

INTERVIEW: Rabbi Aaron Bergman

INTERVIEWER: Charlotte Dubin

DATE: March 8, 2017

PLACE: Adat Shalom Synagogue, Farmington Hills, Michigan

CHARLOTTE DUBIN: I'm Charlotte Dubin. I'm conducting an oral history interview with Rabbi Aaron Bergman for the Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives in his office at Adat Shalom Synagogue on March 8, 2017. Rabbi Bergman, do we have permission to use your words and thoughts in the future for educational and historical research and documentation?

RABBI AARON BERGMAN: Absolutely.

DURBIN: We'll start at the very beginning.

BERGMAN: Okay. Oh, I handled my first question. That was great, yes.

DURBIN: Where and when were you born?

BERGMAN: I was born at Sinai Hospital in Detroit in 1963...though I grew up in Oak Park. My parents moved there in 1965 when it was still a relatively young community, and we lived on Nine Mile between Coolidge and Greenfield on Park Lawn which was right next to a Labbavitch synagogue. And about two blocks from Hamilton Hill, which was a very important place growing up.

DURBIN: Who are you named for?

BERGMAN: I was named after my grandfather Avram. And my grandmother Shendel[sp] ; that's where the Scot comes from. They both died in the Holocaust so I never knew them. But I was the first grandchild. My father was the only survivor. His siblings didn't. So they named me after them.

DURBIN: Your parents had very different life experiences.

BERGMAN: Mm-hmm.

DURBIN: And I wonder if you'd tell us about them and their background.

BERGMAN: Okay. Which one do you want first?

DURBIN: Okay. I'll start with your dad.

BERGMAN: Okay. So my dad was born in 1931 in the Carpathian Mountains, which was called Czechoslovakia at the time and is now in the Ukraine. And lived in a town called Bichkiev which had about 5,000 people. And his father was a tailor, and his mother was a shirtmaker. A very modest living, but they had a number of acres of land, and they would plant vegetables, too. And it was a fairly happy environment growing up. But then the Hungarians took over the village under the guidance of the Nazis. And in 1943 they took my grandfather to the army. They were bringing Jewish men into the army. Not giving them weapons, but essentially be in the front lines. The enemies would shoot, use up the bullets, and then the army would come. And then after a while, though, they told my grandfather they were going to be taking away all the Jews from your village. And they said to him: "You can stay here and take your chances. Or you can go back with them and die." And he went back, but he didn't tell them that's what was happening. Because it was too late at this point.

It was the spring of 1944, and my grandfather goes back. And they're all taken to Auschwitz. It was supposed to be my father's bar mitzvah. So my grandfather smuggles out a bottle of wine, and they have a toast on the cattle train on the way to Auschwitz. I think they actually told my father that he was older than he was because we had a really kind of a strange experience. About eight or nine years ago, my father had been looking for his birth certificate for many years. And how do you get a birth certificate after the Holocaust in this little village in the Ukraine? Well, they finally get the birth certificate, and it's mailed to the house. And it's a different month and year from the one we were celebrating. And it turns out that—according to the birth certificate they get—he was born in 1932...1931. But I think my grandparents knew that if they didn't celebrate his bar mitzvah that he was never going to have a chance at having a bar mitzvah. And where he got the date of May 1931 is that after the war, the soldiers asked him when his birthday was, he says it's around, you know, this time of year. And I had my bar mitzvah. And so they sort of came up with this date. And that's what we still celebrate it on because that's what we've been doing for this long. But his parents must have had a sense that if they didn't celebrate with him then, they were never going to.

So he had an older sister and a younger brother, and they were all taken away. His mother, sister, and brother were taken immediately at Auschwitz, and he never saw them again. My grandfather said that my father was actually 16 and not, you know, 12 or 13, whatever it actually was. And my father was very small. He was not robust. He'd had rheumatic fever. So he didn't look it, but the Nazis said, Fine. You're 16. You'll be in a work detail. So he and his father were together for about six weeks. And then he was separated from his father at the Plaszów concentration camp, which is where *Schindler's List* takes place. So I've actually never been able to watch the movie of *Schindler's List* because knowing my grandfather is in that camp somewhere, so to speak, and he wasn't one of the ones who were put on the list. Then my father survives the war. And he goes back to his village. And his old neighbors are living in his house. And they say: Well, you left—left! And you can't have it. And, you know, here's a 14-year-old boy, and what is he going to do? He didn't have a deed or anything.

And he heard the Russians were coming, so he actually wound up in Germany in a displaced persons camp for two years. And came to America in 1947. He wanted to go to Israel, and the British still had restrictions on how many people could go. And it came down to a coin toss between him and his other guy, and this other guy won and went to Israel. My dad wound up

going to America. Winds up in an orphanage in Cleveland which had a good relocation center for refugees at the time. And he actually made friends with a number of guys. They stayed in touch their whole lives afterward. But he was taken in as a foster child by this really lovely Austrian family named the Pirocks[sp], Fred and Gertie. Fred was Jewish and Gertie was Christian, and they married. In Austria with the Nuremberg Laws, it was illegal. And so they wound up coming to America, and they took in some other kids as their own because they never had them. And they essentially were my grandparents. Because they lived in Cleveland, I didn't see them as often as I would have liked. And Fred passed away in the early 'seventies. Gertie got to see at least my first daughter, you know. So that was sort of a nice connection.

But my father goes into the American Air Force. This is the time of the Korean War by then, by the time he graduates high school. And there was a draft, and he decides to go into the air force because they had better educational opportunities. So they said to him: "Bergman, with your specialty—" which was communications—"you can go to Korea or you can go to Germany." And my father is a very practical man, and he said: Well, they're shooting in Korea. In Germany they're not. So he actually winds up back in Germany in the uniform of an American soldier. And that was a very powerful moment. He said, you know, walking around with a gun in Germany in the 'fifties, it was really tempting. But he knew it would have been ruining his life. And he comes back, and he goes to work. They train him in engineering and communications. And he's working in Cleveland. And he gets transferred to Detroit. And then he's at a party, and he meets my mom. So that's how they connected.

My mother grew up in Detroit and went to Central High. She's ten years younger—or nine years younger, depending on which was my father's real birthdate. And her family had experienced all this terrible suffering in Russia. Her mother was from a backwater town near a backwater of Odessa and literally dirt poor. She couldn't afford shoes and didn't go to school. And her mother—her own mother, my grandmother's mother—died of starvation. This is probably 1913, 1914, in that area. And we used to have a picture of her that I would see at my Bubby's. And I always assumed it was a picture of her in her in her seventies or eighties. And I learned that she was actually about 38 or 39 when she died; her brother actually died of starvation at the funeral. I mean that's how dire it was. And my bubby and my mother's mother had a number of siblings: The oldest went to America, and he eventually saved up and brought the family over. But they had to go through Windsor because the Americans were not really that interested in bringing in refugees from Russia at the time. This is right after World War I, right after the Soviet Revolution. So my bubby and some other siblings, they wind up in Windsor. They become Canadian citizens, I believe...or at least get some sort of legal status. And then they were able to come to America. And eventually she meets a fellow Russian who was 20 years her senior. He was the boss at a corset factory that she was working at. And so they got married, and my mother is the youngest of four, but she has a twin brother. So there's two older brothers, and then she has a twin brother...though one of the brothers has passed away. So my mother is a first-generation American. So she didn't have the firsthand suffering of Europe. But there was so much pain and suffering among the generations that it couldn't have been the easiest thing to deal with. And she wound up being an extremely lovely woman. And they found each other, and they got married, and that was it. They had me and my brother.

DUBIN: Your father shared his experiences with you? Or did you find out about his background in another way?

BERGMAN: Well, I found out at a very young age. My father was actually unusually open for a survivor. And so from the time I was about five or six years old, he started talking about his experiences. He'd actually written a long document before I was born detailing his experiences. And he had written it for me. And then I read it at a young age. But he also started making copper sculptures of his experiences. My father, though his education was obviously like broken up into a lot of different segments—he didn't have the most linear path of elementary school, high school, college, you know, that we kind of take for granted—had a tremendous intuitive sense of how the mind works...always had an interest in psychology and in art. And he became a self-taught sculptor. He was working in this engineering firm, and they had copper scraps, and they had this toolshed in the backyard and a blowtorch. And he would go, and he would make sculptures of the death camps: like the crematoria, the gas chambers. But he'd make them of happier things also: I mean like a father and son. He'd make some humorous things. My father has a very good sense of humor, and he's always like telling jokes. So he really loved America from the day he got here. He was liberated by the Americans. Like he is a Yankee Doodle Dandy, and he really wanted to be an American as quickly as possible. So he really worked on learning the language and really acculturating. You know we played catch with a baseball and all that.

But he was dealing with his demons. And he found a way to deal with them. He would make these sculptures. And I don't think I understand how kind of strange it was to have a sculpture of Auschwitz in your basement, like next to the ping-pong table. It was just...but it was just a part of it. It was his way of dealing with that. And I remember probably around 1970 or so, he went to a presentation of *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. This was a collection of poems and paintings of children, I believe, in Traezenstat[sp] that were found after the Holocaust. And what it was is that they would show slides of the pictures, and they would have these, you know, seven—I don't know how old they would be. The kids could have been anywhere from 12 to 30. I have no idea, you know, when you're that age. But they were reading these poems. And my dad looks at them like that's so interesting. You've got images and music and words. And he started making these slide presentations. And literally with slides, you know, taking the pictures and making by hand. And he had someone take pictures of the sculptures. And he set it to music. I still can't listen to Tchaikovsky now without like right through the heart, you know. It was the *Marche Slave*. And that became.... He integrated the background sounds with his narration and the pictures.

And he would just start going to schools all over the place, and he was sharing his story. And he did this throughout the 'seventies. And, you know, as a kid, like oh, my God! My father's coming to school? I mean I wasn't that popular that I could afford to lose a bunch of friends, you know. And he was great. He was just great. He really connected with the kids because he thought it important that the story be personal. So instead of talking about the six million, he talked about his parents and his brother and sister. But then he would ask the students: Now visualize this happening to you in your family, and all of a sudden the kids are like OH! Because otherwise history is ten years before whatever, you know. So for these kids, just to tell them the facts and figures of what happened with the Holocaust, as important as they

are, my father understood that with middle-school kids, it just wasn't going to connect. They don't have those kind of linear thinking skills. And so he made it really visceral and really personal. And he even had this sheet where write down your family members' names. All right. You know it's nice you write them all down. And then during the course of his presentation, he'd have them cross them out one by one that you just lost. You just lost. You just lost. You just lost. And by the end they're like, oh, we get.... And this was all self-taught, a very intuitive thing, a really brilliant guy.

And my mother is really brilliant, artistically, musically, intellectually. There was always a lot of art and music and books in the house. It was just sort of all lying around and always music playing. And they both did art. Like my mother actually has a background in fine arts training. My father, his art was like very kind of raw, very primitive, but very emotional. My mother's was more classical, and she played piano. I still have the piano in our house. I can't play it, but I have a lot of nice memories from it. I don't think I realized how much was going on in the house until later on and like I married and we have kids. And like what kind of house? Well, it's not going to have a sculpture of Auschwitz. But it was an important piece for me. It was very formative.

And growing up next to \_\_\_\_\_ Synagogue was important also. My father's faith in God obviously shifted a lot. He grew up ultra Orthodox in the Carpathian Mountains. And after the Holocaust, a lot of distance, understandably, theologically. But he still cared a lot about the people in the Lebovitch[sp] Shul was how he remembered what it looked like. So he wasn't there for the sense of theology but a sense of we're still here. It's still around. And so I grew up like literally right next door to it, and that's where I went to Hebrew School and where my bar mitzvah was. And my dad and I sort of shared our bar mitzvah. That was a nice moment. Like because he had his with his dad on the cattle train, to be able to have with his son and then with my brother at his bar mitzvah six years later, it was very powerful. Though with my own daughters, \_\_\_\_\_ mitzvah. That was, I would say, even better than ours because it was another generation. It had gone...it wasn't just that he had created another generation, but that generation had as well. So he and my mom, they really got a lot of it, because, you know, then my mother came from a very modest background in Detroit from families who had just suffered horribly. And to have these lovely granddaughters and daughter-in-law, too. She had three brothers and two sons. So when she finally had a daughter-in-law and then granddaughters it was like, God! All those pink dresses...we can finally do something.

DUBIN: Well, \_\_\_\_\_ then, too. Where did your parents live?

BERGMAN: They are now in Florida, a place called Hernando. It's actually where Ted Williams lived in his later years. And there used to be a Ted Williams Museum there. It's a little remote. My father said it kind of reminded him a little bit of where he grew up, and it kind of has brought him full circle in a number of ways. But it's a schlep.

DUBIN: Now he found his way to Detroit because of that couple that...?

BERGMAN: Actually what happened is that there was some family in New York; they brought him over. But they weren't able to take care of him. So they arranged for this situation in

Cleveland. Even though that part of the family had gotten out earlier, the sense of loss was so devastating. I think the people are just having a really hard time trying to figure out what to do and how to be there. So they made sure he was taken care of. But he left New York, and he went to Cleveland. And he was in that orphanage. And then that couple brought him, the Pirocks.

DUBIN: Now about your growing-up years. Any siblings?

BERGMAN: Yes, I have a younger brother, Lawrence.

DUBIN: Okay.

BERGMAN: Yes, we're six years apart, and he lives in New York.

DUBIN: And anything you'd like to share about those years, growing-up years?

BERGMAN: Well, I was very lucky to have grown up in Oak Park, you know. When people always say, Oh, Oak Park was so wonderful. And my kids always hear. It actually was that great. I loved it. I could walk to the bookstore. I could walk to the park. Had lots of neighbors. There were people we played baseball with almost every day in the shul parking lot that lived around the block. I was lucky that the public schools were wonderful. I went to Einstein Elementary in Clinton, and then I went to Oak Park High. I was lucky that I knew it was a good place. Like I had a sense that it had worked out nicely. And that was reinforced. I had a friend from middle school—and mostly just friends through middle school—we didn't really hang out a lot, and he came to my house once. And, you know, this was a kind of a typical three-bedroom, thousand-ish square feet. We had a basement. And my friend said, "I didn't know you lived in a palace." And at first I thought he was kidding. Then he was saying his circumstances were not quite... But, you know, I was very lucky. And my parents liked to do fun things, and we would go to the zoo and we'd go to Greenfield Village. And so when I did those with my own kids and go to the—we went to the DIA a lot. And we'd go to Cedar Point. And we'd go to Cleveland a lot to visit my grandparents. I never really thought of them as foster grandparents. But basically everyone went to Cleveland on vacation because that's just where—where else were you going to go?

But growing up, I was very shy and very quiet. In fact took a lot of speech therapy in elementary school. There's nothing like getting pulled out of class and "Bergman, you're in speech therapy." So if you told me that this shy, very, very bookish, very quiet kid was going to make a living talking in front of people, I would have said, That's science fiction, you know. Aliens and stuff, that I'll believe before.... But actually I'd wanted to be an astronaut. That was actually my first career goal. I was a very little boy with the Apollo missions. And I remember looking at the moon and thinking, Gosh! There's actually guys up there. It's not like the man in the moon. There's a man on the moon. It was amazing. And I was enrolled in the Space Book Club. You'd get two books a month about science and space and, you know, models. And I just loved that. But I didn't have the hand-eye coordination. You had to be able to fly fighter jets and that. First of all, my parents were not going to let me fly. I mean who are we kidding? I've been wearing glasses since kindergarten. So that wasn't going to happen. But I was very, very shy, very quiet. And I wound up getting involved in BBYO, and that was really important to me. And

they offered a lot of leadership training. And I decided just to go for it. I ran for president of my chapter, and I ran unopposed. And I actually did almost lose. It's like this guy, he doesn't even talk. He's going to be president? What is he going to do, stand up there and just...? But I went to some of the training, and it was great. And that really got me kind of out of my shell and involved. And I loved the guys in the chapter. It was Roz AZA, and I'm still in touch with a number of them, even to this day. Still see them, I still see my old advisor, Mickey, who was a great guy. And that was a really important thing to me. I mean I know what had happened to my father and not having grandparents and an aunt and uncle from him. Like there was always a hole from him in my heart. And that part is never really...that's never gone away. There's always sort of been that nagging thing. So there was this thing kind of hovering in the background, but it wasn't a part of my everyday life. And I played baseball and basketball. And I really did have a very nice 'sixties and 'seventies, All-American growing-up. But I always knew there was something a little different.

DUBIN: That hole that you mentioned: Does it lend itself to the kind of work that you do with your congregation, counseling and...?

BERGMAN: It does in a way. But it's going to sound funny is that one of the hard parts for me is not being jealous of people who had these wonderful grandparents that they got to see every day. I'm lucky I had a bubby. I did have one grandparent that I was able to spend a lot of time with. You know sometimes there are families like, And, oh, and grandma and grandpa picked us up every day after school, and they took us horse...or whatever it was. So I tried not to be...still trying to be happy for them that they had that person and not kind of sad that I didn't have that one. I think that what I have understood is everyone, though, is suffering from something. I haven't met a person yet who would say: Oh, yeah, it's all been just perfect, you know. No problems. There's better, there's worse. There's more appreciative, less appreciative. But I think, when you spend time and you really hear their story, then you understand a little better. So I think that this has helped me listen to stories better.

DUBIN: Now tell us about the college years, okay? You went through these schools, public schools.

BERGMAN: Yes, and I was lucky. I got into my first and only choice. I went to the University of Michigan. We used to go there when I was a kid for the Ann Arbor Art Fair, and I fell in love with the campus. And spent a lot of time at Oreck's Bookstore. In fact they used to call it the Ann Arbor Book Fair, because that's what I really thought was the important thing. But went to Art Fair. And, you know, I was lucky. It wasn't as stressful to get into Michigan as it is now. I mean when my own kids were applying for schools, the pressure was unbelievable. And when I was going, it wasn't quite as bad. So I went to U of M. And I started premed, but my heart was never into it. There was a member of the extended family who was kind of pressuring me. And after a semester of chemistry, I was out. I said this is just...it's not fair to my future patients that I would be a doctor. It's just not going to happen. So I had thought for a while that I was going to be an attorney, but I wasn't really sure what to do as astronaut was still out. Well, you know, the program wasn't what it used to be. You know a lot of the excitement over space travel had kind of waned. I mean they had the shuttles, but even then...people weren't as excited anymore.

I was trying to figure out what to do, and I eventually got involved at the Hillel House in Ann Arbor. I'd gone to Hebrew School. I was involved within AZA, but I wasn't observant per se. I wasn't keeping kosher. I wasn't keeping Shabbat. I was interested Jewish-ly, you probably more from history and culture and tribal associations. But I wasn't observant at any real level. And someone invited me to go to Hillel, and they invited me and invited me and invited me. I'm like FINE! I'll go! If this will get you off my back. And I went to Friday night services, and I'd never really been to Friday night services before, because we'd go to my bubby's for dinner Friday night. So we had a Shabbat thing, but I'd never really been to Kabbalat Shabbat. Most of my associations with services were really High Holiday services. And I just thought they were kind of long, which they are. And here is Kabbalat Shabbat, and it's all singing, and it's being led by people my own age. I'd never seen that before. These were people who had gone to Jewish camps and day schools, and they're leading the service. Everyone there was my age. And then there's dinner afterward. And I said, This is wonderful. And my friend stopped going, and I just kept going. And I loved it.

And eventually, in my junior year, I was sort of at a crossroads in my life. Okay, Bergman, what are you going to do? And who do you want to spend your time with? And I'd been involved in some other organizations and doing some other things. And I said, Well, I really like the people at Hillel. And I like services, and I'd gone to all the classes and the learning. And actually even wound up majoring Jewish Studies there, which was still just a program. It wasn't even a department. You kind of jerry-rigged a number of classes together, and they called that the program. It's much more robust now, which is great. And I'm in the arboretum in Ann Arbor, and it's October 1983, and I'm just sort of sitting there, and I say, You know, Bergman? You ought to be a rabbi. Now I'd been studying Rabbi Heschel, Abraham Joshua Heschel. I'd actually first heard about him from Rabbi \_\_\_\_\_ Spector of Adat Shalom. And it's kind of funny for me with Adat Shalom because they used to have the AZA dances at Adat Shalom. So that was my first time being here. And then I went to a lecture he gave. And one of the rabbis he talked about was Rabbi Heschel, and I spent a lot of time at Border's Bookstore back when it was the only Border's, and it was in Ann Arbor. I saw the name, and I started reading the book, and it really spoke to me to a very large level. In fact I was lucky. Very recently I was able to tell his daughter how much he meant to me, and that was a good moment for me.

But I'm in the yarbi[sp], and I say, Well, you like studying Jewishly. You like the services. You like the people. Why don't you be a rabbi? And I said, okay. And I went home—or, I went back to my apartment—and I called my parents. And they were very surprised because I didn't belong to any particular denomination. I still wasn't keeping kosher or anything. I wasn't really living...and I'd, well, that's nice. Thinking, okay, that was another. But then I started really getting into it more. And I investigated a number of different schools. Paschal had taught at JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary. And even though he had since passed away in 1972, I said, well, that's going to be the place for me. And I liked their approach to things. And I applied, and they let me in. So that was a good....

DUBIN: What were those years like? I mean do you recall any particular experiences or professors who impressed you or classmates? What was that whole...?



BERGMAN: I loved being in New York to start with. I think the fact that it was in New York was a selling point. My father's first cousin is the one who did the "I ♥ NEW YORK" logo. So to have this odd connection. There were a number of professors there. Though, I say one I went into a class of... I grew up with the Lubavitch approach which is very powerful. But it has a certain point of view. And I took this class on midrash on Jewish sacred tales, and it just blew up my whole world. Well, because, you know, when I was growing up, you hear the story about Abraham and the idols and Moses and the coal[??] and the crown and all these stories. And I remember looking in the Torah itself later, looking for those stories, and I couldn't find them. And I'm thinking, well, we must have a defective Torah they've got in there. Little did I know that those were the midrash about that. And I grew up that there wasn't really a differentiation between these two things. And the professor said, "No, there's really a difference." And I remember going up to him, and I said, "Look, you've unraveled everything I've ever believed. Are you planning on replacing it with anything?" And he's like, Nope! But, you know, there was a gift, because it was a good place to struggle with ideas, to struggle with identity. It was a much smaller program than there was at the University of Michigan. I mean the entire JTS wouldn't have fit in the diogue[sp]—it would fit in the diogue at U of M. So it was a much smaller program.

But I liked it. You know the people were trying to make a connection between their knowledge, their belief, and their life, and those are not always the easiest things to reconcile. So I saw JTS as a good place to really grapple with issues. Though the best part is in the middle of the school year I got a new roommate, and he was involved in the Conservative minian[sp] at Columbia. And he asked me if I wanted to go. And I usually went to the one at JTS, and I said, Well, sure. You know he seems like a nice guy. I'll go. And I went there, and there was this young woman, a Barnard student, and she got up and made Kiddush, and we started talking. And she knew my roommate. And then we ran into each other at the JTS cafeteria at dinner that week. And that was because she mentioned that she would eat dinner at the JTS cafeteria, which I never did. I had an apartment; I would be there for lunch. But I started eating dinner there on the off chance. And we went out and got engaged six weeks later.

DUBIN: Gee. What was her name?

BERGMAN: That was it. Ruth, Ruth Weiss. She was at Barnard, and I was at JTS, and we met at Columbia—it's all in the same neighborhood. And it was just very obvious to me, and we spent our first year married in Israel, which was really nice. Part of the JTS program was studying in Israel for a year, and she studied education at Hebrew U. And because she had gone to a Jewish day school her whole life, she was able to take the Hebrew classes in the grad school at Hebrew U. Then we came back, and I finished up. My last year we decided that we were going to start our family and thinking about where would be a good place to raise the child. And I was just very lucky that West Bloomfield in Farmington Hills opened up. There was Faith Abram and Hillel Moses. And Hillel day school was looking to share a rabbi. And I was given the position, and that's how we wound up here. And even though my wife is from New Jersey, she also liked the idea of raising the kids near my parents and the grandparents.

DUBIN: Tell us a little bit about Ruth.

BERGMAN: I wouldn't have gotten through rabbinical school without her in a lot of ways. On, she could help me with my Talmud homework because she... I went to public schools, she went to day schools; so I didn't have quite the depth of background. I've caught up a little bit. But she is beautiful and bright and kind. And, you know, if you had told me a very quiet, nerdy, bookish me at 14 like it's going to be okay being married to her. So it worked out really nice. So we've been together for 30 years, and we'll be married for 29. You know her parents are survivors, too. My father-in-law was in Russia with the whole family. But they had to spend the war in Siberia. They had to flee from Poland. His father owned a chocolate factory in Poland, and they were very well off. And the family was actually on a ski vacation, and the soldiers said, "Look, don't go back to Poland. Just stay in \_\_\_\_\_ and drive to Siberia." Because the Russian Army was actually fairly good to Jewish families. So Siberia was a horrible place to be, but at least the family survived intact. And my mother-in-law, my wife's mother, was a hidden child for seven months. Her family survived, but, you know, it was very tough. So Ruth and I knew a lot about each other without having to really explain it. We each kind of knew what baggage we were carrying, and we could relate to things. And if sometimes we were affected by something that maybe wouldn't affect other people, like, oh, we get...like we understand each other's anxieties and mishegoss, you know, know where it comes from. But I wound up way better than I imagined that way. Good for you, Bergman. That was well done. Well done.

DUBIN: Alright. Okay. Let's get back to the family just a little bit then. Why don't you tell us what the life of a rabbi is like. [Laughter]

BERGMAN: You know it actually depends on the day. And as we were talking before the interview, I had the day all planned. And instead I had two funerals in four hours instead. But I feel that I can help. I think that's what drives me as a rabbi more than anything else. I have...all of my philosophy or my entire approach to rabbi comes down to: See every person as created in God's image. Be as humble as you can. And try to help. That's it. That's the whole thing. Everything else is kind of a variation on those things. So I have a schedule of what I think I'm doing for the day, and then sometimes things come up. One of the things that's interesting and challenging is that I have to be good at a very wide variety of things, in that I have to be able to do pastoral things...but then also to be able to write the eulogy in a way that is helpful and to give sermons and teach classes and work with a variety of age groups. But I really like that. I like the variety. I don't think I could do *a thing* all day every day. Some of the challenge is just being able to make it on time to everything as you never really know....

But part of the hard thing was I missed a lot of my kids' life growing up. That's been hard. Very often I would leave the house when they were little and they were still asleep. And I'd come home, and they were still asleep. You know, Shabbat is not Shabbat. I mean there's a couple hours here and there. But Shabbat isn't the day of rest. It beautiful, but it's just not that. Though we did try to keep the house as normal as possible for the kids. It's not obviously a rabbi's house. And my wife is a Jewish educator. So it's not obviously a Jewish educator and rabbi's house. It's obviously a Jewish house. So it has Jewish books, the dishes, all that sort of stuff. But we tried as much as possible to raise them where they pretty much have a reasonably normal, consistent life at home. But it's hard. It's always tugged at me. It was hard to plan things. Hey, we're going to the zoo on Sunday. Oh, and Mom's going to the zoo with you on

Sunday. And, you know, they assure me that I was there for them. But that was probably the single hardest thing, because you don't get those moments back.

DUBIN: Tell us about your daughters.

BERGMAN: So I have—we have—four daughters. My oldest, Rina, is going to be 26, and she graduated from Michigan State and got her master's from the Jewish Theological Seminary, which I was very proud of. And she works in Jewish education and with Jewish youth. And what's so interesting is that even though it's a very long tradition—and I thought that by being a rabbi, you know, it's just kind of not going to be changing as much as I saw things in high tech or medicine—it's a very different Jewish world, and in many ways it's very exciting. And so she's exploring opportunities of what this changing Jewish world might look at. You know, she's doing a lot of things in Brooklyn and Manhattan and some things in Connecticut. And, you know, trying to make a difference in a way that makes sense for her. And my daughter Shira graduated University of Michigan with a degree in materials engineering. And she is now at UC-Davis doing a Ph.D. in agricultural engineering. She is very interested in food chain and food supply issues. She's very environmentally aware, and she wants to figure out ways of cutting down the waste and cutting down the toxins and how do we protect people and protect the environment more? And she's actually driving a lot of the ways I think about nutrition. I've been a vegetarian for a long time, but I've become a vegan under sort of her inspiration. So it's interesting when you learn from your kids as well. So she's out at UC-Davis, which is a little bit of a schlepp, but a nice place.

My daughter Ariel is a junior at Michigan State, and she's doing interior design. But she's also very involved at the Hillel there and does a lot of programming and has taken on a lot of leadership and helps plan the annual State of Michigan Holocaust Memorial Service which is at the rotunda. And she did this all on her own. We never really tried to push the girls in any particular direction. In fact, we never even really made religious decisions for them once they were teenagers. If they wanted to go out on Shabbat or they were kosher/not kosher. I mean they're vegetarians. But we didn't want the arguments to be over what mattered to us so much. So we didn't really push hard on the religious stuff. And they've each kind of found their own way to it. But Ariel has really embraced those leadership roles, but is still going to be doing the interior design. She doesn't want to be a Jewish professional. But she wants to help in the community. And my daughter Rikki is a freshman at the University of Michigan in the residential college. And she wants to be an editor, but she really wants to work on social justice issues. Like she wants to do writing and editing for things that will make a difference in the world—in the whole world; especially social justice and human trafficking, all these things that I can't believe we're still talking about. So each of them is just amazing. All four of them are very different, but they're very much sisters. But, you know, I'm very proud of them.

My wife and I always thought about what we wanted to do was help them be the best version of themselves. And actually that came from an episode of a sitcom in the 'eighties called *Mad About You*. It was Paul Reiser and Helen Hunt, and they were this young couple in New York, and they had this dog named Murray. And they had never trained Murray. They just let Murray be. But Murray got into an incident and was forced to go to obedience school. And the couple said, "We are so worried that this obedience school is going to ruin their Murray-ness, his

essence.” So what we always talked about the girls is we made sure we don’t ruin their Murray-ness. Like we use that. We didn’t talk about their Rina-ness or Shira-ness. It was their Murray-ness. And not to mess that up. So we put a lot of thought into that. And sometimes it went better, sometimes worse. But at least they know we were trying.

DUBIIN: Mm-hmm. Their choices are wonderful choices.

BERGMAN: Yes.

DUBIN: One word that stuck out that you used was “change,” with your eldest daughter.

BERGMAN: Mm-hmm.

DUBIN: And I wonder how you observe the change that’s going on in the movement, in the Conservative movement.

BERGMAN: Yes. Well, the Conservative movement is changing, but in a way that all the other movements are changing to. And just the concept of movement is a very 19<sup>th</sup>-century idea as well. Where, you know, the movements really developed. But I think what happened in America is that the first generation—you know the immigrants who came here and the refugees who came here and the first-generation—there was a lot of anti-Semitism, a lot of doors were closed. There was a lot of fear. So synagogue membership was taken for granted. *Where* you were going to be a member was a matter of discussion, though in the early days a lot of it was divided between, you know, Galitziana[sp] and Hungarian and Lidvok[sp]. I mean they were sort of these ethnic cultural divisions among the early ones. And so a number of people joined synagogues because that’s simply what you did. There was nowhere else to go. It became your social life; it’s who your friends were. Israel was still in a very precarious position. Israel’s always facing challenges. But its existence isn’t as on the edge as where I think it was almost exactly 50 years ago when Nasser was rolling the tanks, you know, from Egypt. And they were going to destroy Israel. I mean Israel’s always going to have challenges. But it’s scary, but I’m not as worried. Like my own personal goal is to live long enough to see Israel’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I don’t really have a bucket list per se, because I’ve already.... Like things have already turned out way better than I imagined. So the idea of a bucket list sounds kind of selfish to me. I mean there’s stuff I’d like to do, but I don’t have a bucket list. But I would like to see Israel’s 100<sup>th</sup>. Just to kind of make it to that point.

But I think part of the challenge is now is that people aren’t as defined by any one identity. And this is in American life in general. People move between denominations, move between religions, issues of gender identity which become a big issue when how do religious denominations welcome or shun people depending on their own self-identity. So those are some of the challenges. Some of it is people don’t necessarily want a bricks-and-mortar. There’s so much online. But I really believe that people ultimately crave face-to-face actual human contact. I really do believe synagogues have a very important part of the Jewish life. But I think the synagogues that are actually welcoming and friendly but also offer substance and give members an opportunity to grow.

So I think there's always going to be a place. But the Jewish world has always changed. I mean if you look at Judaism from the Bible to the Judaism of the Talmud to the Middle Ages, it's always been evolving. I think that the difference is the speed that it evolves because of technology. And some of it is very good. I mean if you lived in a little village in Eastern Europe, the number of people you got to talk to in the course of your life outside of that village, very minimal. And now you can have communication with people all over the planet all the time. And you get to see different perspectives and different ideas. So I think it's actually a very exciting time. I think it's actually a great time to be Jewish. There are more materials available to people to study on their own. There's a project called Sefaria, which is like the Gutenberg project of Jewish texts. Open source. Every Jewish text essentially for all of history is available online for free. People are putting up translations. So I think that there's great access to knowledge. The rising anti-Semitism does make me nervous; because I can't believe that in the lifetime of survivors we're still talking about this. You know when I talk to my dad, he says he doesn't even know what to do with it. See what's happening in Europe.

But in terms of our day-to-day life, though, we have a State of Israel. We have America that is still committed to protecting people. There's lots to argue about and worry about. But I think America has been a place where we've been able to flourish, and I hope that continues and continues for other people as well. But it's going to be different. If you are just committed to your denomination, it might be rough going. But if you're open and sort of take people where they are and try to be helpful and be open to different things, I think it's an exciting time. So I'm looking to learn from my kids and see what works and what doesn't work.

DUBIN: When you take pride in your congregation, I was just wondering what gives you the most pride about it?

BERGMAN: What gives me the most pride is how many people come up and tell me what lovely members I have and what lovely people who work here. That they get that what we are trying to be is a synagogue, as a shul, where people...you know that the main thing is really a place where people feel safe and people welcomed. And they're really nice people here. I mean they really are. I'm not just saying that. I'm here because they're nice people. That's what attracted me to come here. When I spoke with Rabbi Nevins, my predecessor, the first thing I wanted to know is this an emotionally healthy place. And he said if he wasn't becoming dean of JTS himself, he would've stayed. And so I came, and I met the people. And I said, you know, I like these people. I always kind of measured a place not just by the programs and achievements—even though we have a lot of good things going on here—but do I want to see these people on a regular basis? And I come here, and, yes, I'm glad to see the people. Even the ones I'm not always glad to see, I'm still glad to see. It's still okay. It's what makes it a shul.

DUBIN: You still have that nine-minute limit on your sermons?

BERGMAN: Generally, yes. I try to keep it.... Part of my philosophy is that it's the length of time in between commercials on your average TV show. That's the best of people's attention spans. So maybe it's the length of a YouTube video. But my sermons are relatively brief though I spend hours getting them that brief. Because my sermons are in the context of a longer service. So they've already been there for a while. They're going to be there for a while. So I want to

kind of honor the fact that they're there and give them something very usable in a way that is nice for them. And that at the end of it they might say: Oh, you know, I actually did learn something and I can repeat it back. You know what's nice is that I get to give a couple of sermons a week in classes. So there's plenty of these opportunities.

DUBIN: You have done some work with other religious groups, I believe. I think you showed me a kippah that was given to you by some Muslims. Is that right?

BERGMAN: Yes. The Imam Ardeenia[sp], the American Muslim Center, we have developed a nice relationship with his congregation. I've done a lot of work, particularly Jewish-Christian relations, and now, increasingly, with Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations. I think it'd be important to bring in Eastern religions at some point, too. We talk about interfaith, but we really mean essentially like Western monotheisms. And I think there's a bigger world that we can kind of help each other... whether it's Hindu, Jainist, Buddhist. I'd like to do more with the interfaithless, so to speak, also. I think that there are a lot of people... Religious institutions can benefit from people who challenge religious institutions. And people who challenge it might be enriched if they were to feel welcome and not judged or sold something.

I think one of the reasons that the Jewish-Christian dialogue has improved over the years is not the least because of Vatican II, where Pope John XXIII said some very, very brave things about the Jewish people and their relationship to the Church. And then I believe it was Pope Paul VI and Pope John-Paul II and to our own day Pope Francis, whom I love, when he said, "Who am I to judge?" Really? It's in the job description. You can judge all you want. But that sort of compassion and that sense of openness. But also I find that within the Christian world, they've been having really good internal dialogues as well. And so that's been helpful. And I believe that the Muslim world... I see it even happening in Michigan that there's a lot of good work within the Muslim world among different groups, whether it's Sunni, Shia, whatever the groups might be. They have good dialogues with each other. So what I'm hoping is that as each group internally—and the Jewish community has had some pretty good dialogues though it's been a little bumpy here and there, but at least we still talk—the better each religion can talk to itself within, I think more than the interfaith work is possible. So that's what I've been seeing. But I try to be optimistic. I try not to give up. It hasn't always been good experiences. I've had some really, really terrible experiences. Not everyone is involved in interfaith to share the space. Some people are involved to prove that they are correct. But I keep going, and, you know, it's challenging. Some people are very supportive, some aren't. But I think the beauty of America is that we can have these dialogues in a place... that no other place in the world is doing it. And this isn't happening in the Middle East. This isn't happening in Europe. This isn't happening anywhere else. I think America might be the place where at least the conversation can happen, and I want to be part of the conversation.

DUBIN: Something that has occurred to a number of people is comparing the situation of the refugees from Syria with the Holocaust experience and turning away Jews during the war. Is there some resonance there?

BERGMAN: Well, there's a lot of resonance. I mean I think that America has always been a haven to refugees. I don't want to start differentiating between countries, because the whole

world is a mess. And I think if someone's life is in danger and they want to come to America and make a better life for themselves and to make America a better place, I think that that's what we have to make sure continues to happen. I mean obviously what's happening in Syria is horrifying beyond words. But there are so many places in the world now where, again, after the Holocaust, I can't believe we're having these conversations. A million or more in Somalia, you know, Chad, places in Asia, South America. Our own country where there's been so much violence and intolerance. So I think that America has to be open. I mean I think we have to know who's coming. I mean I would like to know who's in my house, you know. And my daughters would bring someone over, I'd like to know who they were. But I wouldn't say: Until you only bring exactly the kind of person I want to the house, you're not bringing anyone to the house. I can't imagine that. So I think as a country we have to stay with our arms open and our hearts open. And then I think we have to make sure that people who come to America because they really want to be an American, be part of it. But we are a worse country without refugees and immigrants. I mean we're not a country. In fact when I think about that and the Native Americans, how ironic they must find it when we talk about how horrible, what destruction refugees bring to this country. Really! So it's a very... it's sad that the situation occurs. What I had hoped is that there wouldn't have been these Syrian refugees. Syria is a beautiful country. It's got farmland. It's lovely there. I mean the whole Middle East, all of these places. But the fact that there's so much hate that's causing the crisis. That's the part I think we need to figure out as well. I mean how do we prevent the person from being displaced in the first place? I have my ideas.

DUBIN: The changes in the Conservative Movement are something that we talk about a lot. What observations do you have about how... I know you don't like to use the word "movement."

BERGMAN: Yes. Well, you know, the Conservative Movement has always tried to figure out how do you maintain the best of traditions within the world you're actually living in? And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how do you maintain traditions where our society does say that women should be equal? That we honor people who live their lives a number of different ways outside of the standard husband, wife, 2. whatever children. That the definition of who is a family, who is an individual, who gets to participate. The fact that most of the service is still in Hebrew is a challenge, but I believe that for the Conservative Movement Hebrew is a cornerstone. We have to help people become more comfortable in it even though we know that they're not. But we do offer.... Because for me the Hebrew across ces \_\_\_\_\_. If I go to a country where I don't understand the language but I go to a synagogue and it's Hebrew, I know what's going on. But I love the fact that a thousand years ago the person lighting chavis candles is saying the same blessing as my mother did. I think there is a power in that.

So how do you maintain that connection to the traditions with a 21<sup>st</sup>-century sense of morality? And I don't think the sense of morality is faddish. I think this has been evolving. I think that the idea of going back to women not having opportunities—I don't mean that they're mandatory. But I believe that choices and options are mandatory. What kind of marriages? Or what are we going to call a marriage? Or what are we going to call a family? And also the challenge is that we're living in a world where people don't rely on the synagogues for their social life necessarily. That they are far more likely to have in common with someone who isn't Jewish but went to maybe the same college and likes the same music and did the same things. As

opposed to, say, a Jew in the Middle East who doesn't speak a word of English and is not secular or educated. I think part of the challenge is how do we maintain connections within the Jewish people? But also not isolate ourselves from the larger world. And I think that Judaism is at its best when we learn from the larger world and the larger world learns from us. I think that's the same with Christianity and Islam: Is that we're better for who we are. But the difference between with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox and all the differences between these—and the humanistic and reconstructionist and renewal—is what is that balance between the traditional and the modern. Every group is struggling. But the question is how much? I think also the word “conservative” because it's become so politically loaded.... You know when you say now I'm a Conservative Jew, big C, small c, you're talking about the party, you're talking about the denomination, you know, so things.... I think just the term itself feels archaic in a way.

DUBIN: What would you substitute?

BERGMAN: You know I think about that a lot. I don't know. You know I almost think that it doesn't need a name. I mean I think that we're just Adat Shalom synagogue, and this is the kind of Judaism we practice. They've tried a lot of different names, but it's a very hard.... Maybe if someone wants to endow enough money, we can just call the movement after the name of that person, you know. We can call it the Stein or Cohn Denomination.

DUBIN: Not to jump around too much, but you did say that you would like to say something about Israel.

BERGMAN: Well, you know, I think a lot about Israel, and that I'm very lucky that I don't have any memories that don't involve their being an Israel. You know when I think that had there been an Israel when my father was a kid how different things would have been. I mean I probably wouldn't have been born, and I wouldn't have known. But for the first time in 2,000 years to have political independence where we can actually put our values into action... and it's very hard, it's very messy. It is very easy to be noble when you're a victim. There is very little moral ambiguity to victimhood. Moral ambiguity begins when you have power and you can make a decision. Now you can choose when you're being victimized how you're going to respond to it. But only when you have power, then you can really make very difficult moral choices. And now we say we've been having these values, and we've had these dreams, can we implement it? And Rabbi David Hartman always talks about Israel as the greatest laboratory ever there's been for the Jewish people. And he said something else that really resonated with me, is that he said, “God didn't give Israel to the Jewish people because of the Holocaust. Israel is the Jewish people's response to the Holocaust.” In that you respond by trying to build and to create. You know it wasn't to try to destroy the Germans or the other Nazis. It was trying to build a place.

But it's a very messy situation. I mean it's very challenging. It's polarizing in many ways. But the fact that there is an Israel to me is unbelievable. That you can go there, you can study there. Hebrew was brought back to life, and that it's just a language on the street. The food, the music, and culture. But helping people have that connection. And part of my challenge is that if I never say something critical about Israel, I get blasted by one side. And if I ever say something critical, I get blasted by the other side. And that if I don't say anything, I get blasted



by all of it. And that's just, you know, probably part of the trouble with the challenges of being a rabbi; that's part of it, and that's part of my contribution is trying to help manage these things. But I think that American Jews have something to offer to the Israelis in terms of insights and ideas. I'm just not sure playing it out in public newspapers is necessarily the best place, because there are too many people who want to use it: Ah, see we know how terrible you are. Even your own people say Israel's terrible. So trying to wrestle with those things. And who do you say is pro-Israel, who's not. It's very challenging. But I would rather have this challenge than not have an Israel and no challenge.

DUBIN: Now the camera can't see it, but in your office here we're surrounded by books, music, art. These are all important to your life.

BERGMAN: Yes.

DUBIN: And the paintings behind you are also yours.

BERGMAN: Yes.

DUBIN: So how do they figure in your life?

BERGMAN: Well, first, it's always been a part of my life. I mean there was always music and art and books in the house. So it's just very comforting for me, and I like to create things. And I like connecting things. You know I like connecting the word, the sound, and the music. So it allows me to express myself in different ways. Judaism is a religion of a lot of words. And most of what I do is word-oriented. So I love being able to create a piece of music or art that's just nonverbal. But what I've also learned, especially because I've spent a lot of time in education, is that there are a lot of people: they aren't verbal either, and they don't feel there's a place for them in Judaism, even though they're very spiritual, very intelligent, very passionate. And I find that if you show people and say: Look, you may not be able to, you know, read the prayers or study within Hebrew with great facility. But maybe you can make a picture, you can make a song. You can sing a song. You can look at a picture and try to figure out what is the spiritual. But I think with the physical as well. And I think that, you know, with sports and exercise and the yoga that uniting the physical and the spiritual—which we try to offer a lot of these things at Adat Shalom because everyone's got different strengths. And if we don't honor those, Judaism is a very lonely place. But I do a lot of painting. I create a lot of music. And I very often integrate Jewish themes even into the music: words from psalms. I put some of it online. But it's been a great outlet for me.

DUBIN: The children who are in your programs here, do they respond to the options of creating in different ways?

BERGMAN: Yes, we do offer a lot of things with art and music. That's been really important to me, that we offer those for the kids. And stories, even for the older kids. Everyone needs a good story.

DUBIN: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to put out there?

BERGMAN: You did a pretty good job.

DUBIN: Well, so did you.

BERGMAN: I'm very grateful to be part of this people at this part in our history. I feel that this is one of the most momentous shifts in the Jewish world in 2,000 years. Well, when you look at the fact that the most traumatic event in the last 2,000 years and the most politically-uplifting and significant event in the last 2,000 years all happened within ten years of each other: the Holocaust and the State of Israel. And I think this has impacted the way people pray, the way that people think about being Jewish. I believe that Judaism in general is in transition in some ways and in ways that we haven't seen since the destruction of Jerusalem and the transition from the Biblical period into the Rabbinic period. So I feel like history is going to look back at us a few hundred years from now and say: They were living in one of the most monumental and challenging times ever to be Jewish. So you had a State of Israel. You had America. What did he do about it? And that's what I try to do is come up for an answer that my descendants may hear someday and say: Alright. At least he tried.

DUBIN: Any life's lessons in there?

BERGMAN: That was it.

DUBIN: Perfect. Thank you.

BERGMAN: That you.

[End of Interview]