

Interview with Margaret Moers Wenig, class of 1978
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PART 1

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Elisa Glubok: [00:00:00] It is November 8 at 9:30 am, this is Elisa Glubok, class of 2014, and I am at Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Institute of Religion with Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, class of 1978. And so this is the second interview that you've given for the Brown Women Speak project and for anyone who might not have listened to that interview, would you mind speaking to your experience at Brown, what you concentrated in, what your life was like there?

Margaret Moers Wenig: I applied to Brown when I was 16. I didn't even tell my parents where I was applying, I guess I wrote a check myself for the application fee, I applied early decision and fortunately was admitted and never applied anywhere else. I entered Brown, this coming fall will be 40 years ago, it's hard, it's actually hard to even say that something was 40 years ago, but it was 40 years ago and I came to Brown because I wanted to study Religious Studies. That was my major and I never regretted it for a moment. It was an extraordinary department in those days, perhaps it still is, but in those days it was an extraordinary department and some of the teachers there left a lasting impact on my life. And because of Brown's flexible curriculum, I was able to spend almost all my time in the Religious Studies department, which in effect afforded me the opportunity of almost a graduate school education. I studied a few things outside of Religious Studies but I remember, I remember a graduate seminar in Bartok taught by Professor Ivan Waldbauer, who himself was Hungarian. I was terrified in that class, the other students were all graduate students and much more experience in music theory than I was, but he was very gracious to me and I remember the parties that he used to invite us to in which he would lay out a buffet with a huge bowl of grated horseradish and we would take a, a wiener, I would only eat beef, not pork, but, and he instructed us to dip them into the bowl of horseradish. In addition to majoring in Religious Studies, the Brown University Women's Minyan was central to my life. I was there probably every Saturday afternoon for 4 years and I also taught Hebrew school and Hebrew high school for the 4 years that I was at Brown.

EG: Were there any, so you mentioned particularly influential professors, friends, mentors, etc. – is there anyone in particular that you would like to speak about?

MMW: Sure. I had many superlative teachers at Brown, but the three who left the most lasting impressions were Rabbi Joel Zaiman, who was the Conservative rabbi in town and was an adjunct teaching Talmud in the Religious Studies department, Professor David Blumenthal who was at Brown for my first two years and then moved to occupy a chair at Emory and Professor Jacob Neusner. And I am still in touch with Professor Neusner

and Professor Blumenthal, less so Rabbi Zaiman, but but we do touch base every few years.

EG: Okay. So would you mind speaking a little bit about those three professors or mentors that you had?

MMW: Joel Zaiman who was an adjunct in the Religious Studies department teaching Talmud was also the Conservative rabbi in town and Talmud was not easy for me in the beginning, well, it was never easy but it was very difficult for me in the beginning, partly because I did not yet have the linguistic skills, the language skills, so it was slow going, but he was very patient, [05:00:00] and it was well worth it because the literature is so rich in argument and in the spinning out of ideas and I, given that both of my parents were lawyers and that kind of conversation took place at our dinner table on a regular basis, I became very comfortable in that in that setting. He was also a model as a rabbi, I was in, very much admired the work he was doing in his congregation and he was also exhibiting hospitality. There were occasions in which he would have us as students over to his home. I remember very vividly a Passover Seder in his home.

David Blumenthal was similarly hospital, David and his wife Ursula. I spent many Shabbat meals in their home and that was important to me as a young college student but it was also important to me as a Jew to see what Jewish home life was like. My parents are both Jewish but were not in any way observant of Jewish ritual or religious practices so this was very important for me to see what Jewish home life, especially on the Sabbath, could be like. And David Blumenthal also was very supportive of the work that Naomi Janowitz and I did in writing and compiling Siddur Nashim, which was our prayer book for women. I think the professor who had the most impact on me was Jacob Neusner who was a pretty controversial figure in the academic world, partly because he produced so many books, people were skeptical of how it was that he produced so many books, and because he was very critical of colleagues work, often in print and in acerbic letters and all of his students, all of us, were terribly afraid of him, but he was a magnificent teacher and I would like to give you a taste of Jacob Neusner as a teacher.

EG: I know that you've published a tribute to him so if you'd like to share that –

MMW: I would, very much. Through his example, he taught us discipline. He swam every morning, except for Shabbat and he wrote for hours every morning except Shabbat. His classes and appointments did not begin until the afternoon, when his morning of exercise and writing was complete. And I would imagine that he would employ the same restraint now in the age of cell phone and emails and not answer his phone, not send a text message, not read or exchange emails until his swimming and his writing was complete for the day. He taught us respect for one another's time. He did not begin his undergraduate seminars until every student was present and if you were 5 minutes late, he multiplied those minutes by the 30 people in the room and reminded you that you had thus wasted 150 people-minutes. He taught us the importance of clear and engaging writing. In his graduate seminars in which undergraduate thesis students also participated, every word of every student's thesis was read aloud and critiqued by the group and then

revised if need be and then read aloud again. In his undergraduate seminars, he'd draw a tombstone in the margins of a paper at the very point he became bored and stopped reading it. It was pointless to plead and say to him "the best part of the paper is on the next page!" As far as he was concerned, every sentence had to further the argument and propel the reader along. He taught us the value of hospitality by inviting every one of his students, graduate and undergraduate, Jew and non-Jew alike to his home for Shabbat dinner. He taught us the value of limits. Those Shabbat dinners and schmoozes afterwards ended when Jack indicated they were over and that the terminus was designated to ensure that he had time to spend alone with his wife. He valued good questions as much as learned answers. He taught us that good questions further scholarly inquiry. A good question perhaps more than anything made him smile and elicited his praise. He taught us the value of honest criticism. [10:00:00] He never gave gratuitous praise or offered words of encouragement just to bolster a student's self esteem. His criticism was direct and untempered. I experienced it as generosity and as an expression of respect, even love. He insisted that honest criticism be one of the things students had a right to expect from their teachers.

He taught us the value of hard work. He assigned a good deal of reading each week and expected us to master it, not to regurgitate fact but to discern methods. Thesis writing was on a strict schedule, if there were 5 students in seminar then each student read a chapter aloud every 5 weeks. Lateness or incompleteness was simply not tolerated. There were skills and experiences he knew we could not get at Brown in his classroom or on our own, so he sent all of his graduate students to study for a year in Israel at the Hebrew Union University in Jerusalem. And he insisted, even if those students of his who were studying ancient Judaism were not religious, he insisted that they all attend synagogue every Shabbat and holiday for a full year in order to experience a full liturgical cycle. All of his students were required to master the methodologies of what was then called history of religions, including anthropology and also to study the history of Christian thought. He cared for his students' careers. All of his graduate students worked as TAs and then instructors at Brown and sometimes also as teachers in the local Conservative Hebrew high school. He made sure each student had adequate funding to remain a full time student until his or her doctorate was completed. No student was allowed to go on the job market without a completed dissertation. Every student's thesis was publishable and was published and Jack never took credit or stole, never took credit for or stole his students' work or ideas.

Though he held little respect for most rabbis, he had great respect for some including Rabbi Zaiman. And he sent many of his students into the rabbinate. In the years that I was in Brown alone, I can think of 6 undergraduates who went to Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Danny Zemel, Howard Apothecar [?], Laurie Rutenberg, Shira Stern, myself, and Ted Lowitz, although Ted eventually chose another vocation. Jack sent us to the New York school specifically to study with Eugene Borowitz and Dr. Lawrence Hoffman. He cared for his students' personal lives, matchmaking from time to time, interviewing potential mates, and often officiating or participating in wedding ceremonies of his students, even if they were not held locally. He taught us to place our own work in a broad context by both allowing us to participate in his long-term scholarly projects and by teaching us how to articulate the place of our work in a broader scholarly agenda. He taught us to collaborate and help one another. His

graduate students were not given any reason to compete with one another for his attention or approval. They were expected to and did help one another with their work and to help the occasional undergraduate in their midst. If I recall correctly, they were not even allowed to apply for and compete with one another for the same job. He taught us how to think like historians. He taught us that reports in rabbinic literature of names and events did not qualify as history. Other sources were necessary to corroborate an event. This may seem obvious now but when Jack began writing history of the rabbinic period, this notion was revolutionary. He taught us to ask of any secondary source that purports to recount history “how do you know?” And he asked the same of us when we made historical claims. And even more revolutionary, he taught us that analyzing the forms of the Mishnah and the Tosefta, the Bavli and Yerushalmi and various midrashim was crucial to understanding their meaning. And he taught us that the worldview of the rabbis was a system of thought, not merely details about this matter or that. He taught us that a good American college education is not about the amassing of facts but of learning how to learn, acquiring methods of inquiry that we would practice every day of our lives for the rest of our lives. That’s the kind of education he gave us and it changed our lives.

EG: Thank you for sharing that, that’s beautiful. So we can continue by talking about some of the things that you discussed in [15:00:00] your previous interview and some of the things that might have struck you about what you said in 1989.

MMW: It was fascinating to me to listen to that interview. I was struck by many things in it, among them, the disparaging words I had said about the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. My impressions at the time of that interview were based solely on ignorance and I have since met many, many Reconstructionist rabbis who received an excellent education at RRC and who have become among America’s great rabbis of our time. That one of the reasons I gave for choosing rabbinical school over a Ph.D. program was that I wanted to work with people for years and years over the course of their lives, not merely for a semester for even for 4 years, is ironic because that is primarily what I am doing now, teaching at Hebrew Union College. And I do very much miss the long-term relationships that were possible in the congregational rabbinate. But even 24 years ago in that earlier interview, I confessed how much I loved teaching and that has remained a constant throughout my nearly 30 years in the rabbinate. I am much, much more aware now than I was then how different the needs of one learner are from the needs of another. And I struggle every semester to meet those individual needs and I often fail. That is an ongoing challenge.

I still write a lot but now mostly for publication, not for the pulpit, and I miss the immediate response one gets, verbal or non-verbal response, when delivering a sermon. Sometimes a reader of an article I’ve published will write to me with his or her reactions but those reactions are much less immediate and less numerous. So think for a minute, how often do you write to the author of an article you’ve read and share your reactions to the article? Um. I noticed in my interview of 24 years ago that I gave as one reason for choosing to go to Beth Am the fact that it had no religious school. Well, that’s ironic too because in the 1990s the number of our young families with children multiplied to the point at which I said that we must reopen Beth Am’s Hebrew school, which had been defunct for 2 decades or more. And we did and that project turned out to be one of the

most satisfying of my rabbinate. We educated a whole generation of children and we did it as a community and we did it with great love and commitment. And I think that our Hebrew school students gained the impression that Jewish life is something to grow into, not to grow out of.

EG: All right. Well... So what were some of your greatest joys and some of your proudest moments while at Beth Am and the Hebrew Union College?

MMW: Teaching at Hebrew Union College since January of 1985 has been a challenge every single semester. I keep learning what I'm doing wrong, which might vary from semester to semester. I keep learning more and more about homiletics and about liturgy, which are my two fields of teaching, and it's a thrilling and awesome responsibility to engage with students and really inspire them to connect with the material that we are studying. Some of them come like sponges, eager to absorb everything and some feel as though they're entering foreign worlds and they may come with wide open eyes or they may come with defensive shields, because the material is so new to them. Our students also carry a very, very heavy course load and are working, so finding a way to help them both do their academic work on a graduate level and also make, fulfill their other responsibilities is a constant challenge. I think my greatest joy in teaching here has been working in the School of Sacred Music, alongside extraordinary cantors and educators. I have for a few years been co-teaching a course with an [20:00:00] ethnomusicologist. We teach The Modes and the Liturgy for the High Holidays and I have always wanted to teach liturgy, partly through the eyes of the music that interprets it and in the past several years, that dream has been fulfilled. I have learned so much from my cantorial colleagues and that learning has frankly been nothing short of thrilling. I mentioned reopening Beth Am's Hebrew school – that did turn out to be something that I and the members of Beth Am were very proud of. It's awkward to talk about other things I'm proud of, it's awkward to toot one's own horn, but I hope that this will be of benefit to future women and that's the reason I will comply with your request. So –

EG: Thank you.

MMW: One of the things I'm proud of from my years at Beth Am is the fact that we, not just I, but we as a group revived a dying congregation and we kept it not only alive but lively, long enough to give the older generation a good last phase of their lives and dignified burials. I am proud of the pioneering work the congregation did in its outreach to lesbian and gay Jews, its education of other Jews in ways to do just that and in the need to support and in our own support of same sex marriage, and in our own conversations about people who are intersex, transgender, and transsexual. I am proud of the many worship and study experiences Beth Am shared with our host congregation, our Savior's Atonement Lutheran Church. I am proud of the coalition we built with Latino organizations in Washington Heights in order to support the building of new schools in the neighborhood, some of which the organized Orthodox Jewish community had opposed. I am proud of the wide-ranging liturgical innovations that Beth Am welcomed from me and that members of Beth Am contributed to, including the creation of a service of prayer and study for family members of people who struggle with mental illness. I am

proud that prior to my first sabbatical in 1990, I prepared members of the congregation to give sermons, lead prayer, lead services in the homes of mourners, conduct funerals, and they have continued doing so ever since. I am proud as I mentioned in my first interview of the focus Beth Am placed on relationships across generations. One of the most joyous epitomes of that was the bat mitzvah service and celebration in the congregation created for the 80th birthday of Edith Rabino, who since her childhood in Berlin had always wanted to mark becoming bat mitzvah, read from the Torah, and give a Dvar Torah. That she did and we did all the rest. We made invitations and sent them out, but we prepared a feast and our gifts for Edith from the congregation were carried by the children of the Hebrew school whom she had helped to teach as they marched down the center aisle at the end of the service. For most of these young children, Edith's was the first bar or bat mitzvah service they had ever witnessed, they were young at the time. One of our 8 year olds wrote a note to Edith saying, "I can't believe you did so good, you read Torah so good, I bet you've been practicing all your life. I can't believe I'll be doing this in 5 years." That was a sign that our children were noticing that there were adult Jews who studied all of their lives. I am also deeply grateful to Beth Am for members' very serious criticisms of my sermons. Do you want to hear more about that?

EG: Yeah, I would love to hear more about that.

MMW: I -- these are some of the -- I have a terrible, terrible memory, but these experiences were seared into my memory. I think one of the first times I was sorely taken to task was the year that President Reagan visited Germany and went to a military cemetery in Bitberg. Many of my congregants or certainly most of the older congregants had been refugees from Nazi Germany and they came to synagogue that Friday night [25:00:00] expecting the rabbi, who was me, to denounce Reagan's visit to that German cemetery. I had not prepared to do that, I had prepared a sermon on the weekly scripture reading and I didn't think that I had anything to add to the outrage that I knew my congregants already felt. After the service, we had a tradition of sitting down with our coffee and tea and Entenmann's and discussing the sermon for an hour after the service. And during that hour, they tore me apart; limb by limb they ground me into the floor. And that taught me a really valuable lesson which is that before the rabbi can earn the right to place a subject on the agenda of the people in his or her congregation, the rabbi has to demonstrate that he or she cares about the issues that the members of the congregation have on their own agendas. And I will never forget that even though I did make a few more mistakes in that regard, of which I will tell you. In 1990 I wrote a sermon imagining God as a woman who was growing older. It was based on a text in the Machzor, in the High Holiday prayer book, and wove together a lot of texts that were found in that liturgy. That was my Rosh Hashanah evening sermon and for Yom Kippur day, which would be my 4th sermon, I was planning to speak about the scud missiles that were falling on Israel at the time. But my congregants didn't know what that 4th sermon was going to be about and on the receiving line Rosh Hashanah evening, one of my members, very, very small elderly woman with a heavy German accent, came up to me and said, "When scud missiles are falling on Israel, how can you speak about God?"

EG: That's a very difficult question to answer.

MMW: Another profound lesson I learned was, I think it was towards the end of my first year, so it must have been 1985, and it was the Sabbath prior to our annual meeting and at the annual meeting, I began this custom of laying out goals for the coming year and in subsequent years I would look back and review to what extent we met or didn't meet those goals. So, I was trying, I would always use the Sabbath before the annual meeting to set that up. This year I wanted to take all the grief that members had been expressing about how much they had lost. They had lost their Hebrew school, which had been filled with 200 children in its heyday and had closed 20 years earlier. They had lost their rabbi of 27 years who was forced by health concerns to retire. They had lost their building and many of the members had moved away and some were beginning to die. So they were looking back and bemoaning what they had lost. But at the same time, younger people were beginning to move to Washington Heights because real estate prices in the Upper West Side for example where they otherwise might have lived were getting higher and higher, pushing them further north. I wanted to try to acknowledge the losses my congregants had experienced but also turn their attention to the future towards the possibilities for the future. And so I used the text from Isaiah in which the Prophet imagines a new shoot growing from the stump of a grand old tree and that new shoot is called a netzer. And I spoke also about Jews in a DP camp right after they were liberated from concentration camps, who having lost everything imagining forming a kibbutz in Palestine. They formed a garin, a seed for a kibbutz, which they did eventually establish, and they named that kibbutz Netzer, the shoot that grows from the stump of the old tree. And I invited [30:00:00] my congregants, though they had lost so much to, like the Jews in the DP camp, to imagine a future for themselves, for our congregation, and to dream of what they would like to see Beth Am be 5 years down the road. The service had just ended, I hadn't even closed my prayer book, and another very, very petite woman with a beautiful head of completely white hair came storming down the center aisle and confronted me right at the podium and said, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Rabbi, I don't want to think about where Beth Am will be 5 years from now, because I don't know if I will be around, I don't know if I will be alive 5 years from now." The happy ending is that Doris Doakes was alive not only 5 years later but at least a decade later and she helped us to reopen the Hebrew school whose closing she had very much bemoaned.

And there was, well, I'll just tell you one other story. We have a text in our High Holiday liturgy that says, translated into English, "repentance, prayer and righteous deeds can mitigate the the worst of a severe decree," such as a diagnosis of cancer. And I was quoting people like the physician Bernie Siegel, who talked about the value of friendship and laughter and other things like that. I think he even claimed that laughter boosted one's immune system. And after the service, a physician in the congregation, a Dr. David Markowitz came up to me and said, "I'm glad you're not my doctor." And from that I learned that whenever I plan to speak about a field in which I am not an expert, I will consult with experts, and not just read not just read books, but actually be able to speak and ask questions of and be corrected by live experts. And I also learned from that that there are occasions on which I need to allow the experts, [00:15:00] or not allow, invite the experts to speak for themselves. And from that point forward, on Yom Kippur afternoon, four members of the congregation whom I had invited a month and a half

earlier spoke in response to the sermons that I gave and were free to take issue with or completely disagree with the sermons I had given over the high holidays. And that was a completely stimulating process.

EG: Well, you mentioned a lot of different things, that there, well, you're talking about lessons that were learned over many, many years, so that makes a lot of sense and like one of the things that I noticed in your earlier interview was that you talked about connecting generations and how meaningful that had been, especially in your anecdote about the bat mitzvah and the 80-year-old woman and the children in the Hebrew school. In terms of connecting generations and also you mentioned your support of the LGBT community through your vocation, I was just wondering what that has been like for you and especially I know that you started your work with that in the 1980s which I can imagine presented incredibly different challenges that it would today. Specifically, I'm wondering in the Jewish community what what the reception has been by the congregation and has that, that might have changed throughout time and what your role in that has been?

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Part 2

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EG: [00:00:00] So would you please speak to what your role in LGBT outreach has been? And how that's changed over time?

MMW: This is ... a very moving day for me to hear you ask that question because yesterday the Senate passed ENDA, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, a version of which was introduced in 1974 by New York Representatives Bella Abzug and Ed Koch. And then another bill more narrow in its scope, applying only to employment, not also to accommodations and facilities, was introduced in 1994 and one version or another of that bill has been before the Senate every single year, except for one, since 1994. The Senate passed it yesterday 64 to 32, with 10 Republicans crossing the party divide, and even though the bill is unlikely to uh pass the House or even be brought up for a vote in the House, because Speaker Boehner is unlikely to permit it to be brought before the House, still, its passage by the Senate for the first time is an extraordinary indication of where this entire country has come in its appreciation of the rights of GLBT people. In 19-- in 2007, for example, the bill that Barney Frank introduced, the ENDA bill that Barney Frank introduced extended this protection to people whose gender identity was not conforming to the norm and he ended up having to withdraw that provision because of the fear that the bill wouldn't pass if gender identity were included. And many people in the GLBT community were very, very upset that that provision was withdrawn. That it was reintroduced in 2009, that transgender people are now covered by ENDA, well, will be covered by ENDA if it becomes law, but were covered in this bill, and that the bill passed with such a high margin even with coverage for gender identity is really just an extraordinary sign of social and legal and political change in this country. It is poignant for thousands and thousands of us so when I speak about the ways in which it's poignant

for me, I don't mean to suggest that it's poignant only for me, but just to give you a concrete example, it was 1985 when I first spoke from the pulpit asking members of Beth Am to support the passage of New York's Lesbian and Gay Rights Bill. 1985. There was no hope of federal protection at that point and there was a question of whether we would get it even in New York because the bill had been uh introduced many, many times before this, it did finally pass, I believe in 85. But to see this change in those in those almost 30 years has been almost like a miracle for me.

Also in 1985, when just a year after I was ordained, it was still not possible for an openly gay let along transgender Jew to apply to Hebrew-Union College and be honest about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Students who [00:05:00] were in the closet and applied and were admitted feared the entire time that they were here that they might be expelled and did not have hope of being able to be employed as rabbis if they came out of the closet and the placement director in 1984, I believe, no it was 1985, warned the senior class that if any member, even if they were straight and married and you know there was no question in their minds about their sexual orientation, if any member of that class applied to work as a rabbi in a gay outreach synagogue, it would probably be very difficult for them to get a subsequent job in a mainstream congregation because they would be presumed to be gay themselves. In response to that fear, Margaret Holub who was then a 4th year student I believe, 4th year rabbinical student, she and I wrote a resolution which I submitted to the resolutions committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, calling on the movement, calling on the Central Conference of American Rabbis to endorse the ordination of qualified lesbian and gay Jews and in lieu of bringing that resolution to the floor in 1985 because it most surely would not have passed, the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis at the time, Rabbi Jack Stern, asked us if we would withdraw the resolution if he would establish a task force to study the issue. The task force was established and I served on it until its work was concluded in 1990. And in 1990, the Central Conference of American Rabbis did indeed endorse the ordination of lesbian and gay Jews. And now there are many, many lesbian and gay rabbinical students, rabbis, out there, and there are even transsexual, transgender, and intersex rabbis who are who are able to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity. And that's, strikes me as a miracle. It's not a miracle in the sense that I know how much effort went into bringing about those outcomes, how much human effort went into bringing about those outcomes, but I guess I would say the timeframe to me even feels like a miracle. Yes, it took from 1974 to 19, to 2013 to get the Senate to pass any version of ENDA but that was all in my lifetime. I didn't know that I would live to see these goals achieve. So that's what feels like a miracle to me.

In 1985, I began to speak from the pulpit about AIDS, at the time I was a volunteer visiting people with AIDS in hospitals, hospice, or in their homes. It was a time when many clergy were still claiming that AIDS was a punishment for sin and so the gay community needed to recruit clergy who wouldn't come in to a hospital room with that message. So I began speaking about AIDS in 1985. In 1987, the camp doctor and I put together a program at Camp Eisner, one of the Reform movement camps, for a high school class, high school cohort about safe sex and AIDS education. I'm pretty sure we were the first to do that. And I began speaking in 1985 with members of Beth Am about welcoming lesbian and gay Jews into our own congregation [00:10:00] explicitly not just

implicitly. And that was initially something of a struggle. I wanted and some of the gay members of the congregation who had come because they had heard about me, we all wanted to be able to put in Beth Am's brochure, now it would be the website, that we specifically welcome lesbian and gay Jews, and we heard many objections, such as "if we put that in our brochure, people will think that we are a gay synagogue" and other similar objections. But eventually the congregation opened its doors and its hearts and its home and its committees and its board to lesbian and gay Jews. When there were enough, we began travelling in the New York area, including New Jersey and Westchester and Connecticut and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and to camps and to synagogues and to regional regional meetings of the Reform movement to speak about what it is like for congregations to welcome lesbian and gay Jews and how important that is and why it is important to lesbian and gay Jews. I remember visiting a Conservative congregation in Philadelphia where, during the question and answer and feedback part of our presentation, one woman raised her hand and said, "I don't mind if my rabbi officiates at a same sex wedding as long as my children never know about it." In other words, as long as there's no mazel tov published in the bulletin, as long as the rabbi doesn't invite the couple up for a Shabbat before their wedding. And I asked her why? Why don't you want your children to know that that the rabbi is willing to officiate at a same sex wedding? And she said, "Because I want to stack the deck of favor of my children coming out, turning out straight." And it was, those conversations had to be had, we had to have those conversations wherever we went, to change minds. They had to see, that woman had to see the doctor and the professor and the rabbi on the panel who didn't look creepy and had long term relationships and who were raising children um, they had to see that we were human, not monsters who would prey upon their children or steal their wives or their husbands away from them. And the movement did, the Reform movement and now the Conservative movement have both come to welcome lesbian and gay Jews and to endorse legal marriage for same sex couples and to endorse religious ceremonies for same sex couples, so that too has been just extraordinary for me to see in my lifetime. I also I also began well --

EG: So you were a pioneer for this movement – what are some of the ways in which your work was pioneering and can you offer some more specific details about that?

MMW: Well, providing pastoral care for people with AIDS in 1985 and speaking from the pulpit in 1985 about AIDS, that was pioneering, um, asking our congregation to become welcoming of lesbian and gay Jews and observing every year lesbian and gay pride Shabbat, beginning in 1987, that was pioneering for a non-gay synagogue. In 1988, I appeared on the ABC daytime soap opera "All My Children," with three Christian colleagues. We played ourselves as members of this pastoral care team and people across the country called me and said "oh my gosh, I was home for lunch and I turned on the television and there you were." I had never watched the show, I didn't know that anybody I knew watched the show but I found out. [15:00:00] We published guidelines for welcoming lesbian and gay Jews and those guidelines were reprinted in Reform manuals, Reconstructionist manuals and Conservative manuals. I officiated at a Jewish wedding of two men in 1991 and I'm sure that I wasn't the first rabbi to do that but I

think that that was pretty early, pretty early in the process, um. I uh I was among the first, maybe the first rabbi to come out in a non-GLBT congregation and retain her job. There were other rabbis, friends of mine actually, who had been outed and who were either fired or forced to resign but in 1992 I came out and my congregation was very supportive. My favorite uh piece of support that I received came from a man in his 80s, um, very heterosexual man who rarely spoke, he was a carpenter and he built things for the congregation but he didn't speak a lot. He actually called me on the telephone for the first time ever and he said to me "Uh, Rabbi, I just want you to know that I know how you feel. Because I love women too." It was, it puts a smile on my face to this day. I began advocating for same sex marriage in 1995 and I think that the chapter that I wrote for the festschrift for Rabbi Alexander Schindler before his retirement that was published in 1995 may be the first published piece by a rabbi arguing on behalf of same sex marriage.

And then in 2002, my eyes were opened and I had to learn a great deal more when I was asked to lead a seminar here at Hebrew Union College about gender identity. And I did read so many books and so many articles. I compiled them into a reader, which is about 4 inches thick that sits on our library shelf here. And in 2002 organized a school wide seminar here at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion that had a panelist who spoke about legal issues, it had a transgender person who spoke from personal experience and we taught rabbinic texts and Biblical texts that pertained to aspects of gender identity. I repeated a similar seminar the following year at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and in 2005 created a day long workshop at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the gay synagogue in New York with a transgender rabbinical student and there had been transgender members of that congregation who met up among themselves, but I think that was the first time their issues were aired before the whole congregation and I began publishing on this issue in a chapter in Torah Queries and a chapter in Balancing on the Mechitza. And now happily I have handed over that work to people who are themselves transgender who know are able to speak for themselves, they don't need allies like me to speak on their behalf, they can speak for themselves within in the Jewish community and and be hired as rabbis, as Reuben Zellman has been and be given back her teaching position as Joy Ladin has been at Yeshiva University Stern College for Women.

EG: [20:00:00] That's really incredible and I, I was just wondering particularly about in terms that you mentioned at the time that you came out to the congregation, that they were very supportive and that your colleagues and other rabbis had, had not had a similar experience. I was wondering what you think might have caused that difference?

MMW: Time. Time. The friends of mine who are rabbis who lost their jobs, they lost their jobs before I came out, they lost their jobs before the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed that 1990 resolution. It actually wasn't a resolution that was passed, it was a report from the committee that was accepted. So they paid a price, which ultimately benefited the rest of us. Now, some of them remained in the rabbinate. Rabbi Stacy Offner lost her job as an assistant rabbi in a Twin Cities congregation, but many members of that congregation left because she was forced to retire and they formed a new congregation and invited her to be their rabbi and I think she served there for 25 years. So

some left the rabbinate but some were able eventually to make careers as out gay rabbis in the Reform and now Conservative movements and of course Reconstructionists, they were actually ahead of us, ahead of the Reform movement on this.

EG: And I think one of the conversations that I've heard over the past few years has been the importance of leaders and ... especially for a community that includes people of all ages, and like you said, you were having conversations with parents and --

MMW: [inaudible]

EG: Yeah.

MMW: Elisa, you asked what made the difference and I said time, but I wasn't specific about what filled that time.

EG: Yeah.

MMW: You're absolutely right, there were leaders, there were advocates, there were people who were coming out to family members. All of that helped. I would say two other things helped us, though they were both sad things. One of which was AIDS, because AIDS forced many men, gay men who were dying, to come out to their families. I guess forced, I don't know if that's fair, uh maybe they chose to come out to their families at that point because they wanted their partners to be recognized as partners, they wanted their gay friends to be able to share in the creation of memorial services, they wanted to be buried with their partners, they wanted to uh leave their what they had by way of an estate to their partners. So AIDS did bring many families to the realization that they had a gay son or a gay brother or a gay uncle, and it's horrible that so many have died from this terrible disease but but it did advance the coming out process tremendously. And another thing that's horrible but helped us was discrimination. And even when people could not understand why a man would want to be sexual with another man or why a woman would want to be sexual with another woman, even when they couldn't imagine that, it grossed them out, it disgusted them, they didn't want to think about it, they never wanted their children to do that, they could begin to appreciate that discrimination was wrong.

And it was actually the Sisterhood of Reformed Judaism which is now called the Women of Reform Judaism, who first passed a resolution calling for the repeal of anti-sodomy laws or sodomy laws that made sodomy illegal. And then and then... people began losing their jobs as they came out or as police officers entered their home and found them [25:00:00] committing this illegal act of sodomy and if you have a family member or college friend who loses his or her job simply because he is in love with a man or she is in love with a woman, um, you begin to realize how wrong that discrimination is. The discrimination was happening for decades, centuries before this, but if you didn't know that the person was fired because that person was gay, then you didn't realize that the discrimination was taking place. Here's an example. An elderly German refugee in the congregation who was pretty probably pretty conservative in her social values was not when a gay member of the congregation was beaten up on the

streets of Washington Heights by a gang of teenagers who pursued him and beat him up because he was gay. And when that happened, members of the Sisterhood in our congregation made food for Barry, brought food for Barry, called him, supported him emotionally, and uh Betty said to me, "I know what it's like to be beaten up in the streets because of who you are." As a German refugee, she knew that. And so on that level she could identify with the unrighteous discrimination and violence that gay people had to endure.

EG: And that is another way that you can create connections across generations whereas maybe members of the congregation who are part of older generations that probably knew gay and lesbian people but most likely those people weren't out, so like... framing the understanding in a way that is accessible, even though she might have had different opinions about that, she was able to understand because of her own experience.

MMW: That's right. If Barry had not been out to the congregation and he was just beaten up... People in the congregation would have assumed that it was a mugging and there are lots of muggings in the city and they wouldn't have thought a whole hell of a lot about it, they certainly wouldn't have considered it a hate crime or a form of discrimination. It was only because Barry was out at Beth Am that people could see that the beating he endured was a form of discrimination, was a hate crime, simply because of who he was.

EG: And I think that that is part of what makes coming out very, very difficult even if it contributes ... there's still this experience of discrimination and now it's something that everyone knows about, but...

[End of audio section]

Part 3

File name: pemb000559_3

EG: [00:00:00] So at Brown and beyond, you written prayer books and sermons, about and for women, what were your motivations in writing these and what has the response been?

MMW: When I applied to Brown to study Religious Studies, I was 16. I knew at that point I wanted to be a rabbi, I was, I had tremendous respect for a rabbi with whom I had been studying for three years and I even wrote in my application to Brown that I wanted to become a rabbi. What I didn't know was that at the time there were no women rabbis, at the time I wrote the application, there were no women rabbis. There was a woman who was a rabbinical student, but I didn't know that. And she hadn't yet been ordained. It didn't occur to me that women couldn't be rabbis because my mother was a lawyer, her mother was a professional, my aunt was a professional, I was raised to believe that women could do anything that we wanted to do, I didn't know that some professions barred women, so I was very naïve about that. But when I arrived at Brown and was exposed to a more observant form of Jewish practice, I immediately realized the extent to which women were discriminated against and and joined the Women's Minyan because

in the quasi-Conservative Shabbat morning at Hillel, women were not allowed to read Torah, were not given aliyah to the Torah, and were not allowed to lead the service.

So I joined this Women's Minyan that had been formed shortly before I arrived at Brown, where we granted ourselves the permission to read from the Torah and to lead the service. So it was partly for those women that Naomi compiled Siddur Nashim. It was never published but it was circulated, it was widely circulated, it received a good deal of press, and it was I believe the first prayer book in the Jewish world that used feminine imagery for God. And that was, needless to say, controversial. When I was a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, and leading services here for the students and faculty in 1979, I think, I very, very fleetingly used a feminine pronoun for God and during the discussion afterwards, discussion slash critique, one of my teachers accused me of idolatry and pagan worship. So my motivation my motivation was pretty strong to counter those sorts of attitudes. In 1990 uh that sermon that I gave when the scud missiles were falling on Israel, I entitled "G-d is a Woman and She is Growing Older."

It began inviting people to imagine G-d as a woman who is growing older, explaining that all our images for G-d are inadequate and frankly to my surprise that sermon ended up being re-printed ten times, twice in German translation, not my own and re-delivered by rabbis not only over this country but even in Australia, somebody sent me a cassette tape of a rabbi in Australia preaching that sermon. Not only have rabbis given that sermon from the pulpit, but so have pastors and ministers and I still uh to this day receive emails from people saying [00:05:00] "I just heard your wonderful sermon delivered by my rabbi or my minister, this year on the High Holidays or you know on this occasion or that occasion," and I also sometimes meet seminary students from Christian seminaries whom I'd never met before who come up to me and see my nametag and say, "Oh, I know you, you wrote "G-d is a Woman and She is Growing Older."" And I say to them "How would you know that?" And they say, "Oh, we studied that sermon in our seminary in our homiletics class." So I was fortunate again to grow up at a time when feminism was burgeoning, just burgeoning. There were many feminist Jewish organizations. There were Jewish feminist scholars who were publishing and speaking widely. I benefited from their pioneering work and my mother's and my grandmothers' pioneering work as professionals who were also wives and mothers.

EG: So you talked a little bit about how this sermon, "G-d is a Woman and She is Growing Older," had a really wide reaching effect that you might not have anticipated and I was wondering why you think that might have been, if you, why it's something that has resonated so widely.

MMW: Elisa, I'm probably not qualified to answer that because the people who are qualified to answer that are the people who preach the sermon in their own congregations or who assign the sermon for their own students to study in the homiletics class or the editors of books and journals that reprinted it. So I would only be guessing, but here are my guesses. One is that it was written ... as poetry in the sense that it, it sounds pleasing to the ear to hear it spoken aloud. It honors the aging and the aged which I think was much needed at the time, now fortunately people like Rabbi Dayle Friedman have created institutes and trainings sessions for honoring aging and providing pastoral care for the aged and rich life experience in their 70s, 80s, and even 90s. That was less so the case in

1990 when I gave the sermon. And I also think that people were hungry for new images for G-d and while the Reform movement was creating gender-neutral prayer books instead of speaking of G-d as king, as sovereign, instead of speaking of G-d as father, they would speak of G-d as parent. They would use source of life or source of the universe as a name for G-d, but those are all somewhat abstract and I created a midrashic narrative that was very concrete, you could see it in your mind's eye and I think that was, I think people needed and welcomed that attempt to imagine G-d in a fresh way. [whispering] I also should speak about mental illness, ask me a question about people with mental illness.

EG: So you also mentioned that one of [00:10:00] the things you were really proud of was working with family members who had family members who had mental illnesses and I was wondering if you could speak as to your experience with, with that.

MMW: People who struggle with mental illness and family member of people who struggle with mental illness have tended to remain in the closet about the mental illness they or their family member is struggling with because there's a lot of shame associated with mental illness. I value the coming out process not just for LGBT people but for other who are forced into hiding by shame or discrimination. I think coming out is extremely valuable, not only for the person who's in the closet or the whole family that's in the closet but for everybody else who can benefit from learning from the experience of the person who has been in hiding.

One member of Beth Am had a sister who was schizophrenic. That schizophrenia had a huge impact on my congregant's life and on her family's life. Her sister died of cancer and Miriam and I talked about how to honor her sister's life. There was no funeral, the family didn't want a funeral, so at the end of Shloshim, a 30-day period of mourning, Miriam and I created a ritual for family members of those who are struggling with mental illness and the ritual was maybe an hour and half long, took place in someone's apartment. It involved studying texts, there are rabbinic texts about mental illness, some of which are very helpful. We studied texts, we recited prayers, and woven in this service, woven in among the prayers were first person testimonies that we had drawn from an extraordinary book called "When Madness Comes Home."

And I invited members of the congregation whom I knew from confidential conversations either struggled with mental illness themselves or with a family member's mental illness. And I asked them if they would be willing to read these first person testimonies so that they wouldn't have to reveal their own experience, but I thought that they would be better people to read aloud the first person testimonies of others than someone who had absolutely no experience with this at all. And the service was very moving. At the end of it, people who were there, many people who were there literally lined up to speak to Miriam and to speak to me, we were at different corners of the room. There were lines of people waiting to speak to me and waiting to speak to Miriam to tell us of the mental illness that they had struggled with and that family member had struggled with. So I knew that there were a handful of people in the congregation who were affected by mental illness. I did not know about all these others. I did not know about all these others. And when Miriam and I repeated this ritual at a conference run by an organization then called Synagogue 2000, now called Synagogue 3000, the same thing

happened. People lined up to tell us about their own, the ways in which mental illness has affected them and their families.

EG: You also mentioned to me that you and some others from the congregation went to the psychiatric care unit at – I'm not sure which hospital, [15:00:00] but you can, would you mind telling me about that experience and what exactly you did?

MMW: After Miriam and I created this ritual, the congregation became aware of how many of us were affected by mental illness in the family and for the next few years, members of the congregation and I, a small group, went to a psych unit in a nearby hospital and conducted abbreviated Rosh Hashanah services, Yom Kippur services, there and ever blew the shofar. And then after we had done that for a couple of years and I guess the people on the unit, the staff on the unit, trusted us somewhat, they gave us permission to escort some of their patients to Beth Am to be part of our services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In addition, here were other people with disabilities in the congregation. The first bat mitzvah we had before the school reopened was the bat mitzvah of a young girl who is deaf and her father was deaf, so we found a way to to teach her. She was able to read from the Torah and her teacher who may have already known sign language brushed up on her sign language or learned sign language for this purpose. And uh while this family didn't sign, we did use sign language on certain occasions and we bought assistive listening devices, both for those who suffered from hearing loss and either congenitally or because of increasing age. And those hearing devices were very, very important to members of the congregation. And I also learned how to speak in such a way that those who read lips could read my lips. I remember once being told that the microphone I was speaking into was in the way and somebody who needed to read my lips couldn't see them because the microphone was in the way, so those sorts of concrete things we had to learn.

EG: And I'm just curious, in terms of the one girl you mentioned who learned to read from the Torah, did she – what, I don't know how involved you were in teaching her, in learning Hebrew for reading from the Torah, I imagine that there are other difficulties presented in learning a different alphabet and –

MMW: Well, she learned Hebrew almost the way she learned English. She wasn't deaf from birth, but she lost her hearing at a very young age so she had never spoken as an elementary school student or as a high school student or as a college – you know, she had never, I think she was 16 when she wanted this bat mitzvah, but she had never spoken as, spoken English as a hearing person except for the English that a very young child can speak and her father read lips, she learned to read lips, she went to a special school that had teachers who were trained in teaching students who were deaf, so she learned Hebrew the same way she learned to read in English. And I wasn't the one to teach her Hebrew, that was a member of the congregation, Nina Neshet. I worked with her on the speech she was going to give, she's brilliant, [20:00:00] she exhibited no disabilities when it came to expressing herself in writing and then and then uh speaking her words to the congregation.

EG: Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience with people with, with disabilities in the congregation?

MMW: I can talk about a homeless man.

EG: Okay, would you mind telling me more about that?

MMW: It's recording?

EG: Yeah, yeah.

MMW: There were many people in the congregation who had a commitment to social justice or even liberal politics. There was a homeless shelter in the neighborhood and some of us from the congregation helped staff the homeless shelter. There was a food pantry and we would collect food and some even helped staff the food pantry. One Friday night, I had invited a panel from the Coalition for the Homeless to come speak to our congregation about the experience of being, experiences of being homeless. And one of the panelists was a man named Patrick Flanagan. He so loved the service that he never left. He kept coming back week after week after week for services and he became an active volunteer in the congregation. He was befriended by members of the congregation while he was still living in a shelter. And sometimes he would lose his bed in the shelter and be on the streets and he would still come to services and people were still very glad to see him there. At one point, one of our members was leaving the city for a number of years and offered Pat his apartment and agreed to take only what Pat could afford to pay on the public assistance he was receiving. So Pat lived in Michael's apartment for a while until Michael was forced to give up that apartment. Another member of the congregation worked very closely with Pat to help him go through the application process for permanent housing and while that was very difficult, when Pat was not taking his medication, he was very difficult to deal with, but he did end up in permanent housing and he's still coming to Beth Am almost 30 years later.

EG: Wow. So now I'd like to ask you when did you realize you were a lesbian and what was your coming out process like?

MMW: I smile, Elisa, at that question for two reasons. One, because I know that as a matter of principle, there are many gay people who don't want to talk about that except with those they are close, those with whom they are close, probably wouldn't speak this way to a reporter or for an interview that's going into an archive. Some do, some are very willing to, and some won't. And I also smile because I hope that X number of years from now, nobody will be asking that question any more. It won't, there won't be a big story to tell about one's coming out. Unfortunately in my case, there is something of a story to tell and I will start with Brown. I had been attracted to girls from the time I was young. I thought nothing of it, I thought it was nothing more than friendships, young girls have strong bonds of friendship with one another. I was at Brown in the 70s. I learned many years later that there were a lot of gay people at Brown even in the 70s, [25:00:00]

though they probably weren't for the most part out, um, unfortunately I didn't meet any of them and that's, in one sense, it's a shame, I wish that I had come out in my teens or 20s. On the other hand, if I had, I wouldn't have the wonderful daughters that I have because I never identified myself as a lesbian, I'm not even sure that I had heard the word. That's very embarrassing to say, I guess I was much more sheltered than I had thought myself to be.

I very much wanted to have children, ever since I was young, and I met the man who seemed to be the perfect husband and father of children. He also happened to be the oldest son of the rabbi I had studied with all through high school. He had gone to Brown, he was 12 years older than I am, he is 12 years older than I am, he had gone to Brown, he had left to go to medical school, complete his internship and his residency and then he had moved back to Providence to live, he loved Providence so much he had planned to settle there. And we met actually at the Hillel through mutual friends. And as soon as I graduated from college, Bob and I married. I was 21 years old. And when I was 25, I became pregnant by choice with our first child, and I wouldn't even have waited that long had there not been extenuating circumstances. And gave birth to our first daughter in 1983 and gave birth to our second daughter in 1986.

In 1987, a number of things happened in my life that made me begin to or forced me really to put a name on the feelings, the crushes that I had had for women. Part of it was that I met closeted gay people in the student body at Hebrew Union College. I had frankly never really had friendships with gay people so that was eye opening for me. Part of it was my work with people with AIDS and my advocacy as a married woman, a heterosexual married woman, my advocacy on behalf of uh legal rights for gay people, including protection from discrimination in employment and including uh the right to legally marry and religiously marry and part of it was much more personal than that, which was that the feelings that I had for women didn't go away. They didn't go away, sometimes they were torturous, and I remember going to see a movie called "Desert Hearts." I went to see it with a heterosexual classmate, I guess we were both rabbis at that point, because it was 1987, she had been a classmate, and the movie was about two women, one of whom had clearly been a lesbian for a long time and the other one of whom had her first lesbian relationship for the sake of this film or her character did in this film.

When I left the theater, my friend had gone off to do whatever she had to do and I was alone and I began to cry and I began to sob and I was sobbing uncontrollably. I went to the telephone, there were just pay phones at that time, to call my husband, I was planning to tell him right away, I couldn't reach him, I tried to reach a lesbian friend of mine, I couldn't reach her. I had scheduled a hospital visit that afternoon. I got on the train to go up to Memorial Sloan-Kettering. I wept on the train and when I came home that evening, I said to my husband, "I think I must be a lesbian and if that's the case, it's unlikely that I'm going to be able to sit on this for the rest of my life, and I'm afraid that our marriage is not going to be able to be lifelong." At that point, he and I went into individual therapy, I to deal with coming out and Bob to deal with what was likely to be the end of our marriage. But I had not yet had a romantic or sexual relationship with a woman ever and when I felt like I couldn't, absolutely couldn't sit on it anymore, Bob and I separated. And I became involved with, I fell head over heels in love with another rabbi who was, who had been out as a lesbian for a number of years. And Bob was

wonderful, he wasn't happy that the marriage was ending, but this was no surprise to him and there was no betrayal involved, there was no infidelity involved, so he remained pretty calm.

My parents completely flipped out. My liberal educated Jewish parents completely flipped out and were actually quite cruel in the things that they said to me. My mother, who was a lawyer and an advocate on behalf of women in her work as a lawyer and as a law professor, actually said to me that if there's a custody battle, she would testify on Bob's behalf. My father said to me that he would never permit a lover of mine in his house. It was, it was horrible. The person who calmed my parents down was my mother in law. Bob's mother said to them "If you can't accept this, you will lose your daughter." She also said to me at the time that she wasn't surprised. She had suspected all along and my parents loved her and she calmed them down, thank thank goodness.

Bob and I separated and divorced, we shared custody 50/50, he moved 6 blocks away, there were no fights between us. I re-partnered much sooner than he did and Sharon and I welcomed him into our family, the five of us went to synagogue together three out of four Shabbat mornings a month, sat in the same pew, that's where our daughters marked becoming bat mitzvah. All school occasions and birthday and holidays, we celebrated all together. I thought that that was as good as a divorce could be. What I didn't know until fairly recently was that it was hard on my daughters, on our daughters. It was hard on them. It was hard on them going back and forth. It was hard on them not seeing me and Sharon for half a week and not seeing their dad for half a week. It was hard on them to mentally bridge their two lives. I think they felt that [35:00:00] the adults were all trying so hard to make this work that we weren't really open to the ways in which it wasn't working for them. And I have tremendous regret about that and I think divorce can be very, very hard on children even if the ex-spouses remain not only amicable but very much in each other's lives. And Bob and I and his second wife still are very much in each other's lives. In fact, I'm going to the movies with them this weekend. So, but it was hard on the kids and I didn't know it when they were young.

[End of audio section]

Part 4

File name: pemb000559_4

EG: [00:00:00] A couple years ago, you were quoted in a New York magazine on an article on same sex divorce and I was wondering if you could speak about what you spoke about to them and your experience with that.

MMW: I was 34 years old when Sharon and I became a couple and we were still young enough that we promised each other 50 years. Alternately, we would say that we promised each other forever. Sometimes it was 50 years as a joke. Of course, no one knows how long anyone will have the opportunity to live but that was sort of an expression we used. And I truly believed we would be together as long as we lived and we even bought cemetery plots next to each other and I believed that we would be buried together. Didn't work out that way. Didn't work out that way, and after 19 years, Sharon left the marriage for good and because we had been civilly married in California in 198,

no, in 2009, we had to be civilly divorced. And that was a heart wrenching, financially devastating, emotionally devastating experience for me and for our extended families and for our friends, who were trying to support us. Both of us had been traumatized by the latter years of the relationship, during which we disagreed about something very important to both of us and we were not able to compromise or resolve the disagreement, so each in her own way fought about it. And we were traumatized by that experience. And separating didn't end the trauma, the trauma continued, in fact, uh in some ways it got worse because because now that we were alone, we were truly free to admit to ourselves and to a few trusted other people how horrible those last years had been. And it was traumatic for each of us in different ways.

One of the ways it was traumatic for me, a way that Sharon didn't share, is that Sharon had been my only lesbian lover and becoming partners with Sharon had completely changed my life. It in a sense gave me life that I hadn't had before. It wasn't, it was almost as if, not that I was being reborn, almost that I was being born, in that relationship. So I had never really fully lived or felt that I'd lived outside of that relationship. So it was terrifying to me to have it end. In addition, [00:05:00] I'm very old fashioned and really, really, really wanted to be one of those 80-year-old people celebrating a 50th wedding anniversary. I really, really wanted to grow old with Sharon and we had imagined many things that our old age together would be like. So I didn't know what my future was going to be. And because the relationship ended on such a bad note, it made me, it forced me to call into question those 19 years. And really what had been going on and what had they meant. And my grief and despair were so overwhelming that I couldn't live with them anymore. It was a physical pain in my body and all I wanted to do was end that pain. And I did try to end my life and came very, very close to doing so.

I tell you this knowing the danger of copycat suicides and knowing that no congregation will ever hire me again because of my serious suicide attempt. It's too big a risk for a congregation to take. I mean, Beth Am took me back after benching me for a year, which was completely appropriate. Beth Am took me back because they had so many years of history with me that the suicide attempt did not wipe me out. But I would never be hired now by a congregation who justifiably took my suicide attempt into account. So there are dangers in speaking or writing about this. Dangers for me and dangers for other people. But just as I believed in the value of coming out as a gay person, just as I believed in the value of people struggling with mental illness coming out about their struggles or allies of theirs being able to speak about those struggles on their behalf. Just as I am glad that some people who are transgender can now come out as transgender and even keep their jobs, even though the unemployment rate of transgender people is extremely high and violence against transgender people is extremely high, but still, that people can come out as transgender, that ENDA covers people who are transgender is amazing. I think it's important to come out about suicidality. When I was discharged from the hospital after three weeks in the hospital, the president of the congregation and I had long conversations about what to do next. And we agreed that, I insisted that I tell the congregation. I couldn't imagine standing up in the pulpit for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur pretending nothing had happened. That felt to me like deception. I wrote a letter, he wrote an accompanying letter that went to every member of

the congregation, telling them what I had done and inviting them to a congregational meeting.

At that meeting, people were invited to ask me any question they wanted and it went on for hours. It was one of the most profound experiences we had together as a congregation. One of the things that happened at that meeting was that many people in the room told me either publicly or privately of family members, friends, who had ended their lives or of their own [00:10:00] periods of suicidality. And from those admissions, from those testimonies, I realized that this is a huge problem. Huge, huge problem, suicide is a huge problem in the United States and other countries. In fact, there have been recent articles in the Times and elsewhere calling suicide an epidemic in America now. Not only the suicide of transgender and gay or lesbian kids, not only the high suicide rate among veterans, more veterans die of suicide than soldiers are killed in the field, but there's a huge spike in suicides among baby boomers, among which I am one and I think it's important for the health of everyone that we begin to talk about this publicly. I never felt shame about being a lesbian. I did feel tremendous shame about the second divorce and I do feel shame about the suicide attempt because it's one of the worst things parents can do to children. And my children were adults when I nearly died. I was 14 when my mother made a suicide attempt and I know that what I did will negatively impact my daughters' lives forever. And that's terrible. But my, I couldn't tell my family that I was suicidal. I couldn't tell them, I couldn't tell them, I mean, I did, I did in fact tell them at one point in 2007 when things were particularly rough between me and Sharon. But I think they thought at the time that I was just talking, that there was no substance behind it. I couldn't make them understand how terribly deep the grief was and also the anger, and now I hope that other people will have the words and have families who will be there for them, who will listen to them, who will take seriously the depths of their despair and that this epidemic of suicide can be somewhat curbed.

EG: Okay, so I was wondering if you could speak to what your life has been like as a parent and as in parallel with your career and what that has been like for you, and there has been a lot of discussion recently about how women can simultaneously be parents and have careers and I was just wondering what you thought about that.

MMW: That is an issue that my generation really struggled with. I guess my mom's too, although there were fewer professional women in her generation. I will be very [15:00:00] interested to see how each of my daughters, should they become parents, will work this out. I always assumed that I could and would be both a mother and work full time because my mother did. What I didn't realize was that my mother was able to have children and a very demanding career because she had a woman named Molly. Molly came to take care of me when I was 6 months old and continued to work with my family, for my family, until after my first daughter was born. And she was on weekdays, the primary parent. Weekends we spent with our parents, but on weekdays, she was the primary parent. She took us to the doctor, she took us to buy shoes, she was home when we got home, she uh everything, she supervised our homework, she took us out to the playground to play, everything, and she had dinner ready when my parents came home from work. In those days, middle class families could afford to have what were called housekeepers because of course those housekeepers were being underpaid. My mother

was extremely generous with Molly, in fact, because my mother was discriminated against as a woman lawyer in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, her pay was much lower than my father's, and she actually gave Molly her net earnings after taxes and paid Molly on the books, but it wasn't, it, that was affordable for middle class families and it was affordable, I'm sure, on the backs of those housekeepers. I had no idea what it would be like to try to be a mother and a rabbi without a Molly to take care of my children, our children. In the first few years of their lives, we went through so many different babysitters and it was a nightmare, it was just a nightmare, a nightmare if one of those babysitters couldn't come the week before Rosh Hashanah when I needed to finish four sermons, a nightmare if the babysitter couldn't come when I had to conduct a funeral.

What made it possible for me to continue to work was the fact that Bob as a father and Sharon as a co-parent were very, very, very involved in the parenting of these, of our two daughters. Very involved. And it was helpful frankly that there were three of us, it was helpful that there were three of us, so that Bob could be with the kids if Sharon and I needed to be out of town and we could be with the kids if Bob needed to be out of town. And we set up the custody arrangement so that he worked at night the days of the week that the kids were with us and we worked at night the days of the week that the kids were with him. So there was, they had babysitters but they also had parents who were very much around. In 2000, the year 2000, Sharon turned to me, no, maybe it was even 99, Sharon turned to me and said, "Beth Am is getting the best of you and we are getting only what's left over." **[20:00:00]**

Those were pretty strong words and I didn't respond right away. It took me a while to let that observation of hers sink in. When her words really resonated with me, I resigned from Beth Am and simply continued teaching at Hebrew Union College, so I wasn't balancing the two, trying to balance, struggling to balance the two jobs and parenting. And our home life became a lot easier because then I was the one who had dinner ready when folks came home. But I don't, I wouldn't jump to recommend that solution to other women. My mother was extremely distressed when she heard that I was going to reduce my working hours, she was worried that I would be risking my financial independence. And we also know that it's hard when your children don't need you anymore to reenter the work force at a level that reflects your years of experience. So I wouldn't recommend this strategy to other women. I'm ready to hand this struggle over to the next generation of both fathers and mothers and encourage each parent and each family to find solutions that will work for them both professionally and personally. I have to give a tremendous amount of credit to our daughters, Liba and Molly, who are extraordinary women, very different from all three of us, their parents, making their own way in the world, having an impact on the world, and coming to terms with what was for them a complicated growing up, between the divorce of their mother and father and then the divorce of their two moms. It was rough, it still is rough, and I love them very, very much and give them tremendous credit for the work that they are doing to make a life worth living out of what they think of it.

EG: To talk about where you are now, the suicide attempt was in 2010 and so it is now 2013 and almost 4 years later, and I was just wondering if you could speak about where you are now.

MMW: All of the years that Sharon and I were together, even when things were difficult between us, I never fell in love with another woman and I never was physically attracted to another woman and I didn't think I ever would be. So when she left, I truly believed that I would have to spend the rest of my life alone. I was 53 at that point and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life alone. I couldn't believe that I would ever fall in love again, I couldn't believe that I would ever be physically attracted to another woman, and that contributed to the despair. And even after recovering physically from the suicide attempt and even after working closely with a psychopharmacologist to help me remain alive, [25:00:00] I still doubted that I would ever re-partner. And I began to adapt to, accept the idea that I might not re-partner, that I might be alone. And with that came some wonderful things. I began to spend a lot of time taking photographs and editing photographs, I began to read not for work but for pleasure voraciously, I mean, I always read for work but I began to read voraciously for pleasure. I began to exercise and eat more healthfully and reconnect with old friends and make some new friends, go to movies by myself, go to theater by myself, go to opera by myself... all of these things were huge steps for me, I'm ashamed to say, but they were huge steps for me, remember, I met the man who became my husband when I was 19 years old and married him at 21. And I could imagine living a rich and satisfying life alone, though I did very sorely miss the day-to-day companionship and the physical affection from a partner. I can now say that in the last couple of months, for the first time since I met Sharon, I think it will be possible for me to love another woman, to enjoy being loved by another woman, to be attracted to another woman, and I don't feel the need to marry again, although I very much believe in the value of marriage but I no longer feel that being unmarried is a stain on one's record. I no longer feel as though I must live together with someone who is my primary relationship, my companion. I would very much like to have another primary relationship until I die, but discovering hidden resources within myself that have made my life rich as a single woman has been, frankly, a gift.

EG: Well, thank you very much.

[End of audio section]

[END OF INTERVIEW]