Toba Spitzer's book 'God is Here' and the question has been raised during those sessions about what is prayer, how does prayer relate to what she's talking about, which is the reimagining of the Divine through sort of conceptual metaphors? So, I'm interested in hearing what she's going to say about that, because, I mean, I think she makes some great points in the book and then our liturgy is all aimed at praising this one Divine being... out there, wherever. And I don't know how the two can survive. It sort of felt more natural, I mean it wasn't anything like a bolt from the blue -- I have to go to Shabbat -- I just felt I had to go to Shabbat. And also that was -- going to Shabbat -- that was an important part of the B'nei Mitzvah class, so I definitely increased my attendance then. So that was early 2012 to 2014. So now it's 2023 so I'm pretty much a regular in one way or another.

[27:13]

Miriam:

So that Bat Mitzvah was really a cusp that things changed...

Ellen:

Oh, absolutely. As I said, I started wearing a tallit and I really felt like I was... I mean I was always been a member of Kolot you know on paper, but sort of because of the Bat Mitzvah I felt like I was now a part of Kolot. And I was totally legit, because of the B'nei Mitzvah I belonged there in a way.

Miriam:

That's pretty powerful.

Ellen:

Yeah. Through that I started wearing a tallit and stopped eating pork, which I was not eating a lot of anyway, but you know, no more bacon no more anything. And Ellen had spoken powerfully about how that relates to Jewish history. She said, "They never killed us because of it." [laughing] They wouldn't kill us for a lack of a [word unintelligible]. I stopped eating pork because of that. That actually followed the B'nei Mitzvah... Bat Mitzvah [word unintelligible]. And so yeah, that was pretty powerful. I also felt a strong connection to my B'nei Mitzvah mates, you know. And, you know it was a very powerful [word unintelligible]

Miriam:

Did the community change for you?

Ellen:

I don't think so. I think the community is ... my feeling about the community changed, but the community sort of, relationships to me are not different. I mean I'm a familiar face. I'm a member and a familiar face. My daughter was a Bat Mitzvah. I was a Bat Mitzvah, so you know ...

Miriam:

How did it change for you. Other than wearing a tallit?

[talking over each other]

Ellen:

It became a Shabbat regular. I became more mindful of Shabbat. I don't know... I'm still on a road to discovery. Every, every Saturday is still – even if I don't feel like going – something is always there I find. Rabbi Miriam's – as we discussed – Rabbi Miriam's blessings are fantastic, the leadership of the [word unintelligible] is fantastic. There's always something. I mean, early, early on Ellen focused... you know, you don't come here to talk to God. You could do that on your own time. You come here in case God wants to say something to you. And that is a powerful reason to go to Services.

Miriam:

Oh, that's delicious. And I also really love the idea that every time you go to Services there is something to discover.

Ellen:

Yeah. Yeah. There's rarely a Saturday where there is nothing – nothing there. I mean there's always something you know. I notice something different, Miriam said something deep or unexpected or another member of the community does. There's always something. And that's what makes it important and delightful.

[30:18]

Miriam:

I know that you are a Torah Study regular and a Torah Study devotee. I will put myself somewhere in that. Talk about that community and talk about that connection.

Ellen:

Oh. That is a very strong, powerful connection and I feel that that connection is even stronger than it is when I go to Services. I feel like... I only went rarely when we were live in the balcony before Covid. I have become a regular since we're on Zoom. And, my... my unhappiness with the service... with the Torah Study before was that you know we studied the parsha, so we first read the parsha at Torah Study which took some time and then we went around the table and people's comments were not necessarily related to each other. Then you had all these snippets of thoughts or conversations, but they didn't add up to anything. And now on Zoom, or hybrid, when we're in breakout we are speaking face-to-face with someone – different people, small groups – on a given question or a given topic. And I think that is the best part of it. Really. Our ability to turn over some what might be a very simple question is so meaningful. I love that part of Torah Study. And I really don't want to go back to the way it was with 20 people making unrelated comments. I mean, I think it becomes entirely live again – which I don't think it will, because people are scattered, geographically scattered – but if it went live again, I think it would have to be sort of different rules, I think we come having read the parsha so we don't have to spend time reading the parsha. And there is some sort of breakout – you know, conversation is directed among... there is some kind of breakout where you can deal with the question of the day rather than this sort of nebulous commentary, which I don't think you could parse out any... you know a disservice. You know, we're dealing now with the parsha on a whole different level than we did in the original Torah Study. I also think these people are my friends I feel. I mean I'm looking at their faces every week and...

Miriam:

This is on Zoom

Ellen:

This is on Zoom. And I feel very close to them. I mean I met Susan Taylor she's married to Terry Fox, I met her on High Holy Days. And dealing with a mask and a tallit on it was really hard to see who she was. But she has distinctive glasses so I went up to her and said, "Susan?" and she said "Yes." So it was great to meet someone who I didn't know in person and you know I'd like to meet more people. I would like to meet more people in person whether socially or... I mean Samuel's in Chicago, he's not coming, a few people are also scattered so they're not coming in person, but I just feel – Torah Study is a must attend Saturday morning. It is a must attend.

Miriam:

Talk about what you get out of it.

Ellen:

It's... aside from its foundational, the Torah's foundational existence for Jews, to me it's an exquisite intellectual exercise. And I don't get that from my job unfortunately and I don't get that in many places. It's really, really important to bring everything to bear on one's understanding of the parsha and the questions and the resources that people bring – the leaders bring – to the discussion. And I love it. It's a wonderful exercise that I really cherish.

Miriam:

That you don't get anywhere else?

Ellen:

No. I don't. I mean there's no class like this. There's no nothing. This is an hour of really intense discussion which I love.

Miriam:

You lead Torah Study sometimes.

[35:38]

Ellen:

Yes. It's very hard. It looks easy, but it's much harder than it looks, although it's easier than drashing. I have drashed about 20 times over the years and Torah Study is much easier, because you say, "Oh. Why wouldn't Moses have done... you know, X Y and Z. Discuss." And you send people away for 20 minutes. You don't have to say why Moses didn't do X Y and Z in your drash, so it's easier to lead than it is to drash. But...

Miriam:

I actually remember hearing you say it's much easier to drash than it is to lead Torah Study.

Ellen:

I think this last time.... I drashed a few weeks ago and I got to the point where I wish I could say to everyone, "Discuss" and not have to do it myself. So, I think that was it. I like doing both. I like doing both. I like ... and I like, as you know, I attend Torah Study with my husband, Mike, and not only do I... he and I do wrestle with the Torah portions, but I like leading with him, because he and I will have very different approaches to the portion. And it's good. It's exciting. I like it. I like it. Really.

Miriam:

What other groups of Kolot have you sort of engaged in. Torah Study is one of them. And Torah Study is huge. There's so much to Torah Study.

Ellen:

I can't even discuss how large and important it is for my life it is. But, I don't remember what year, but starting in maybe 2010 or 2011 I became a part of Gemilut Chasadim.

Miriam:

This is pre-Bat Mitzvah, because I sort of see that as a... yeah.

Ellen:

Pre-Bat Mitzvah. And I just remember the committee, at that point the committee was very small and the congregation was small. At that point it was really us, those of us who were members of Gemilut were doing the bringing the dinners...

Miriam:

Explain a little bit about what Gemilut was like at that time.

Ellen:

Gemilut Chasidim involves acts of loving kindness. It's a group of... in the old days it's a group of people who were willing to set up Shiva, bring dinners, help a person who was going to or from the hospital, in the hospital and in those days I remember bringing food to someone in Williamsburg; helping Shelly before she went to the hospital, in the hospital multiple times for she was hospitalized repeatedly at one point and Shelly used to live around the corner for me, so it was easy for me to just go over there. And it was very hands-on. And I think also --- pre-Bat Mitzvah, definitely pre-Bat Mitzvah – and I became co-chair of Gemilut with Sandy Abramson and was just when her wife who was already ill entered her final illness, so she was not part of it. So I was chair of Gemilut for a couple of years. Luckily, I was unemployed at that point. So, there were so many people in so many situations needing so much help I literally spent full-time days on this. Literally spent fulltime days and I have to say it was one of the most rewarding and spiritual times of my life. Doing nothing but helping people out was exceptionally wonderful. I loved it. And it was hard, but I got a lot out of it not just the people being assisted. And Ellen and I would meet with... I remember one time we met with a Social Worker from the Jewish Board and when she was driving me back she was going, "I don't know what we're going to do when you get a job." And right after that I got a job so that was that. I think Sandy took over at that point. But it was very intense and immensely rewarding, immensely rewarding. At this point, Gemilut is able to put out calls to the congregation for people to help other people, other members in need. And a lot of people will respond. So, it's not just a few members of the community. And the committee has evolved, you have help from someone who's I think is a Social Worker someone from the Jewish Board for those who need long-term care. And Phyllis, Phyllis Arnold who obviously acquired different pieces of sort of supportive medical equipment so she could help that way. So, it's really quite different.

Miriam:

Are you still part of Gemilut?

Ellen:

I have not been active. I mean at some point [word unintelligible] schedule for it, but I'm not really active. I had to step away. When I stepped away I had to step away. Just had to do it.

[41:49]

Miriam:

It's says a lot about the community, that there are people in the community that are so willing to step up.

Ellen:

Oh, absolutely. This is a much changed community. Social [word unintelligible] and has a lot of people, in a lot of different... spread out in a geographical area, so there's always someone where someone who needs assistance whether needs a ride or a dinner or something. So in that way it's a much more spread out, it's not just you know 5 people or 10 people trying to do this kind of thing. And it's a wonderful thing. I mean, if it's a thing... a three-legged stool that Judaism rests on includes Gemilut Chasidim.

Miriam:

And you feel that.

Ellen:

Oh, yeah. Yea, yeah, yeah, yeah. I felt... I didn't feel it until I had the Shiva for my mother. And Ami Kaplan set that up with her partner's help out. And it was gorgeous. It was gorgeous. I did nothing. I did literally nothing. In fact I wasn't even sure when they were here. And I was so impressed that I

joined immediately, I joined up, I joined immediately. And that was very important. The beneficiaries of that is very important.

Miriam:

That says a lot. Says a lot about community and says a lot about connections

Ellen:

Yeah.

Miriam:

It says a lot about who is in this community.

Ellen:

Oh yes, absolutely. I think that is a hallmark of this community, its generosity, its willingness extend themselves. It's very important. Very important. I hope it's a hallmark of other communities, not sure. I hope it's a hallmark of other Jewish communities, but I'm not sure it is... in other shuls.

Miriam:

Oh, you're not sure that...

Ellen:

That it is an element of a Jewish community. I hope it is.

Miriam:

I'm so impressed that you have seen Kolot grow the whole time. You've had... you crest, but you never came down from a crest, you know.

Ellen:

Yeah

Miriam:

And then it's a community that changed again. When Miriam became Rabbi... ok, hold on one second.

Pause

[45:08]

Miriam:

OK. Alright... I don't remember where we were.

Ellen:

Me either.

[laughing]

Miriam:

I'm supposed to...

Ellen:

Something about my engagement in...

Miriam:
Oh right.

Ellen:
Oh yeah, and I think that's... the influence of the clergy, as I've gone I'm more involved in the Service and find new things in the Service. Lisa B Segal is a great Cantor because she'll change up the songs that we sing every Saturday. The Saturday it changes up and she teaches the melody. She's both educational and a song leader. And that's very important to bring everyone with her. And Miriam is you know is "still new", I'm putting that in quotes, and she'll say some wonderful, surprising things. So yeah, my engagement has maintained and I guess increased.

Miriam:
There has been a big influx in new people. I mean since pandemic. I mean the pandemic was a real boon that.. you know people that we never knew... I mean it was a boon in terms of membership. The membership really increased. Talk about Kolot now.

Ellen:
Well... I don't always know everyone sitting in the sanctuary.

Miriam:
And you did... ?

Ellen:
I did. But it doesn't really matter. I mean a lot of people are people I've seen at Services before. I don't *know* them, but I've seen them at Services before. And some of them are new and there are all different ethnicities and gender expressions and it's interesting. It's much more interesting. And there's a vitality and a life in the congregation that I think comes with the relative youth of the new members. And they [word unintelligible]. I like it.

Miriam:
Do you want to say anything more about the contributions you have given Kolot and the reciprocity of what you have gotten back?

Ellen:
I think... I'm happy that I have been engaged and been contributing. On the other hand, I wish I had more time now at this point to be engaged with other classes or many other things like that and I look forward to having more time to do that. But I'm happy I've been engaged. Mike reminded me – this is before you joined – I was... it was the year I did nothing but Kolot, nothing but Gemilut —and I was honored on High Holy Days by Ellen on the Bima. At [word unintelligible] Tech. And I was really so honored. I mean, I was truly honored it was a highlight in my life. Oh wow. And on the other hand, I would hope that... and I think many more people now are engaged... but I would hope other people would feel that kind of engagement. It's important to the life of the community. We're not just in and out, you know like 10 – 12 on Saturdays. I mean, there's something fundamentally engaging about helping another member because he or she isn't engaged, or a member in need – something. It could be easy could be a lift or something, it could be a dinner, it could be a pet sitting, it could be any number of

things, yeah... another member needs it and it's an important thing to move in enough to provide that. Just because it's a fellow member. And I think that's an important level of engagement.

Miriam:

That's very special to have that kind of community.

Ellen:

Yes. Absolutely. And I hope even though we're growing at this incredibly fast pace, I would hope that this maintains on some level. In terms of the future a lot will depend on finding adequate space, because we're outgrowing the space. And I don't know the answer to the space question, but I think it's going to be fundamental to keeping Kolot Kolot... keeping it cohesive. At some point we'll have... I mean right now Shabbat services are manageable in terms of attendance. Will we have to go to a double session like a lot of shuls do with two services. Maybe a Friday night and a Saturday morning or two on Saturdays? I mean something will have to happen. And I think we have moved beyond the ability at Gethsemane to survive. One is the accessibility, right off the bat having stuff with the space.

51:49

Miriam:

It sounds like you have no problem with Kolot growing.

Ellen:

No. I don't. I don't... I wouldn't like it to grow just for the sake of growth. But if we are attracting... I mean, obviously we're gonna always attract families who send their kids to CLP and disappear after their B'Mitzvah. That's always going to be so... but it seems a lot of the new members are people who attend services and who are committed to them. And I like that. And if that's the kind of growth that we're experiencing then that's a good kind of growth. Is it too much for the clergy, the current clergy you know one Cantor and one Rabbi? I don't know. I mean they're the ones who have to say. I don't know. I really don't know. They're the [word unintelligible] obviously, depends on how many pastoral visits they can do, but right now it's still comfortable. And it's great to hear from different people drashing and people leyning. You were right, thank you for... Jacob Gross' drash was phenomenal.

Miriam:

There have been a string of phenomenal drashes. I think they've upped the ante as the regular drashers have gotten a whole lot better, too.

Ellen:

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. There's always something. It's very rare that even a seasoned darshon – I hate that word 'seasoned' it sounds like someone's got garlic powder – but it's rare that even a veteran darshon will have nothing new to say about it. It's always something. As far as when I first joined Kolot, actually I only went for the Torah portion. I went for the drashes and leyning. It was only after a little bit that I started going to the rest of the service, too. But sometimes I'd just come in late so I'd hear the Torah, but now I'm into the whole thing. [laughing]

Miriam:

You're in for the whole thing

Ellen:

I'm in for the whole thing.

[pause]

Even though I'm late.

Miriam:

You mentioned space as a challenge. Do you see anything else that's a challenge going forward from here for Kolot?

Ellen:

Well, I think there a couple of elephants in the room at Kolot. Israel, Israel/Palestine is not much discussed even by the committee. I think there is a committee, but I haven't heard a report from them.

Miriam:

Talk more about that.

Ellen:

Well, I think that that's for some Jews... American Jews that's a concern. And that's a question.

Miriam:

Wait. What's a question?

Ellen:

You know whether Israel... you know, two-state solution or one-state solution. This new government is extremely right wing and basically anti-Palestinian. A lot of the congregation is very pro-Palestinian. So, I think... a lot of political... a lot of different points of view on Israel and sometimes I think...

[recording paused]

Miriam:

Ok, let's back up a little bit so that we get this. We're talking about the issue of Israel-Palestine within the community and your perception of what those issues and complications are.

Ellen:

Yeah. Thank you. I think there are many issues and many complications. And I think you know, if you were to ask congregants who are congregant would say are all over the map. But I don't feel that it is sort of discussed enough and I'm not sure how that discussion should ensue. But it's sort of out there and I'm not sure how to bring it in. And the other thing of is about... and I think about this a lot I'm really close to talking about this with Rabbi Miriam -- is antisemitism. You know you have an anti... an antiracist committee, we have... we're very concerned with many issues of race, but we're not talking about antisemitism which has grown a lot. And I personally have experienced antisemitism. I did. And I'm sure a lot of people have in this community and I think there should be a way for us to deal with that, to discuss it. I'm not sure how, I mean I don't have a good idea about this and this and this should happen. I don't have that, but I feel like it's something that should be discussed.

Miriam:

It sounds like there are some things that you feel like Kolot discusses well and there are things that sort of aren't.

Ellen:

Yeah right. Well, that's sort of natural it depends on sort of the leadership, the personal political proclivities and the... I think those sort of [word unintelligible] move in one direction or another ... but doesn't mean it's not a good idea. So, I just would like to see more of a wealth of issues. I don't know. I don't know how... literally don't know this could happen just ... I'm also very concerned about the safety and security of our space. I mean we used to have a Safety and Security Committee. I don't know if they're still in existence, but hearing about attacks on other synagogues and the fact that we have sort of an open-door policy... I think it makes people – including me – uncomfortable. We're very vulnerable. I mean you can't be a secret about Services in synagogue once a week... more than once a week. And I don't know. How can you deal with that? Is it enough to sort of mount a TV camera at the entrance? Do we... no one I think likes the idea of having a uniformed guard at the entrance. I mean a lot of this has been discussed, but it seems [recording unintelligible]... This neighborhood, you can't say, "Oh, Park Slope no problem." There are a lot of people in this community... a lot of different communities.

[pause]

Miriam:
Any other challenges?

Ellen:
Well as long as it's handled well.

Miriam:
And not overwhelming. Any personal challenges?

Ellen:
No... no. I like Miriam, I like Lisa very much. The liturgy is the liturgy, you know and there's a certain set of processions that we follow. We follow a Reconstructionist procession. We go ... and that's ok. I don't personally see... Oh, another thing I think needs to be discussed is a lot of the congregation is getting old. And I used to really look up to Martha Usdin as a role model. I liked her very much and she's gone. Kathy August doesn't come very often. And so we've risen to the top. And I think we're called the older-ishes.

Miriam:
Older-ishes? There's the younger-ishes and the older-ishes?

Ellen:
Yeah. You know, what about that? What... probably we're expected to give more. But aside from that, what else can we sort of get from Kolot or learn from doing something in Kolot. You know, should there be some sort of organizational work/committee or something just devoted to this issue. Isn't that Kolot?

Miriam:
I think it's... where do you see Kolot going?

Ellen:
Right.

Miriam:

Where... or what do you see as Kolot in the future?

Ellen:

Well. I can't say anything. I really don't. If we keep following the growth curve we've been on then we're obviously going to grow out of Gethsemane soon. And I don't know what that will look like in terms of space. And also this is not a wealthy community. And for one Shabbat... [recording unintelligible] ... have to have a capital plan and raise millions and millions of dollars and I know from having plans at Union Temple that having a building is a lot of responsibility. So, I'm not sure we're up for that. I'm not sure that is what we want to devote a capital campaign for... to. I don't know if we're ready for that, but I do know that we need something. We need a place to be. I mean having the Children's Learning Program here, the Administrator here, the Services there... it's too scattered. You don't have... it's what we have to do at this point, but it's not ideal.

[1:03:08]

I don't know the answer. I don't have the answer.

Because it's past that issue of a capital campaign is huge. It's... this is not that kind of congregation.

Miriam:

I see that clearly. Do you feel that the core/the center has moved at all with all these new young people coming in?

Ellen:

If it's moved at all it moved because we changed Rabbis. And I think a lot of the new members have come because we have a new Rabbi. I don't think at this point we have seen... maybe we have, I don't know. But I think Rabbi Miriam is the leader who will take us into a new direction, maybe. I don't know. Or inflect us in addition. I don't know. But I'm sure that a lot of these members have joined because we have a young Rabbi, a Rabbi who is very open to a lot of issues. And... not that Ellen wasn't, but you know it's different if someone is 65 and someone is Miriam's age.

Miriam:

What I really like is that this doesn't bother you. It's this is my... you're connected to Kolot, you're expecting to be connected to Kolot and Kolot will...

Ellen:

I guess when I'm looking back what as we are now, I'm good with Miriam and I'm happy with the way things are going... I did feel a sense of upheaval when Ellen retired and we acquired a new Rabbi. And I did, but now I'm OK. It's... you know I was there at Kolot because of Ellen. And she was really all I knew [recording unintelligible]. So that was 20 years. She was my Rabbi for 20 years, so it was hard you know for me at first to make that shift.

Miriam:

It was your commitment to Kolot.

Ellen:

No. I think one of the things that really matters was the fact that Miriam was here for a pastoral care meeting with my family right after she came on board. Right after. And she was so excellent that really I felt very good about her.

Miriam:

You had a one-to-one experience with Miriam.

Ellen:

Right. Right. Three-to-one.

Miriam:

Three-to-one. [laughing] Three-to-three.. that confirmed your... that's very interesting. Would you recommend that to people?

Ellen:

Would I recommend what?

Miriam:

Having a pastoral...

Ellen:

If it's an issue requiring it. Not as a matter of course, but yes, there are real issues and if there's an issue that requires having that kind of close meeting, yeah.

Miriam:

Did you have that with Ellen?

Ellen:

No, I didn't have an issue.

Miriam:

You didn't have an issue.

Ellen:

Although with Ellen I mean, soon after I joined I had her over for tea; as a board member we had breakfast you know with a couple of other board members; when I was in Gemilut I was alone with her in the car, you know we would talk. So, I didn't have the same kind of issue at that point, but I had plenty of face-to-face time with her. And that was great.

Miriam:

That.... That we tend not to have with Miriam because of the size we are.

Ellen:

Well, my role's changed. I was on the board, so I had I had time with her; I was on Gemilut, so I had time with her, I was a B'nei Mitzvah... so it's different. You know now I'm plain old congregant.

Miriam:

And you don't have a problem with that either?

Ellen:

I don't know. Right now that's pretty much what I can do. I'm looking forward to when I lose this job which is – it doesn't sound like it takes a lot of time, but it takes a lot out of me. Then I'll be able to devote more time to Kolot. Doing something, I'm not sure what but...

Miriam:

And you see it going forward and you see yourself connected to it.

1:09:06

Ellen:

Yeah. I don't see why it shouldn't go forward. The change of leadership... it sort of demonstrated it can continue. And I mean I hesitate to think of some changes that may happen, but...

Miriam:

Like what?

Ellen:

Well, if Lisa left. Or even if Miriam left it would be... I'm hoping... I mean I had Ellen for 20 years. I'm hoping Miriam stays longer. And Lisa, too. You know.

Miriam:

So you see it changing and you want it to stay the same.

Ellen:

No, it's not that I want it to stay the same, I want it... well... I want some kind of continuity at its core. I mean, the service has obviously shifted a little bit you know, Lisa became Cantor and Miriam became Rabbi so of course there's some shift. [recording unintelligible] Enjoyable. You know, I'm not disgruntled [laughing] in any way. So, I don't see any downsides to Kolot right now. I just think really a space issues is... space issue is really has to be. Accessibility, especially in an aging congregation on one hand, you know one portion is an aging congregation. I can think of one member with a disability, you know a mobility issue. I have little balance issues. Other people are old. And the stairs are a problem. And Kathy August fell down the stairs I think it was last year. And it's an issue. You know when we had the garden and it was much easier, but right now there is really not an accessible entrance to the shul and that's important.

Miriam:

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you had wanted to talk about? Is there something you had in mind or that you wanted to bring up?

Ellen:

We talked about past and present issues. We talked about you know how I changed over the years with a Bat Mitzvah and contributions I've made. Now ... that my husband. You know when I married Mike he was Catholic ... and although lapsed. He hadn't done anything. And he converted not to any doing of mine. He told me he was converting. It was more of Ellen had something to do with it not me. And I... he had been going to Torah Study for probably 10 years before that. So, he was the Torah Study regular and I think it was that intellectual engagement in the kind of perspective that he saw in that kind of relation attracted him. And we lit candles, you know we had lit candles before that. And I think he was attracted to Judaism. So that, that was sort of... and brought us closer. And I liked the fact that he's engaged. He came to the Toba Spitzer thing on Tuesday and he's engaged in a couple of things. And I

like it. It's good. It's good for the two of us, because he's still got something of that outsider suspect, so he feels safer in ... makes sense. Sort of refreshing, I think it's sort of. I don't have any serious problems. Sorry... [laughing].

Miriam:

And it's an organization that has been in your life for so... for decades.

Ellen:

Yeah. About a third of my life, I was a little less than 39 when I started. And, yeah. The fact that it's only a block away is just a coincidence, but it's a happy coincidence. At some point it will move and I will have to travel to get there. That will be less happy, but I love the fact that it's right here. And that's... I like being adjacent to it.

Miriam:

But that's not going to be a problem because this community... you're so engaged.

Ellen:

Yeah. Right. We'll have to see. If it goes to the Bronx, I mean that's an issue. We'll have to see where it goes. Now I have to say that I'm not thrilled with taking the subway to get to New York Tech on High Holy Days. Which I feel, obviously walk to Kolot and walk to Mission for Today. Taking the subway is not ideal. But I could ... for a few days.

Miriam:

I like your Kolot. I like the Kolot you have around you.

Ellen:

You weren't here, you weren't a member in 2015.

Miriam:

I may have... I was High Holidays

Ellen:

Because we had our 25 anniversary celebration in the Social Hall of the Canning Factory and Ellen and Lisa presided basically an all-Kolot thing. And it was great. It was wonderful. Ellen was really interesting and Ellen and Lisa B. It was really fantastic. That was really a wonderful thing. Wonderful memories.

Miriam:

I think we've got it.

Ellen:

Good!

Miriam:

Is there anything else you can think of that you would want

Ellen:

I'm worn out. I'm depleted. I can't think of anything major that... you know, I don't have that kind of over-arching knowledge that would say "I can't do this prayer", "I think we should that prayer". I don't

have that. You know, I've sort of... I'm a totally Kolot-made creature of Shabbat. I don't know. I do whatever we do. So, I can't say anything about liturgy. So, I think this... so far so good.

Miriam:

Nice. Thank you. Thank you very much. That was great. That is great.