

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

MERLE FELD

Interviewed by

EMILY PRATT

December 1, 2008
Northampton, Massachusetts

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Narrator

Merle Feld (b. 1947) grew up in Brooklyn, and graduated from Brooklyn College in 1968. Feld's home growing up was not especially Jewish, but she found herself drawn to Hillel and Jewish Life during her years at Brooklyn College. After marrying Rabbi Edward Feld in 1969, the two worked together on a number of projects involving Jewish life, especially ones demanding egalitarian religious experiences. Feld spent 19 years living in Princeton, NJ while her husband served as the Rabbi for Hillel at Princeton University, and became involved with the Jewish students there while also beginning to write plays. In 1989, during her husband's sabbatical year from Princeton University, Feld and her family lived in Jerusalem. Feld became involved with efforts to facilitate dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian women on the West Bank during the Intifada. In 1999, Feld published her memoir, 'A Spiritual Life, a Jewish Feminist Journey.' In this book Feld shares much of her work that has been important in the Jewish feminist movement, including her poem *We All Stood Together*. Most recently, Feld founded the Rabbinic Writing Institute and is involved with Rabbis for Human Rights.

Interviewer

Emily Pratt (b. 1987) will graduate from Smith College in 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Jewish Studies and History. She hopes to attend Library Science school to pursue a Masters Degree in Archiving.

Abstract

In this oral history Merle Feld describes her desire to achieve something larger than the reality of her poor childhood in Brooklyn. The interview moves from the path through the years immediately following graduation from college that led her to her work organizing dialogues between Israeli and Palestinian women on the West Bank in 1989 through to a long discussion of that year. Feld notes that the courage she needed to facilitate these fraught dialogues came out of her work, as a Jewish feminist, moving towards an egalitarian Jewish tradition while in Boston, Champaign-Urbana and Princeton. The main focus of the interview is the year Feld spent in Israel working with Veronika Cohen to facilitate discussions attempting to break down prejudices held by Israelis and Palestinians, in an attempt to work towards peace.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Two 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Emily Pratt. Edited for clarity by Emily Pratt.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Feld, Merle. Interview by Emily Pratt. Video recording, December 1, 2008. Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Merle interview by Emily Pratt, video recording, December 1, 2008, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Feld, Merle. Interview by Emily Pratt. Transcript of video recording, December 1, 2008. Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Merle Feld, interview by Emily Pratt, transcript of video recording, December 1, 2008, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

Transcript of interview conducted December 1, 2008, with:

MERLE FELD
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: EMILY PRATT

PRATT: Ok so, uh, this is Emily Pratt, and I'm here interviewing Merle Feld on December 1, 2008. We are in Merle's home in Northampton, Massachusetts, and this interview is for my History seminar at Smith College entitled Women's Activism and Oral History. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

FELD: Yes.

PRATT: Ok, um, well let's start with, a general question. Can you tell me about your childhood in Brooklyn?

FELD: Huh. (long pause) (laughs) Nothing like a small question. (laughter)

PRATT: (laughs) Ok, well it's kind of big.

FELD: It's interesting. The thing that comes to my mind when you pose that question, is that I think of books. I suspect for lots of us when we're kids we imagine, that the other children and teens we know have an easier life, and that our own life is particularly difficult or complicated. Um, and then we discover, at various points in adulthood, everyone had a difficult, complicated childhood. So, I would say that about mine, and I would say, um, books were a source of nourishment for me, and, you know, the window to larger worlds. I think in a lot of ways, my childhood felt like I was waiting for my life to begin. Probably waiting for enough control over my own reality. I'd say to have the kind of life I wanted, but I think I knew so little about what was possible that um, I don't know what it was I wanted or imagined. Probably an early dream was to be a writer, and I thought that that was to be a novelist, which is the one kind of writing I've never done. My parents were devotees of, of Broadway theater, and so I was, you know even as a child – in those days theater tickets were not so much more expensive than movie tickets were, which in those days were not so very expensive. So, theater was more available. And I knew the lyrics of many Broadway shows by heart and – and then as I got older, you know, saw lots of straight plays, and, so maybe somewhere in the back of my mind, there was a thought of well, maybe I'd be a playwright, which, is part of who I've been.

I'm conscious that, this interview takes place between two dates that are important to me. A day ago was my mother's yahrzeit, was the anniversary of her death, and tomorrow would have been her birthday. So, it's um, it's always a poignant time of year for me. You don't imagine, when you're young, but, but you see it more when you age, how, how much as a woman you're in conversation with your mother for all of your life. My mother's been dead now 32 years. It's a long time, and I'm still figuring her out. (long pause) Working

at reconciling – all the strength and beauty that was in her soul, and all her imperfections. So, a question about childhood, evokes that layer as well.

PRATT: Ok. Um, I guess we can go from talking about your mother, although it's kind of a, not – it doesn't feel like quite an appropriate jump, but, um, could you tell me about, um, the gender dynamics in your home? Like, the relationship between you and your two brothers, um, how your mother treated you and your brothers differently?

FELD: It seems like a very natural next question.

PRATT: Oh good! (chuckle)

FELD: (sigh) (long pause) As someone who grew up in the '50s, there's a lot of pain in that question. (long pause) My mother carried such a heavy burden of, who she thought she ought to be as the 'good woman,' and, it figured so little into her thinking, how she might achieve self realization. (long pause) I think her dreams for me were, were very limited. She wanted to see me happily married and a mother. (long pause) And it would be a horrible mistake to take for granted, how important, those aspects of life are, but, because, I think, they formed the boundary of her expectations for me, my focus was always outside that identity. I mean, I always wanted to know, well, what more could I be? (long pause) I'm not sure if my early identity was shaped more by the fact of my gender or by our poverty. And I um, I'd have to say both. And, and how the two, intermingled and intensified each other.

PRATT: Um, I can probably guess the answer to this question, but, did you ever think that your life would take the path that it had, in your formative years?

FELD: My husband and I often say to each other, we never imagined what our lives would be, we never imagined this degree of blessing. The opportunity to do so much fascinating and creative work. (long pause) Not remotely.

PRATT: Okay. Um, now that we've started talking about your husband, I know that Havurat Shalom was one of the first projects that you two were both involved in. Um, so could you tell me a little bit about the founding of Havurat Shalom, what drew you to it, just kind of, anything that comes to mind?

FELD: So Havur—What?

PRATT: (overlap) That's another big question (laughs)...

FELD: That's another big question. Well that's easier than tell me about your childhood! (laughs) The conservative rabbinical school, the Jewish Theological Seminary, in New York, was, by all accounts, a difficult institution, for students, for some students, who attended and were ordained there. I think it certainly was a difficult institution for my husband and his close friends, in the '60s when they were students there. So, they imagined creating, a new

seminary, a new rabbinical school where, the spiritual lives of students would be, nurtured. Where students would be better respected and empowered. Where, I mean in the era of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, where, social justice work would be an integral part of rabbinic studies. So that was the dream of Havurat Shalom. And, and these guys – and they were all guys, the seminary didn't admit women then – and the, the founders of Havurat Shalom who were, for the most part, not all, but for the most part, the teachers, like Eddie, had themselves been ordained there, they, you know, they were men. Well, they were so young (laughter), I don't know that, they thought of themselves exactly as being men, you know, in the ways that, um, we even think of ourselves as being women. So they were guys, Eddie was ordained in 1968 and, left New York to go to Boston to be one of the founding teachers of Havurat Shalom. Other teachers, included Art Green, who was, you know, most central. Zalmin Schacter, who, happened to be, on leave that year, and, had come to Boston to, to be a part of Havurat Shalom. Buzzy Fishbane, was one of the founding teachers. David Goodblatt, Burt Jacobson. (long pause) And lots of people who are famous for having been part of Havurat Shalom, but in fact were, even younger, who were the students, so – many of these people remain life long friends. We just had a 40th reunion, last summer. And, it was very moving, to be with those old friends again. So, it was a stellar cast of people, who, you know, were, sort of rabbinical hippies, with very large dreams, and tremendous idealism.

What was I doing there? When Eddie graduated from the seminary, it was the same year, 1968, that I graduated from college. He very much wanted to get married – I think I was very young, and didn't feel quite ready to get married. But knew that I was in love and wanted to be with him, so he was going to Boston and he said, Come, and, I went! Coming from my truly assimilated family, with only you know, a taste of Jewish life as a college student – (chuckles) the thought that I would be an equal member of that community was fairly preposterous. Just on the, on the level of Jewish knowledgeability. On the other hand, we were all kids, and (pause) I knew as a part of a community, as a part of network of friends that we were peers. So that really started for me – (long pause) My own experience of, participating in the women's lib movement, just, you know, as a, as a natural outcome of my life, of where I was in that moment in time. And I've written some about that, and, I suspect you've seen pieces about that.

PRATT: Actually, I was just thinking that, I don't know anything about your participation in the women's lib, specifically, the women's lib movement. So, could you tell me about that?

FELD: I've said elsewhere, and written elsewhere, how I never considered that (pause) as activism. I think I understood activism to be, What do we do on behalf of others? And not, What do we do out of our own self interest? So I think I've been surprised, or I used to be surprised, to hear other women talk about that aspect of their lives as being, the beginnings, or the main part of their activism. But – (pause) because of the accident of my birth – accident meaning, it placed

me in a particular generation in a particular period of time, I grew up under one set of cultural assumptions, which I've talked about a little already, and came of age in what was the beginning of a completely different world. So, not even in Havurat Shalom, which was, in 1968, but in 1969, when Eddie and I moved to the Midwest, and lived for four years in central Illinois, those were the years that I was in consciousness raising groups, and it would take me back too far to try to remember what it was we talked about in those groups. But maybe I'd say, looking back, and I've never really talked about this. Maybe what was most significant for me, or for us, was, um, (long pause) that it would be of any interest at all to talk about our personal lives, our daily lives – (pause) Maybe that was what was most revolutionary, about those groups. (long pause) That what went on in the day to day, sorrows, annoyances, frustrations, of personal life, of domestic life, that that, that might have significance. (long pause) I think the prejudice, the misogyny directed at women, (pause) has been profound. To grow up feeling, there's just nothing important about you, (long pause) you breathe that in, and you believe that, and then how likely is it that you'll act in the world?

PRATT: Yea. Um, a lot of what you're saying, I hear, obvious connections to the work that you did in Israel and the work you're continuing to do, so maybe this question is a nice segue into the next part of this. So, how would you say, or, what kind of influence do you think this work, or, your, just kind of daily reality in the '60s and '70s in Illinois, and in Boston, and Havurat Shalom's emphasis on egalitarianism, how do you think, what was the path...

FELD: Tsk, tsk! Time out!

PRATT: Time out?

FELD: Havurat Shalom did not have an emphasis on egalitarianism. Really, to the contrary. I mean, when I describe its *raison d'être*, in being founded, that, that truly, I think, women were invisible to that enterprise. When, we in the Havurah and women in the culture outside the Havurah, in that historical moment, began making ourselves visible, then I think the men in the Havurah said "well yes, women should be included." But, but that wasn't what it was about.

PRATT: Okay. Sorry...

FELD: No, no no no no! I, uh, we've come so far so fast, that, you know, people like me grew up in a world where women didn't have aliyot, women were not on the bimah, women were not counted in a minyan. Let alone, ordained as rabbis and um, those were hard and painful fights. (long pause) And the men of Havurat Shalom were, really, exceptional, because there were many Jewish men and many Jewish institutions that were-not-welcoming. And did not move over without a huge fight.

PRATT: Mh hmm.

FELD: (long pause) I think those fights actually were the beginning of courage for me. And, um, perhaps that's why they deserve to be counted as activism. (long pause) In the years of the early mid- maybe even late '70s, I think we were constantly – we, Jewish feminists, were constantly in situations where you were shaking inside. To demand to be seen, to demand to be counted was, a radical upset of the existing order, and most people don't give over power graciously or happily. I'm thinking of a time – by 1973 Eddie and I were in Princeton. And when we came, there was one Orthodox service on campus. And, I guess it was the first year of Simchas Torah, and the men were dancing with the Torah, in a large room, many men, many women – undergraduates. The men dancing so vigorously, that really, the floorboards, you know, were moving. And, you know, just concentric circles of men, and the women being just literally pushed to the corners and the edges of the room. And, Eddie as rabbi on campus, sort of gave me a look, I gave him a look, he had one of the Torahs in his arms, and, hmph. (long pause, starts to tear up) And he danced it out to me, and handed it to me, and I took it, and I took it outside and we danced in the dark on the grass, you know, there were however many, 20, 30 undergraduate women, dancing with a Torah in the dark on the grass. (long pause) But how does it feel to have to steal a Torah? (long pause) You know, and you're shaking because you're holding something so precious to you, and, and the assumption of so many of the men was, "you don't deserve to be holding that. You're not worthy to be holding that, because you're a woman." So, it takes a certain kind of courage to say, "fuck you. Yes I do. This is my Torah too." And to have to do that over and over and over again, you know, to feel like, you're just walking through those years, constantly breaking cultural institutional norms. With people telling you, "you know, what you're doing will be the death of Judaism. Because, see it's really working now, and there isn't a problem – you're the problem. And you're destroying this." And to have the courage to say, (heavy sigh, pause) No. You know? Judaism will thrive with men and women shoulder to shoulder. You know, I don't know, I don't think they still are, but, it's not how I raised my daughter, but, you know, in those days girls were raised to be polite and smile and smooth things over, you know, where there was a problem, the role of a woman was seen as, you paper it over. You make it okay. So to flip that on its head and be the one, as a woman, to say, "this is broken, this isn't okay. This is broken, this needs to be changed, this is unhealthy, this is unholy." Phew, so, yea, I think that, in fact, those years were a kind of training ground for the work that came after.

PRATT: Mh hmm. Um...

FELD: You need to stop it for a minute, um...

BREAK IN TAPE

PRATT: Ok so here we are again, we were just talking about Princeton, but now we're going to move on to Israel. Um, so, you have said that you had traveled to Israel a number of times before your year sabbatical uh, with Eddie and your children

in 1989. Um, why had you gone – under what circumstances had you gone to Israel before?

FELD: I, uh, we were Jewish? (laughter)

PRATT: (laughs) Well I haven't been yet! I'm not a bad Jew!

FELD: Oh, it was uh, like, uh, I don't know – you did that. I first went in 1971, Eddie and I lived there for a summer – Before and after, I mean in those days, you just, uh, you had a round trip ticket and you could make as many stops as you wanted, so, you know, we went all over Europe before and then after and, you know, it was wonderful. So we lived there that summer, I was, still in those days trying to learn Hebrew. I say, uh, I must hold the world record for the number of times I've taken Hebrew 101. (laughter)

PRATT: (laughs)

FELD: I uh, whatever genetic predisposition you need to acquire second languages, I, it's not one of my blessings, so...

PRATT: Me neither.

FELD: (radiator clanging throughout) Anyway, it's, it's amazing, I mean I was thinking about being there in '71 when I was just there, two weeks ago, how much it's changed. You know, even things like the airport. When you, when you used to – you, you fly into Ben Gurion, I mean that's the airport. So it was this old, old, sort of dilapidated airport terminal, and, uh, and when you'd finish going through customs – an old house has an old boiler (laughs) and, it makes noise. – When you'd finish going through customs, you'd walk out, you know, out of the building into the air, and there was, there was like a railing or a some kind of barricade, that you know, kept the people who were waiting for disembarking passengers, you know, sort of kept them, in a, in a different space. But it was so moving, to see – all the, all of the incredible variety of faces and peoples who would stand there straining to see you know, when are my loved ones coming out? – No, I'm not going to cry again! – This was, just very, just so, it was like, it was like the whole promise of having a state was encapsulated in that, in that image, of the people coming out of the airport, just um, you're eyes couldn't be big enough to take it all in. You know, what is this magical place? And, and, you know, is someone waiting for me? And, and visiting Israel through the years, and seeing, you know, in different waves of immigration, who would typically be there waiting (phone rings) you know, and who would be, coming out? And now, it's, you know, it's an ultra modern, I mean, it looks like... What does it look like? Maybe it looks like the Tampa airport, or, um, (answering machine picks up – laughs) You're just going to have to edit – Um. (pause waiting for answering machine) It used to feel, when you'd go to Israel, and, and drive out of the airport, you know, headed for Jerusalem, that everything looked sort of scruffy and um, (long pause) like it was still a country in, in process. It was still, a country that wasn't finished yet.

Now it's... more finished. There are whole huge neighborhoods in Jerusalem, that you know, just never existed. Jerusalem was, was really a kind of sleepy, backwater, town... (long pause) There were tokens, that you needed to make a phone call – asimonim – and um, I mean I have enough Hebrew to right, you know, buy my humus in the shuk and whatever, but... Not for real conversation. So an asimon was this little metal token with a whole in the center. And sentimental people used to save one and put it on a, on a necklace, you know. You know, so now you come out and you have your rented cell phone, and, so I forgot the question. What was it like? So that was, that was what it used to be like. Why did we go? Uh, cause we were Jewish. And, and there was something extraordinary about... (pause) for Diaspora Jews to suddenly be in a country where, you're the norm. (long pause) And, you didn't have to forever be explaining yourself.

PRATT: Yea. I'm going to ask you to stop because the tape is running out. So I'm going to stop...

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

PRATT: This is tape 2 of the, my interview with Merle Feld on December 1 in Northampton, and I'm Emily Pratt interviewing. So, we were talking about, um, her experience in Israel before her year there in 1989. And you were saying...

FELD: And, and why, why did we go, to Israel.

PRATT: Yea, right.

FELD: So, literally the first time we arrived in Champaign-Urbana, in 1969, we flew in, we needed to rent a car to go find a, a hou- we were moving there so we needed to find a place to live and – So, it's this little airport, and we come off the plane and we come into the, you know, the terminal, and there's a Hertz desk. So we go up to the Hertz desk, and you know, we're going to rent a car, and the woman behind the desk says, "do you-" says to Eddie, "do you work for an organization that gets a Hertz discount?" And he said, "I don't know, I work for Hillel, it's the B'nai Brith foundation." She looks up B'nai Brith in her book and says, "oh yes, you know, you do. And what's your position? What's your title?" And he says, "I'm a rabbi." And she says, "what's a rabbi?" (laughter) So I used to joke that, I then spent the next number of years when people asked me what did my husband do, I'd say, "he's a Jewish minister." (laughter) So, um –

PRATT: Going to Israel.

FELD: So going to Israel, you know, people at least think they know what a rabbi is. (sigh)

PRATT: Um, I don't want to cut off any of your stories, they're wonderful, but, um, I think we should move on to...

FELD: Please.

PRATT: ...your work, in Israel.

FELD: Yes.

PRATT: Um, so, I've um, I've read that you had to be dragged kicking and screaming back to Israel in 1989. Um, so how, or, can you tell me about how you got over this displeasure about being in Israel for that year enough to start your work with Veronika Cohen?

FELD: The kicking and screaming was because 1989 was during the first Intifada. And uh, I, my primary concern was um, how am I taking an 11 year old and a seven year old into a war zone? You know, this is not the culturally enriching experience I had imagined for our family's sabbatical year. And in point of fact, there were uh, repeated and close acts of violence that year. There was a bomb

at my kids' bus stop, there was a bomb in macha n'yehuda where we went every week to do our shopping. There was lots that was, scary and dangerous. It's very hard to explain to people but, that's the view that you have, from abroad, from the outside. When you're living there, it's something very different. (long pause, clinking dishes from the kitchen) I saw the, the possibility of, learning from Veronika about- it's just going to be noisy... (laughs)

PRATT: Yea, I don't know if we can do anything about it...

FELD: Um, (Pause) it's just going to be noisy... (laughs)

PRATT: Maybe we can take a break, before, or while, your husband's in the kitchen? Maybe?

FELD: Sure.

PRATT: Ok.

BREAK IN TAPE

PRATT: Ok, so here we are again, and we were talking about Israel and your um, beginning to be involved with Veronika Cohen and how that happened.

FELD: So, Veronika was an old friend from Champaign-Urbana. She's, an extraordinary person. She was born and raised in Hungary, after her parents had survived the Holocaust. She left in '56 with the Hungarian Revolution, came to the United States, went to college here, is a musicologist, a composer, music educator, and she and her husband were our earliest and dearest friends from Champaign-Urbana. They made aliyah, maybe, in the late '70s? Um, 1980? Something like that. And were living in Jerusalem. So – and I knew that Veronika had been very involved in lots of organizing and peace activism, from the start of the first Intifada, and, I was, intrigued and curious and, eager to meet the Israelis and Palestinians she was working with. To see – what entrée she had found into Palestinian communities and life and – This was in the heyday of the period when Israeli government officials and American officials were exclaiming that, you know, “there is no one to talk to. There is no partner for peace.” But Veronika was clearly meeting with people and working with people so, I wondered who are the people she's come to know and trust, and literally, you know, within the first week of arriving, I said to her, “let me come along with you.” And, and she was certainly up for that. Having just been with her, spent, two different Shabbatot with her, on this visit, (pause) I'm reminded as always of, just what a privilege it is to, to call her a dear friend.

In 1989, 1990, the year I was there, she had two teenage children, she was working full time as a faculty member at the school of music at Hebrew University, and she had both of her aged and ailing parents living with her. One or two of those identities would be pretty much full time for most people, but

Veronika dealt with all of that plus really spending more hours a week on peace activities than on her full time faculty job. So, she's someone who had enormous energy and, a greater passion for justice than maybe anyone I've ever known. Um, I, (long pause) to catalogue the activities that she was the organizer for, that she was, collaborating on with colleagues in the peace community, would exhaust me and you, just, just listing what she was doing.

You know we, we developed a, a sort of regular regimen that year. She would make the rounds on the West Bank from you know one Palestinian city to the next and here she knew people and there she knew people and I remember in the very beginning I must have been there only two weeks at that point, we went to Nablus to be, observers at a trial of Palestinians accused of a violence against settlers um, a really, a really tragic story, which was a casualty of war and not, not an act that these Palestinians were in fact guilty of. There was a kind of skirmish between a group of settlers who had gone on a hike and the Palestinians in the town that they were hiking through. And one Palestinian boy and one Israeli girl were shot and killed, both by the Israeli guard who had come along with the settlers, but it was the Palestinians who were on trial for this, so we went to, to visit and, and sort of, show solidarity with these people. We come into the courtyard of the military base where the trial is taking place, and – and I've as I say I've been in Israel at that point maybe a week and a half, and, and, Palestinians begin in ones and twos approaching her, to ask for help. You know, like, they knew that she was someone who had names of Israeli lawyers who were wanting to help defend Palestinians in court cases. She just had um, (pause) she knew the ins and outs of how to get things accomplished and to be of real tangible help to people, and, and I just kind of stood next to her as you know, as people sort of lined up to ask for information, to ask for help, to ask for advice, it was incredible to me. (long pause)

Of all the different activities and on going groups that she was involved in, the one that was most important to her I think, or the one where she did the most extensive and in depth work was with a Palestinian community in Beit Sahur, which was, which is, a, a suburb of Bethlehem. And there was a group of Israelis including Veronika and a group of Palestinians who joined together in ongoing demonstrations, peace activities. There was a tremendous sense of, um, empowerment that this community of Israelis and Palestinians felt. That with our energy and our commitment and our creativity we could end the occupation. (pause) So for lots of things, you know, I was a participant amongst other participants. (pause)

The place where I showed, or had an opportunity to, to exercise some leadership was with one particular dialogue group in Beit Sahur. Over the course of that year, I participated in dialogue groups with Israelis and Palestinians in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu Tor, um, with groups in Beit Sahur – all of these groups were mixed, meaning men and women, and you know you would sit in a living room like this living room and um, people would crowd in, and, want to talk, and want to listen. And, and people would compete for air time, so, you know, it would get louder it would get louder it

would get louder, and certainly on the Palestinian side I think, the men more often won out over the wives who were there with them. And after some time the, the women of Beit Sahur said, “we want to be participating more fully in dialogue, and it seems to us that the way to do that is to have a women’s dialogue group.” So, Veronika said to me, “I don’t have experience with women’s groups, like, you know about women’s groups Merle (laughter), you know, and besides, I really can’t take on yet another groups, so, could you do this?” And, I felt like, I rel- I felt so unworthy, and scared of the responsibility. I tried very hard, kind of looking over my shoulder to see like, wasn’t there someone else who was more appropriate? Because I felt like, I’m here for a year and then I’m gone, and I don’t, I don’t deserve to be in a position of leadership here. But, there really wasn’t anyone else who was willing to take it on, and, it turned out that I was well suited, to gather Israeli women to come to the group. There were always more than enough of the Palestinian women who wanted to come to dialogue, but in part because we held the dialogues on the West Bank, I think Israelis were, lots of them, really scared about coming. And scared of putting themselves in Palestinian hands and being in Palestinian homes. And I always just took my cue from Veronika. You know, I thought, well, she doesn’t look scared, so probably I don’t have a real reason to be scared.

So part of my job initially was to round up or entice Israeli women who, to come participate. And I had a lot of contacts in Israeli society because um, there were, I was taking a Theater and Midrash course that year, wonderful course, I was, I was working for the year in a, in a, the studio of a, of a Jerusalem potter, my kids were going to an Israeli school, I was a regular at a synagogue in Jerusalem, so uh, and I had neighbors, so you know, sort of all these different points of contact, I would tell the women I knew about, you know, “we’re forming a dialogue group with Palestinian women, we’re gonna be going out to Beit Sahur.” And literally there were women who joined that group because they said, um, “you’re here on sabbatical, and you could just be sitting in the café, but, you care enough about this to devote time and energy to it,” and I think secretly felt, “whatever courage it took to go, you have that courage, so, how can we not?” So one way to look at it is to say I was really good at guilt tripping people. (laughter) One woman, one Israeli woman, who, you know some of these people I’ve been mentioning, the Israelis, I’ve just seen, you know I’ve just, I’ve just been with. It’s 19 years later and – so the woman I’m about to quote is one such woman. I just was with her two weeks ago, she turned to me at an opening session of this dialogue group, and said, something like, “this is the most fascinating afternoon, I may ever have had in my life.”

Um, (pause) you know, each time we would meet the Israeli women, we’d meet on a street corner in Jerusalem, and, you know, a bus or a mini bus, would, would pick us up, and it was, a 15 minute ride, to get to the other side. Now it’s a whole lot longer, but – and we would arrive in this little town, very hilly, and every week we would be in another woman’s home, like the, the Palestinian women in town who were participating, took turns hosting. (pause) So we would come in and, and they’d all line up to greet us, and shake hands, or kiss

on both cheeks – you know and always the expression “you are welcome, you are welcome.” And we would sit together and, and they would serve us, they’d serve juice, they’d serve Turkish coffee, tea. (long pause) When you travel to any foreign country, it’s an incredible gift to be able to be hosted by an ordinary family, you know? It’s a completely different experience than staying in a hotel, than, you know, it it’s like, how do people furnish a home? And how do they behave at home? And, and most important the access to listen. To hear about peoples lives. (pause)

There was a wide range of socioeconomic class amongst these women. And, it was clear that – there were little groups that knew each other, but that we were crossing class lines in this dialogue groups, and we’d be in homes that were, you know, on a scale one to twenty, they were on a scale of one to twenty, from something close to affluence to um, the very simple home of a peasant. And, it also just was clear that this was the first time for a lot of them to have been in each other’s homes. So, if you think about you know, a typical street in your hometown, and, maybe you know from, what the class mix might be on a certain block, and in how many of your neighbors’ homes have you been a guest? (pause) When Northampton was celebrating its, what, um, 250th anniversary? The Historical Society had a tour of, of this block. Like different neighborhoods had different celebrations for that year. So this neighborhood, this block had you know – and we all walked along from one home to the next, you know being welcomed in and seeing like, what was the architecture, whatever. (pause) So there was on the simplest level the experience of having hospitality extended to you, but what actually went on in the dialogue groups was not, anything resembling polite social banter. (long pause)

There were, a few Palestinians who took responsibility for organizing the dialogue each time and then there were a few on the Israeli side, including me, who took responsibility for organizing the dialogue, and, the very difficult ballet of how do you on the one hand open subjects which are volatile and intimate and painful, because what would be the point of sitting around and, and you know, politely trading recipes? But on the other hand, (long pause) trying to help people find, the common humanity, so that you didn’t feel so angry or hurt or attacked that you couldn’t come back. (long pause)

When we got to talking about history, it was always a dead end. You know it was like, “well the trouble all started when you did x,” right? “Well no, because you’re forgetting what happened before that, before that, right. You were the perpetrators of violence and you did, and why didn’t you accept this possibility when, you know, and if you had said yes to this, and, but, but, but why did you do that?” And when it got to that level of talking, (sigh) there was no way out. There was no, (long pause) nothing positive could come of that. What was fruitful to explore and, and to give people a safe space to talk about and be heard were, what are the effects of the occupation and the Intifada on your life? (long pause) And to have a place to tell your stories. And to be listened to respectfully. (long pause)

There's so much shame in being a victim. (sigh) So to be able to talk about how you're suffering and to find a way to do that with dignity, was a real gift. (long pause) Hmm. I suppose in some way for women on both sides, what those dialogues accomplished were, and, and I think this was a huge achievement, um, to see one another. It suddenly occurs to me the gigantic image that filled the screen, that filled the screen for Israelis was the young male Palestinian terrorist. And the image that completely filled the screen for Palestinians was the young Israeli male soldier. And, so that when, when you'd say to an Israeli, "Palestinian," that's all that could be seen. And when you'd say to a Palestinian "Israeli," that's all that could be seen. And to sit together as close as you and I are sitting together, in the intimate space of a home, and see Israeli, Palestinian – there's a human face there. And it's the face of a woman, like me. (pause) You then would bring in the stories of the people in your intimate circle, and suddenly, the soldier was this woman's son. (sigh) Of the Israelis who participated in this group, maybe half of them, had 18, 19, 20 year old kids who were serving in the army, and, (pause) they had stories to tell. (long pause) The Palestinian mothers in the group, you know, like, they had 12-year-old kids who were throwing stones. (long pause) It was also the case that, the group had affect on concentric circles, so um, it wasn't just the Israeli women who came, who were present, like they also go home and talk to friends and neighbors and family, you know, "this is what I've heard," you know, "this is who I've met, this is what I've seen." And similarly, you know sometimes the bus would deposit us you know, in front of such and such a house and it would be the wrong house, and it, it seemed like all the shopkeepers, the people on the street in Beit Sahur knew about the dialogue, you know so – There was a kind of ripple effect. (long pause)

I've been thinking recently about the affect of that year on me. And, why it was so important to me. (long pause) It's often the case that, the things you do that are the hardest and the scariest, help you to grow in ways you would not have grown. And that was by far, my involvement in that group, the leadership role I took in that group, was by far the most, daring thing I had ever done. And it made me feel in subsequent years, in, in different experiences and challenges in my life, (sigh) You've done work on the West Bank, how hard could this be? (pause) So it's been a great gift to me. There were times that year that I felt myself in danger, with one exception not in Beit Sahur, but just traveling through the West Bank, you know, walking you know with one other woman, down you know unknown streets in some Palestinian city – and I wasn't, I wasn't ever really afraid for myself. But typically what would go through my mind was, Please don't hurt me, I have two young children who still need a mother. Although, you know, whatever fear there was there wasn't enough to keep me home. Once in Beit Sahur...

PRATT: Wait, before you start this story, I should tell you that this tape is running out. Um, so, I have another one, we could keep going, or we could stop – we've been going a while.

FELD: Yea, we have. Um – and I have a lot to do today. Um – do you have enough of what you need?

PRATT: Yea!

FELD: Ok, so-

PRATT: I mean, I could sit here for another three hours and talk to you about all these other things that I, we didn't even get to. But, tragically, that isn't possible.

FELD: Yea. I-

PRATT: So, yea. There are maybe two more minutes on this tape. So, I would ask you if there's anything else you want to talk about? But, there's not really time to talk about it.

FELD: No, I think – You know, if this is sufficient for your purposes, I'm – I have a day.

PRATT: Okay. Well, thank you so much!

FELD: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Pratt, December 2008

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