Oral History Interview: Jane Rachel Litman

Interviewee: Jane Rachel Litman

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B. This is Mark Bowman with the LGBT Religious Archives Network on August 30, 2018, and I'm doing an oral history interview, a phone recording, with Jane Litman. So if you want to begin by introducing yourself, Jane, and spelling your name for the transcriber.

Jane L. I'm Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman. My last name is L-I-T-M-A-N.

Mark B. Good. Thank you, Jane, so much for spending this time for the oral history project for the LGBT Religious Archives Network. And again, we're here to hear your life story and your engagement and involvement, so would just ask you to start with your origins. And I'm mostly going to listen to you and ask questions occasionally. Thanks.

Jane L. Sure. My grandparents are all immigrants. They are from mostly Lithuania. My grandparents on my mother's side I don't know very well, but my grandparents on my father's side I was fortunate to grow up with. They were Goldie and Morris. And I'm very pleased that my grandson Morris is named after my grandfather Morris, and also his father's grandfather Morris[i], so that's very nice to have that passed down.

Mark B. Good, good. Where did they settle in the U.S. when they came?

Jane L. Well, I'm going to start with just a little more.

Mark B. Go for it, yeah.

Jane L. Morris was a revolutionary in Russia and got sent on a train to Siberia, but somehow escaped from the train and walked across all of Russia and then Europe to finally catch a boat to the U.S.

Mark B. Oh, my.

Jane L. My grandmother was only six, and she came with her family. Her father[ii] was a translator and knew something like 12 or 13 languages. When he got to the U.S. he got a peddler's cart, and he didn't know how to be a peddler at all, and sort of peddled his way to Hope, North Dakota, where he went totally bankrupt. And the local saloon owner took him in because he spoke Swedish, and most of the people there were Swedes, and so he could speak fluent Swedish, and English, and Russian and all sorts of other things.

And he did not want my grandmother to go, you know, my great-grandmother[iii] to immigrate steerage the way he had, so he asked them to wait until he made enough money to send them second class tickets. And my grandmother used to say, you know, she got on this boat and it was all you could eat. And she had never, ever had that much food in front of her, and she loved bananas, and so she would sort of steal bananas, and she took tons of bananas and she emptied out some of her clothes from her suitcase and filled her suitcase with bananas.

And when they got to port a man came and said your husband sent me, give me all your money and I'll change it and come back and take care of you, and of course never showed back. So they had their train tickets. They got on the train from New York to Hope, North Dakota, but they didn't have any money for food. But my grandmother had her suitcase all filled with bananas, so they ate bananas all the way.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*] Across half of the U.S.

Jane L. To Hope, North Dakota. So my grandmother was the first girl in her city, in her village or whatever you want to call it, the town, to go to college, and she went to University of Minnesota. And my grandfather also, he had already been to university in Russia, and so he went to medical school. And my grandmother became a social worker, so they were a professional couple. And they lived in Yellow Springs in Minnesota, They lived in a small town where he was a country doctor.

And every year they would vote socialist. And also my grandmother, being the doctor's wife, would be part of the elite that would count the ballots. And of course everybody assumed that the doctor and his wife would vote Republican. And so they would count these ballots, and there would be two socialists, votes for socialists, and my grandmother would just laugh about that to herself. And then she said one year there were three socialist votes and she started to wonder who was the other socialist.

So she really, in a certain way she raised me and I feel really grateful to her, and she taught me a whole set of values that I really appreciate about

history, and heritage, and political choices. She was a very important person in my life. My mother's still alive. She's psychologically impaired, and it was very difficult to grow up with her, but because I had my grandmother on my father's side, that really helped.

And my father[iv] was a psychoanalyst. He's gone now. He was one of the founding directors of the first suicide prevention center in Los Angeles. And he was a complex person, not all that present, because he worked very hard, so I didn't really know him that well until I was older. As I said, my grandparents really raised me, and I really bless them for it.

I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles, and it was up in the hills of Los Angeles, and so I was a bit of a loner of a kid, and I spent a lot of time sort of watching snakes, and I discovered a beehive, and I would sit watching the bees. There were a lot of animals up there.

There was a very large fire when I was six, and that certainly—and we had to evacuate, and that left an impression. With all the fires going on now, I really do remember that. And I'm very grateful. The fire came down to right next to our house, and I could walk the line between the fire and where it wasn't burned, and I'm very grateful to the first responders and firefighters who saved my childhood house.

Mark B. So this was your father's parents, so they had moved from Minnesota to L.A.?

Jane L. They had. What happened is my dad was in the service, and he went through California, and when he was stationed—he's a doctor. I think I said that. And he was stationed briefly in San Francisco, and he said to himself why am I going back to Minnesota? And they moved to Los Angeles. And then he had three brothers who were all doctors, and two of them also moved to L.A. And my grandparents had retired by that time, and when three of their four children moved to Los Angeles, they moved after them.

Mark B. Got it, okay. So you started school there then?

Jane L. Yeah, went to public school. It was a very Jewish neighborhood. My parents were not observant in a sort of religious sense of the word. They were both atheists. My dad belonged to the psychoanalytic institute, which was 95% Jewish at that point, and would sometimes take me and my sister there and sort of leave us there. So that was sort of my religious upbringing, was all these older Jewish men who were psychoanalysts. It was fine, though. I mean, it really, it did create…

And my grandparents had been socialists and atheists, too, but my grandfather, later in life, became more religious. All of those were a very strong influence on my Jewish identity, if not exactly my spiritual identity. I think my spiritual life was more with the snakes and the foxes and the bees up in the hills. But I was always a pretty spiritual kid. I felt a strong sense of something beyond us that moves the universe forward.

Mark B. So what was your passion and interest in those early school years? How did you spend your time?

Jane L. Well, I read a lot. And I remember having a very, sort of a conflict with my local librarian because I was—I mean, they had just crazy rules. I was supposed to stay in the children's section, but I had read everything in the children's section, and it didn't really appeal to me too much, so I would go into the adult section and read mostly history books, but also some fiction.

And she caught me, I think, with *Lolita* when I was about 11, and that was… I think up until then they'd slightly ignored me doing this, but at that point we had a showdown in which she told me I couldn't read the adult books anymore. And at that point I sort of made a mental decision of a strategic choice here about whether to tell her the truth that I was going to continue doing it or just nod. And I do remember that moment of deciding just to nod and smile and then ignore her.

And I got caught fairly regularly. And I think the other librarians didn't care, were just not going to enforce it, but she would catch me regularly, go look for me, and I would have to go hide, grab up books and hide. I mean, it was ridiculous when I think about it. So I spent a lot of time in the library reading.

I spent time with my grandmother. We would read the *New York Times* together and she would make comments. And we would cook, but she wasn't the strongest cook in the world now I look back on it. So we would

make sort of strange kinds of things. She was very open-minded, though, so anything you wanted to put, like salami and chocolate was just fine, anything you wanted to do, or anything I wanted to do was okay with her. She was extremely loving.

And then sort of the shadow over my childhood was my mother, who was hospitalized several times for depression and other issues, and was, in those days, pretty heavily drugged for it. That's what they did. And I also think they gave her electroshock and various things, so I think that was pretty hard. My mother also got pregnant fairly regularly and either miscarried or had stillbirths, so that was another shadow over my childhood. The whole thing was pretty—

Mark B. Did you have siblings? Were there siblings who lived?

Jane L. I have three siblings who lived. One is adopted. They are all very troubled people, and none of them have managed to get married, or have children, or have careers or anything because they're all very, very troubled. I was saved by my grandma, and I feel incredibly grateful for that, that she rescued me, and I'm blessed.

Mark B. Moving along high school, finishing up—

Jane L. By high school I was really wanting to get out of L.A. up to Berkeley. I had hitched up to Berkeley several times, and the antiwar movement was going on, and Berkeley was where I wanted to be, and L.A. was not. I think the appeal of the animals and the woods had ceased. By that time I

really wanted to be with people. And I lived an hour's bus ride, really, from anywhere, so it was…you know, L.A. is so hard to be in if you don't have a car, and so I really wanted just to be up in Berkeley.

I left high school a year early and I went to Berkeley because that's where I wanted to be. I was 15, and I had a great time. My years at Berkeley were extremely great. I loved it. I majored in antiwar protest and I minored in feminism, and I hardly went to class, though I seem to have gotten relatively good grades. I don't think anyone went to class in those days, so I don't think it was so unusual.

I started as pre-med because that's what everybody I knew, you know, my father, and my uncles, and my sister was already at Yale, and she was pre-med. And I soon realized that that was not what I wanted to be and I really fell in love with religious studies and Jewish studies, so I switched over. And my love was originally intellectual.

Mark B. I was just going to ask you where that came from, where that love drew from.

Jane L. It was originally intellectual. I started reading like Buber and Heschel, and I said well, these people have something to say, they know what's going on here. And there was an excellent professor, Robert Bellah. I don't know if you know him.

Mark B. Sure.

Jane L. He really spoke to me. I mean, the thing about Berkeley in the ‘70s was—I think it’s true now, too—but then the class of professors was extraordinary. The availability. You could just go and talk to people of amazing intellectual and spiritual depth who were happy to talk to undergrads. It was a much different system in those days.

And of course also it was cheap. I wrote my own checks. My tuition was $212.50 a quarter. I had a job. I had a job tutoring. I easily made that amount of money. And rents were also very cheap, and so life was cheap. And I feel bad for college students now who go into tremendous amounts of debt and work very, very hard sometimes with one or two jobs, plus college.

And for me it was the great adventure. It was super fun. At some point along the way I started to face into my bisexuality and the fact that I was attracted to women and men. And I think—

Mark B. Any particular recollections or triggers, or early recollections of that?

Jane L. Oh, there was a really cute girl. [*Laughs.*] There was a girl. How does the song start? There was a girl named Alma. Yeah, she was pretty cute. And dark skin and blue eyes—

Mark B. This was at Berkeley or before?

Jane L. At Berkeley. She was lovely. Super smart, really funny, and I just…and she stole my heart. And it was a bit of a shocker. I just sort of had to… It wasn’t a super shocker, you know, in the sense that I had known for a long

time that there was something. But it was, you know, I think I had viewed pretty much all relationships pretty lightly until her, and she was my first serious emotional head over heels. She was more ambivalent than me, and she pulled the plug on it.

I was also attracted to men, too, so it wasn't as troubling as I think it can be for me. And I grew up in a permissive household, and it wasn't that I didn't understand what bisexuality was. However, at some point I decided I wanted to be a rabbi, and there were almost no women rabbis at that point. In fact I think while I was in Berkeley the first woman was ordained.

Mark B. Did you identify with a particular tradition at that point?

Jane L. At that point I just felt—well, the Reform movement—I didn't actually even know about Reconstructionist Judaism, or what I knew was only through books. And so I just expected it would be through the Reform movement. And at that point the Reform movement wouldn't admit you if you were gay and would expel you. And I applied to it. I was 20 when I applied to rabbinical school.

Mark B. So you did get your degree from Berkeley in religious studies?

Jane L. I did, in religious studies and Jewish studies, yeah. And I applied to rabbinical school. And they had a psychological examination. In the examination they ask you have you been attracted to somebody of the same sex, and if you answer yes, then you don't get in. So enough people

had told me this that I knew to answer no. But I have to say it really went against my grain. I was not really a closeted kind of person, and had very rarely… I understand the strategic need for closeting or other kinds of strategic moves, but it really wasn't part of my personality.

And so they also said to me that if my boyfriend, at the time, wanted to come—the first year was in Israel—that if he wanted to come to Israel with me that we had to get married. And that is also, that's a policy they no longer do at this point. But that was 30 years ago, more than that. That was 40 years—more than that. That was 43 years ago. So 43 years. I also, in a certain way, felt like getting married to him would solve my bisexuality problem, which was idiotic. Of course it just made it totally worse, right? But off I went to Israel, newly married, and the whole thing was a disaster.

Mark B. What was life like in Israel? What do you remember from that?

Jane L. Well, I was surprised that the Israel of my childhood, which was the kibbutzim, and the equality of women, and socialism—and my grandparents were both Zionists, so they talked a big game with Israel. I learned very quickly that there were serious problems in the society, and that was 43 years ago. It's only gotten much, much worse by now.

But I had several friends who were Palestinians. In those days they didn't even call themselves Palestinians. They called themselves Arabs. And I also took a tour of one of the refugee camps and I really could see that there were very, very serious problems. In Berkeley I had been part of the

Berkeley Women's Health Collective, and we had been teaching each other to do cervical exams and things like that. And so a group of women at Hebrew University and I decided we would organize some women's health collective workshops, and we got in trouble for it. They said to us health services are part of the government, and what you're doing isn't allowed. So I learned that Israel was not quite the place that I expected.

And also I really struggled with being married. He was a nice boy, but I wasn't ready to have made that commitment at all. And I just wasn't being an authentic self. So I took a leave, and they were very nice. They said come back when you want to come back. And I went back to Berkeley and I went to graduate school. I went to graduate school in computer science and I got a master's in computer education. And I said you know what, I'm just going to lay low and wait until they admit gay students, because I'm not doing this again.

And that's when I learned about the Reconstructionist movement, because I started to have some friends who were closeted in the movement, particularly Linda Holtzman, who was well known for being a lesbian, but not quite out. She was almost out, but not quite out, but near out. And I also was very involved in Jewish feminism. Helped to organize a group in Berkeley called Dyke Shabbos, and we would meet at lesbian group or we would meet every week for Shabbat and write our own liturgies. Lots of fun stuff.

And I belonged to a group called B'not Esh that still meets 37 years later, which is a Jewish feminist spirituality collective of very prominent Jewish feminists. Well, in those days we were all in our 20s, but now that we're all in our 60s, people have really actually—it's full of rabbis and scholars, people who have really gone somewhere with it.

And I think I was just waiting for either the Reform movement or Reconstructionist movement to change its policy. It just seemed to me it was inevitable. At the time I was working in Jewish education and doing some computer work. I like computer programming, but it wasn't really…I wasn't going anywhere with it. I knew I wanted to be a rabbi.

Mark B. I assume your marriage ended when you came back from Israel?

Jane L. It took a couple more years.

Mark B. A couple more years? Okay.

Jane L. Yeah, it took a little longer. You know, it's a little personal, but I would say the monogamy aspect of it ended somewhat mutually, but… I mean, we supposedly made a mutual agreement, but he didn't really want to. He was…I don't want to say a negative word about him because really I wasn't ready to be a good partner for him and that was my fault and my responsibility. And so though he agreed to an open relationship, he wasn't really on board.

And so I started seeing women, and eventually I got into a relationship with Rabbi Julie Greenberg. And Julie joined Dyke Shabbos, and became

more and more Jewishly observant, and started to talk to me that she wanted to be a rabbi, too. And she had never been in the closet, but she was willing to go give it a try. And so she went off to the Reconstructionists and was admitted in the closet. And she was sort of my canary in the coal mine, giving me reports about whether this was going to be workable or not.

At the same time my friend Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, who was on the faculty there, who has now come out and been a Jewish lesbian for years and years and years, and has written, I think, at least one book on it, she was married to a man at the time and not out to herself fully. But she was a friend of mine and she was also feeding me the secret information.

And both of them said to me—this was now 1984—so I had left Hebrew Union College in Israel in 1975, so it had taken nine years—no, 1976, so eight years. But eight years, you know, at that point it seemed like a long time, but now, of course, it seems like a few moments. Like eight years, you know, like who cares? And I did fun stuff.

And so they both said go for it. And I applied completely out, and I was accepted. It was a very close vote, and one of the people on the admissions committee called me the next day and talked to me for another hour. But they took me. And I was the first out queer person to go to rabbinical school.

Mark B. Excellent.

Jane L. And two weeks after my admissions interview I met my partner, who's a man, and I—I mean, here I was the lesbian poster child, right, for the rabbinical college, and I met a guy and I fell in love with him. And it was very awkward. Very, very awkward. People ask me about it, and all I can say is, you know, the issue is really authenticity for me. It wasn't really so much men or women, but really about being my full self, and that I needed a partner who could accept who I was.

And I actually had a couple of relationships with women who were very upset over me being bisexual, even though I was in a committed relationship with them. One a famous lesbian comedian. And I traveled the country with her, but she could never really accept me because she was always worried I would run off with a man, even though I told her that was not going to happen. But biphobia is pretty intense in—

Mark B. At that point. I recall that very clearly. The gay and lesbian community, I was sensing it then, but we were struggling so much to affirm our own identity that bisexuality just wasn't really well received at all, so I recall that.

Jane L. It was threatening. Especially, I think, among lesbians in the women's community. I think men, there's a little bit of like, whatever. And also I think men mostly assume that it's transitional bisexuality, that you're just having a hard time coming out.

Mark B. That's true. That's what we thought back then, yes. You just hadn't come out yet. That's correct.

Jane L. Right. Whereas for women there's more the fear like you're dipping your foot in and you're going to run away. And even still there's such a thing they call it "college bisexuality," which is a sort of a negative term.

Mark B. So you started rabbinical school.

Jane L. I started rabbinical school. I was an out lesbian. I had this guy in the closet. But not totally. I mean, I was working my way to figure out what to do. I mean, it was a very new relationship and I wasn't sure what was going to happen anyway. But after a while I settled down with him. And I still had a very strong queer identity, and still do. And so when I graduated one of my first jobs out was serving an LGBT—in those days no T—LGB congregation in Laguna Beach, California, on the beach.

Mark B. Before you go on, any other highlights at rabbinical school? Were there things that stuck out, either experiences, or studies, or any connections that really had an impact on you?

Jane L. I enjoyed the intellectual challenges, especially Talmud, but all of it. Jewish heritage is extremely rich intellectually and ethically, and, to a certain extent, spiritually. Not exactly in the same way. The spiritual piece is pretty complex and takes a while to get to. But the intellectual piece is right on top. And that was lovely. And the community there was very nice.

I had some problems because it turned out that there were actually a lot of closeted faculty, gay faculty there who felt very threatened by me. And there was quite a bit of conflict around that. And toward my last year in

rabbinical school, my dad had cancer, and so I came back to Los Angeles. Also my partner lived in L.A. and so I did my last year in L.A. And during that year there were rumors that I was involved in Pagan practices. I had a lot of friends who were Pagans. I knew Starhawk.

And the truth is I did go to Pagan—I went to Christian things. You're a religious studies student. But the Christian and the Buddhist stuff was not as threatening. The Pagan issues were threatening because there was a misogynistic and homophobic undercurrent. And they brought me up on charges before the full faculty—it's just incredible, frankly—of witchcraft.

Mark B. Wow, wow, witchcraft. Oh, my goodness.

Jane L. Witchcraft, yeah. I mean, it was funny, except for it wasn't because it's five years of rabbinical school, and I was in my last year, right? I mean, it was a lot of money, and a lot of time, and I wanted to be a rabbi. And now looking back I realize it was just sort of meant to intimidate me, and they were really probably not going to throw me out. But it was pretty bad at the time.

So I can't say that I have fond memories of rabbinical school, but I did… And I'm still in touch with some—the people who were sort of baffled by what were going on have all apologized to me and said it sort of went by them, and they didn't quite realize what they were being pushed into. The people who refused to go along with it were Linda Holtzman and Rebecca Alpert, who are really brave people and tried very hard to stop it.

The people who went along with it who have since apologized to me, I don't really feel like I need to name names, but one of them has since come out. It was just a sad thing. And it just shows people who are closeted their whole life and ashamed of their sexuality—the person who made it happen is a famous Jewish author, teacher, and spiritual leader who's closet gay and just couldn't stand it. And one of his younger lovers wrote me a beautiful letter saying I'm going to stop him from doing this to you if I have to out him. And we've all sort of protected him. I'm still protecting him in this interview. I'm not going to out him. But his craziness was very hard on a number of people around.

And it's something, those of us who are quote, "elders" in the queer movement know that there were just so many people who are closeted queer who just create havoc on people. There are people who don't, but there are a lot of people who do—congressmen and all sorts of leaders. I feel bad for them.

Mark B. Okay, so you finished and you started serving a congregation in Laguna Beach.

Jane L. In Laguna Beach, a lovely congregation, Kol Simcha, which is very ironic. It means either all happiness or the voice of happiness. And the phrase where it's most prominent is in the wedding blessings, so I thought it was a really beautiful name. They were lovely people, really wonderful. I just was blessed to have such a loving, warm and supportive congregation. I didn't know then how hard congregations can be. They were just

wonderful. But I was serving that community and also I was teaching in the Cal State system, teaching religious studies. And that was a good life. I really enjoyed it.

And I think, though, I wanted to move back up to the Bay Area, if possible. And my partner [Stew] went to [Boalt] and was a lawyer, and I think he also wanted to move back to Berkeley. So we both kept looking around. And the gay congregation in San Francisco opened up. And in those days, which is now ’97, nobody wanted that congregation. Now I think it’s slightly more attractive, but in those days nobody wanted to, because you were outed, and there was a fear you would never get another congregation.

At that point the Reform movement maybe had just started a nondiscrimination policy. I don’t know what year they did, but it wasn’t a lot before that. It took a long time after the Reconstructionist movement. The Reconstructionists were first and then it took a while for the Reform to come on board. Though now they’re very good. They’re great, actually. I want to be nice.

So I went to Sha’ar Zahav, which is the LGBT congregation up here. It was a different place than it is now. That’s now 20 years ago. And I wasn’t allowed to say the word queer. I got up there and I would say queer this, queer that. And also there was, again, a lot of issues with my bisexuality, and issues about being married to a man. And I don’t think

they were fully…the search committee really realized what they were getting into in hiring me.

There was trouble, frankly, with the lesbians. The gay men liked me fine, and the small bisexual crowd, of course, did. But the lesbians were sort of really troubled about it, and really wanted a lesbian rabbi. Felt like I wasn't representing them. So it was just always an issue. And after a while it just was clear to me that that was a limitation, that I wasn't going to be able to serve this congregation in the way that would best for both me and them.

And so the job of rabbi educator opened up in Berkeley, in the Berkeley Reform congregation, and I met with the rabbi, who was a Holocaust survivor, Ferenc Raj, and Ferenc and I got along great. Ferenc and I were simpatico on first meeting. He'd read what I'd written. It was totally the issue of being an authentic self. I just feel, again, deeply, deeply blessed to have worked with him. He was an extraordinary role model in compassion, and perseverance, and being able to take great personal tragedy and rise to a level of deep, deep compassion.

He was Hungarian, and they had taken his brother to prison, and the family said we've got to get you out of here. And so they smuggled him and his family out, but his wife, at the last minute, decided not to come, just left him. And so he got on a plane with his three little kids and came to New York during the Cold War. And he was saved as a baby by Raoul Wallenberg from death.

And so he—and his son's gay. And we just got along great. Those were really fun years learning from him. He knew the Talmud by heart. He's still alive. I shouldn't talk like he's… But I really enjoyed that camaraderie and that relationship, and learned a lot from him.

Mark B. What years were you there?

Jane L. I was there maybe '99 through 2008. And my kids were little, and they grew up in the Berkeley schools, and so that was… In 2008 he retired. The synagogue is nice enough, but it was more mainstream than really what I was looking for. I really wanted—I liked being with him and I liked having a place with a really excellent preschool, and summer camp, and religious school program for my kids, and to do that good work in the community, but it wasn't the work that I was devoted to, which was more progressive.

And I got offered a job by the Reconstructionist movement to be a synagogue consultant. And so I started consulting with synagogues, and I found I really liked that job. And I would sort of fly around from place to place, and synagogues, you know, we didn't pay our taxes, or we're having a fight with our rabbi, or we're wanting to move buildings, you know, just synagogue issues. And I would help them restructure and figure out what they needed to do, and it was a great job. It was really fun. So I enjoyed that a lot. And again, it was another kind of job where I could just be me, and that was very important. And my kids were older then, and so that was good.

Mark B. How many kids?

Jane L. Two kids.

Mark B. Two kids, okay.

Jane L. Yeah. A daughter and a son. Both of them identify as, quote, "queer spawn." My son is gender queer at this point. And in fact I probably should be using they-them pronouns. I don't think they care that much, though. They're sort of vaguely gender queer. He's Asher, and so I'm going to just use Asher. Asher lives in the Bay Area. He's a Jewish educator. And Asher's partner is also more or less gender queer, and so it's sort of a pleasure. They are my window into the next generation of what queer means.

And so my daughter[v] says she's the straightest queer spawn she knows and that she gets together with either her lesbian or bi friends and her queer spawn friends and she says nobody's straighter than her. She doesn't know how it happened to her, but there it is. She married an Orthodox boy[vi] who is lovely, a totally wonderful human being, but I think that sort of took her in a slightly more conventional direction.

And eventually the Reconstructionist movement ran out of money and decided that it couldn't have people working from San Francisco flying around, and that they needed to re-congregate everybody—

Mark B. Reorganize.

Jane L. Yeah, reorganize everybody into Philadelphia.

Mark B. Religious institutions do that all the time.

Jane L. I didn't want to move to Philly, though. Like that was out of the question. So I was very fortunate. I found a job as an interim rabbi with the Coastside Jewish Community in Half Moon Bay. And they are really a lovely group, very open and affirming, and have a lot of LGBT congregants. It was a good match. And I stayed there for a couple years to help them find a permanent rabbi, which they did, and it's really well.

And I'm now…I have a little congregation, a little monthly congregation in Chico, which is also progressive. They run a little soup kitchen, and they're lovely. I've been really fortunate with my smaller congregations that have been great.

And I have this job, running the Jewish Roundtable for the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies at the Pacific School of Religion, which I love. It's like the perfect job. When I saw this advertised, like within walking distance of my house is a job running a Jewish queer think tank at a progressive Protestant seminary in conjunction with other ethnically diverse groups, using an intersectional approach, it's like the job's written for me. So I can't have been happier in this job.

We did a big conference the first year I was here for trans Jews and allies that was totally sold out and over attended. And right now I'm editing, with my colleague Rev. Jakob Hero, the book that's coming out of that. We just finished a conference for queer rabbis, invitation only, on

confronting Trumpism in which everybody wrote a one page white paper on best practices for things like resilience, and I'm editing that right now.

And I adore my colleagues. I could not have better colleagues, including you, Mark. You know. We work with people who are just amazing. Each one has an amazing story, an amazing life history, and has worked hard to be a spiritual leader in their own tradition and for LGBTQ people. So it's a wonderful group. We're really blessed. I love working for Bernie. I really like Justin. Both of them are wonderful people.

And my other work that I do is I am a hospice chaplain. A friend of mine was a hospice chaplain and she decided it was too much driving, and so she started asking around saying would anybody like a few shifts of hospice. And so I thought, well, you know, it's something I've never done.

Although when I was rabbi both at Kol Simcha and Sha'ar Zahav it was during the height of the AIDS crisis, so I did bury a lot of people. I actually, at that point in my life, when I was at Sha'ar Zahav, the first three months I was at Sha'ar Zahav I had 17 people die, none above the age of 50. And at that point in my life I said I sort of am sick of funerals, like I don't need anymore funerals.

But it turns out that hospice is really different, that my… I have yet to have anyone under 60 in my caseload. Most of my patients are in their 80s and 90s. And it's just a different thing. It's not tragic. The idea is to promote quality of life at the end of life. And it's really good work. It's God's work.

Mark B. Good. Well, thank you. That's walking through. Excellent and great story in terms of showing your life journey. As we wrap up, as you look back over the years, are there some particular threads, or values, or life lessons, or messages that you really find have really shaped who you have been and who you are today?

Jane L. Well, you know, I think when it gets down to it, there's a quote from Hillel. It's so cliché, but it's so true. Which is, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, and if I'm only for myself, what am I, and if not now, when?" And really, truly, I mean, it just does sound so clichéd, but finding one's authentic voice, my authentic voice, being my authentic self, telling my truth.

And really just maintaining that in the course of a lot of people saying—you know, there's a lot of beliefs about you have to be born a certain way, or you're born that way. For me, I don't know if I was born bisexual. It's hard to tell. But I have early memories of that. But whatever you are, you don't have to be born it and you don't have to choose—whatever it is, that's what you are. And people—as long as you're not hurting someone else, you get to be you.

And so to me the spiritual value of honesty and authenticity and giving voice is important. Sometimes I feel like the most important thing I do as a rabbi is I just look at people and I say I see you, I hear you, I believe you. Whatever you've gone through, I believe you, and I'm here, I'll take it in,

and I'm not going to push you away just because you're different. So that's one.

And then the other is, of course, helping other people, living a life of service. I think of myself as sort of lightly gender queer. If I could be—every so often I think I would be trans if I could be trans Monday, Wednesday, and every other Saturday. That's part of the thing about being old. It's like when we were young you couldn't quite be gender queer, though I did live for a couple years as a very butch lesbian in which I had very short hair, and I had a different body than I do now. And I really passed as a boy all the time, and I lived my life with male privilege in the sense that in the public sphere I lived that life.

And I do think, you know, for me, sort of that sense of, that's another sense of being an authentic self, is like in those days, in the early days of feminism, we tried to expand the role of women so that it could encompass everything. But it was a constant fight because there are all these people who are constantly policing what it means to be a woman. So if you say I'm a very butch lesbian woman, there's lots of people who are going to give you a hard time all the time.

And instead right now feminism and the LGBT movement has a different strategy, which is create your own gender, or be your gender, and name your own gender. And that is a different strategy than saying there's a binary in which we have a very large category of women, a very large category of men. Now we just say forget the binary, be who you are. So

that's really great. And I think for now it's a better strategy because the policing—there is policing, but it isn't…the policing, at least for me, is not the same as being constantly policed to be appropriate in a woman role. It's more about we just don't like queer people. So it's a different thing.

So I think that that kind of gender opening is great, and I really feel glad I'm part of it. I don't super identify with being a woman, though I do with being a feminist. But it's not like I think I'm a man, either, because I don't really. It's just sort of I don't fit into either role very well. Sometimes when I joke around I say I'm a really poorly performing woman. I'm like a deliberately poorly performing woman.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*] Uh-huh. Great, good.

Jane L. Yeah, so I would say…yeah.

Mark B. Powerful story. Thank you, Jane.

Jane L. Oh, thank you.

Mark B. Anything else in terms of significant in your life that—

Jane L. Oh, oh, I know what I was going to say to you. Yeah, I hadn't finished my thought. I have these kind of male assertive urges. Like I'm pretty aggressive for a woman. And I really don't like taking guff at all. And I think I really feel blessed that I have been a rabbi because I think I could be a pretty difficult person otherwise. Like if I had been in a career that encouraged, like a lawyer, that encouraged being aggressive and encouraged sitting on your privilege. And I really feel deeply, deeply

blessed to have had a career that led me on a spiritual journey. I can't even begin to verbalize how blessed I feel. And it's really helped me grow as a human being.

And when I wanted to go into the rabbinate, a lot of the reason I wanted to go into the rabbinate was because it was a pioneering field for women, and it would sort of hide…it was re-gendering, and could give me an opportunity to be in a place where my more androgynous self could be at home. And so having gone into the career in order to sort of gain the male privilege that rabbis have, it's been, I think, an ironic and beautiful blessing that instead it gave me the opportunity to serve others and to have humility, and I'm really, really grateful for that.

Mark B. That's very good. Thank you, Jane.

Jane L. Thank you, Mark.

Mark B. I'm going to stop the recording and then get back to you, okay? I'll be right back.

Jane L. Okay, sounds good.

[*End of recording.*]

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[i] Morris's great grandfather on his father's side was a Holocaust survivor. I look at my baby grandson and see in him the literal embodiment of joyous survival.
[ii] Sam London
[iii] Rachel London, for whom I am named
[iv] Robert Litman
[v] Sophie Litschwartz
[vi] Ari Rabkin