

Oral History Interview: Allen Bennett

Interviewee: Allen Bennett

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B. This is Mark Bowman, Sunday, May 3rd, 2009, and I'm here with Rabbi Allen Bennett at Temple Israel in Alameda, California. Thank you, Allen. If you would be willing to start out just sort of saying your name and spelling it so the transcriber can get that.

Allen B. My name is Allen B. Bennett.

Mark B. Thanks so much for taking the time today. Would ask you to just sort of begin early years, where you came into the world, recollections of what early life was like in your family and community.

Allen B. I was born in Akron, Ohio in 1946 at the end of the Second World War. Perhaps a non-essential, but I think now, to me, interesting accident of my birth is that I wasn't born Allen Bennett. I was born, apparently, from what I can figure out chronologically, I was born Allen Blumenstein, because my father's name had become Blumenstein. My sister was born four and a half years before I was, and there had apparently been no thought, when she was born, about names and identification. But by the time the Second World War was over, my father was concerned that his children should not have to go through their entire lives with Jewish sounding names in case what had happened in Europe might spill over to the United States.

So from what I can – I don't know when it happened, but my birth certificate was changed early on, and all four of us in the family went from being Blumenstein to Bennett, so my sister apparently was Blumenstein for the first four and a half years of her life. My name, as I said to my father in later years, clearly would not have identified me as a Jew. It sounded more like an Anglican bishop, the Most Reverend Allen Barnett Bennett, which he thought wasn't much fun, so... And he said that I must have become a rabbi for spite because if he were trying to avoid my being visible and public as a Jew, this certainly was not a way to hide it very well.

Mark B. Right, right. [*Laughs.*] Agreed.

Allen B. So that was—

Mark B. Your parents were...what did they do, what was...?

Allen B. My father originally had wanted to be a dentist, and because of an accident of fate, ended up in the scrap iron and steel business, because his father-in-law was in it. My two uncles, my mother's brothers, thought they were going to run the company, but when my grandfather was dying, they were in Europe in the Second World War, and my father, as the sole supporter of his family, was not. And I think my dad was working in retail sales in clothing stores.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. My grandfather asked him...he knew he had a good business head, and he liked him, so he asked him if he would take over the business, and so he did. And he ran

it until he sold it, or till it went out of business, and that would have been 25, 30 years ago.

Mark B. Okay. Good.

Allen B. My mom never worked outside the home, and never worked much in it, either. We were comfortable. A liberal Jewish family in a town that had, before I was born had five synagogues, three of them Orthodox, one Conservative, and one Reform. By the time I left, which would have been around 1960, I think there was one Orthodox, one Conservative, and one Reform. My dad was the...my mother's mother had been one of the leading Jewish society women that volunteered for all the Jewish organizations. My mom, who was not well physically, did the best she could from home, mostly.

And Dad was the...Dad was the president of everything and anything he ever was involved in. He was the president of the hospital board, he was the president of the Rotary Club and the temple and the country club and – yeah, just whatever. He didn't like the way the phone company was treating its customers in the little town where his business was, so he started his own phone company. And he thought that the banks were screwing people to the wall, so he started his own bank, and both of them flourished. And the only reason that he didn't stay with those things any longer than he had to was it kept interfering with his golf game.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. So, I mean, I think the thing in his life about which he was most passionate was golf.

Mark B. Was golf.

Allen B. And actually, when he was young, he had wanted to be a golf pro and could have. I mean, he had a four handicap, so he was a super golfer. But he, being the responsible guy that he was, said that he wanted to make sure he could support his family, and didn't think a pro golfer could do that with any security, so he was going to do something else. Anyway, so that was that.

Mark B. That's that.

Allen B. I was shipped off to boarding school when I was 13, ostensibly not because of behavioral problems, but because my parents didn't think that the schools in our hometown were adequate to give me the education that they thought I should have. By the time I left to go to prep school, neither of them had really become enamored of my idea of becoming a rabbi. I had decided that when I was five.

Mark B. Okay. Do you recall how that formulated?

Allen B. It was a mistake.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. Our kindergarten teacher in Sunday School wasn't there that Sunday, so one of the mothers of the students was the substitute teacher. And being kindergartners, we didn't know that she didn't know anything about what she was doing, but her son Jimmy, being the loudest mouthed kid in the class probably twice over, realizing that his mother didn't have any idea what to do, said, "Well, why don't we play temple? And he

should be the rabbi,” pointing at me. And for whatever reason, I didn’t say no. Because my dad was so involved in the synagogue – we were at services on Sabbath eve every week anyway – so I at least knew what the rabbi looked like, or maybe what he did.

A psychoanalyst and I would later on discuss some of the implications of that early imprinting with the rabbi stuff. But in any case, I came home from Sunday School that day and said, “Well, I guess I’m going to be a rabbi.” My mother’s response was – she didn’t say it in these words – but it was sort of like, “Isn’t that nice, dear, why don’t you go out and play in traffic?” And my father probably wasn’t there to respond, and I’m not sure my mother cared enough to tell him about it when the time came, because I’m sure she thought that since my dad wanted me to go into the scrap business, there was no point in discussing it any further. But the nickname stuck, and I always...I mean I re—

Mark B. The nickname was Rabbi, huh?

Allen B. Yeah.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. I mean, other kids were called things like schmuck and, you know, but...from early on, that’s what they – that was my nickname.

Mark B. That’s what you were called.

Allen B. Yeah. There was another piece of the puzzle. I mean, for me it was a puzzle, at least. I didn’t find Friday night services particularly boring. I didn’t find them particularly interesting, because I didn’t understand what was going on in terms of the

philosophy or the theology or the liturgy. But because we were there so often, I got into the, sort of the flow of it. And so I was...I think it didn't take very long for me to have memorized the Hebrew prayers. And it was, I think, partly because of that and what developed into a real love for language and linguistics that I was able to learn Hebrew much faster, because I was already familiar with the sound of it from services. And I think that sort of contributed to the comfort level.

In terms of family dynamics – and there's something about this that all ties together as well – Mom was a very cold fish, very controlling, brilliant. By her own claims the smartest woman she ever met. She was a Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year at the University of Wisconsin. My dad never finished college, so she always had something to lord over him. She was punctual, punctilious, clean, polite, well educated, I think worldly, for people who had never been overseas at that point in time. But always in control. No matter how ill she was – and she was always ill – she was always in control, sometimes in a very passive-aggressive sort of way.

So in my, I think, last three years of seminary, while I was in psychoanalysis, one of the things we pieced together was that at eight o'clock on every Friday night, the rabbi would walk out of the entrance door onto the altar dressed in a black gown, and for the next hour and 15 minutes or more, my mother didn't say anything to anybody; she was silent. And unconsciously, I think, an awareness took root that that man in that black gown had immense power over my mother.

Now, it turned out that in the car on the way home after services she would always critique his sermons, which meant that she at least listened. But she always

complained. They were either too long, or he repeated himself, or the point that he made wasn't really good, you know the... My father would always defend him, the rabbi, because he was my dad's golf partner. So there was a very interesting sort of interconnection which just, I think, added – whether significantly or not – added to the formulation of character.

Mark B. Right. So you went off to prep school? Where was that?

Allen B. Hudson, Ohio, Western Reserve Academy.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. A school that had been founded in 1826. Ultimately moved to Cleveland to become the university and then they decided that they needed a preparatory school in Hudson, so they reopened it. When I was there, it was an all boys school. But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves because in 1957, when I was 11, my father decided that I was too old for day camp, which was clearly true. Where are you from?

Mark B. I'm from Mansfield, Ohio.

Allen B. Okay. So you may not know that Jewish kids, for the most part, didn't stay home in the summer; they all went off to camp. One of my dad's plants was in Mansfield.

Mark B. Mm-hmm.

Allen B. So as a good Midwestern Jewish kid, the question was, of course, where would I go to camp. My sister had gone to a place in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, which is

in southeast Wisconsin. But another one of my dad's golf partners, a guy who ran a shoe store, the Jewish shoe store in Akron, sent his kid to a camp in northwest Wisconsin, and the kid was a sort of a Dumbo the Flying Elephant fat wuss, and Dad said, well, if Norm's kid Steve is going to become a man that way, I'll send my son there and, you know. So I went.

A boys camp started in 1929. A place that probably had a greater influence on me than anything else in my life, and still does. It's still *the* most important influence in my life, as we speak. I was a camper there for six years and I was on the staff for seven years, and except for a hiatus when it was not possible for me to get back there, I've been back every summer for family camp, which is a week-long session after camp is over, since 1988. But this would be my 52nd year of affiliation with that place.

But again, it was a boys camp, so it was all boys. And as I came to learn – not particularly consciously, but as I came to learn – hormones are hormones, and if you're not gay, you still have hormones, and if you don't have a non-gay place to put them, you can just as well put them in a gay place until you get out of that phase. Were my father alive today, he would say it's still a phase that I'm going through.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. But there was no knowledge – there was no discussion about that. I don't think he could have even formulated a vocabulary for it in the '50s. My first summer was '57. My first crush on a counselor was in '58. And I'm still in contact with that guy. And he's married, has grandchildren, he's retired, you know, all that kind of stuff.

Mark B. Yeah, yeah.

Allen B. But he was this absolutely just dazzlingly sweet, nice, gorgeous, blonde sailing counselor who became a professor of music in Mississippi, right? And basically took me from a kid whose piano teacher was so frustrated because I couldn't master reading music very well, and, I mean, he – Ray, the camp counselor, was the accompanist for all the camp hootenannies and stuff.

Mark B. Okay, mm-hmm.

Allen B. And I must have said to him one day, how do you do that? I mean, you don't even look at music. And he said, well, I don't...I know the songs. I don't need the music. And I said, well, show me what you do. And we used to sit, in our free time, and, I mean, very, very lovingly, very gently he would say, well, apparently you know how to do this, because...so encouraging that I came to understand through him that I really could pretty much play whatever I could hear. So it was one of the first times in my life when I got that kind of unconditional encouragement to take a gift and share it and run with it.

But it was also a time...I physically matured a little bit early. I mean, at least I started noticing that I had pubic hair before...and I was checking everybody else out, but not everybody else was getting it when I was getting it. And because it was all boys all summer, and you went to that camp in those days either for two months or two months, whichever came first – now you can go for the first four weeks or the second four weeks, or all eight, but in those days you were together, same boys, same bunk, eight weeks.

And as we became sexual, it was either us or the chipmunks, and most of the guys couldn't catch the chipmunks, so... So there were sort of unofficially campy kinds of, you know, circle jerks and other kinds of things that we did, but nobody – I just can't imagine that anybody ever thought the word "gay" in 1957 or '58. And I certainly didn't think of it. But I didn't care. As long as I was getting my jollies, you could have called it cherry pie, it would have been fine.

When I ended up going to prep school, they had, again, all boys, right? And I had already gotten to the point – my dad was getting clearer on the concept, not willing to accept it, but getting clearer on the concept – that his passion for sports and love of sports was not transmitted to me, at least not in ways that he wanted. He loved baseball and he loved football and he loved cigars. And to this day, I could live the rest of my life entirely without any of those, okay?

But he would pack us into the car in Akron, and my mom would light up her unfiltered Camels and my dad would light up his whatever cigar it was, and we would drive to Cleveland to go to the Browns games or the Indians games. We'd all get car sick because of the smoke, and da-da-da. So even if I liked sports, I was too sick by the time I got to the stadium to enjoy it. But I couldn't catch a ball. I don't think he ever tried to throw a football because I think he gave up because I couldn't do a softball.

Just...but that counselor in '58 was also the sailing counselor. And I had already kind of started to figure out – this is a wilderness camp, by the way, it's an outdoors camp. It wasn't a sports camp, it wasn't about competition. Whatever competition there was, was my competition against me to make me better.

Mark B. Right.

Allen B. And it's one of the most important kind of value things that they teach still. I mean, it's really a baseline value thing that they teach at this camp is that the competition that we have is with ourselves, to improve ourselves to the best of our ability so that whatever gifts we have to share, we can do better. And I was too young to be allowed to go sailing. But because Ray was the sailing counselor, he would take the whole cabin on a boat on a day when we didn't have other things that we had to do. So that was my first introduction to it, and I was hooked, just hooked.

So the next summer, '59, I was allowed to be in the sailing program and stayed in it until – and my last summer as a camper was '62, and that was the year I achieved the highest rank in sailing at camp. And, I mean, I just – it was...it was like heaven – going to heaven without having to die to get there. In '63, the first summer on staff, I was on the sailing staff. And by '65, maybe, I was heading up the sailing staff. And it was my life. I mean, I...every year when I left camp, I made a countdown calendar for every single day that I could count, you know, until I got back. And every year I tried to get back up there earlier and stay later.

I was telling somebody here last night that if I...the book that I want to write is a book about Midwestern values as they were exemplified by that place and the people in that place, with the assumption that if the world ran according to the values that we taught at that camp, there would be no wars, there would be no poverty, and no famine. And instead of greedy competition, there would be sort of blissful cooperation and really, really good global teamwork.

Mark B. Was it often the same boys back year after year so there was kind of a community that formed, or would it turn over a lot?

Allen B. The return rate to that camp is...it's remarkably high.

Mark B. Okay. That's what I was guessing.

Allen B. I was a unit head in 1970, so I had, I think there were 240 kids then, so about 75 boys in the village, 13-year-olds. And already, by the time they were 13-year-olds, they had established pretty good reputations for being troublemakers. And sometimes when you're a troublemaker they don't want you to come back. I didn't come back the following summer, but 97% of the kids in that village did, because they think they're free. They think they're playing, right? All we do is give them a safe space with incredibly large boundaries for them to learn about themselves and each other and the society that we create for them in that environment, which is a *phenomenal* environment. And let them go at it. So...and the network created from that place is...it's just, it's unbelievable.

I'll give you one example that has nothing to do with what we're talking about. I'm going to be going off to Washington, D.C. at the end of this month to do a wedding, and it's a wedding that I wouldn't normally do. A Catholic woman and a Jewish guy, and they have not committed to raising their kids as Jews and they've not committed to having a Jewish home. And normally those would be two of the reasons that I wouldn't do it. But I, for some reason, thought that this guy had something going for him. He's a law student at Stanford, and he's very strongly Jewishly identified, so I couldn't figure out what this was all about.

But the more we talked, the more there was a piece, something missing, and I hadn't had time yet to really take any biographical information from them, even though I wanted to. So at one point he offered something, and I said, "Where did you get that from?" And he said, "Oh, it's just from stuff I do in the summer, or did in the summer." I said, "Well, what did you do in the summer?" He said, "Oh, I went to a camp." I said, "Really? Where was that?" He said, "It's in the Midwest. You would never have heard of it." I said, "Give me a for instance." He said, "It's right next to a little town. It's called Camp Nebagamon."

I said, David, I spent 13 of the best years of my life at Camp Nebagamon, and was supposed to become the assistant director of the camp, except that I ended up not being able to do it. And I said, so you have just gotten yourself out of my needing to take any biographical information. I said, if you worked at the camp as a staff person, I know enough about your character to know that I can do this wedding without any hesitation. It was just that simple. I mean, there are some real bad guys that came out of it.

Mark B. Right. Sure.

Allen B. I remember asking the former director once what he could tell me about a certain guy, and he said, "Oh, little Henry from Tulsa?" I said, "Yeah, little Henry from Tulsa." Little Henry from Tulsa was Henry Kravis, who was the managing partner of Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, the takeover specialists, right? And he was a little snot when he was a kid and he was at camp. Nothing changed. If you ever see "Barbarians at the Gate," the movie, that's about Henry Kravis.

Mark B. That's about him.

Allen B. Yeah, right. But at the same time, Tom Factor, who's a dentist in Sausalito, was the grandson of Max Factor, right? Peter Rosenwald, who was in my cabin from Columbus, is from the Sears Roebuck family. King Harris – and his first name was King – King William Wishbone Harris was from the family that made the salad dressing, and his sister Toni was from the home permanent, right? I mean, it's – yeah, I mean, these were very, very well placed people.

The Tisches, Andy, Danny, Jimmy and Tommy Tisch, were all campers when I was a counselor, but their dad and uncles were, like, the Postmaster General, and so on, so on, so on. Half of them are Republicans and half of them are Democrats. But they were, yeah, the Loews Hotel and Theatre chains. And when we were kids, we didn't know that, you know. We just knew there were four boys named Tisch and they were brothers, and that was a lot of boys to have in one family, you know, that was a real curse. So the connections that we have made were just...they're amazing, you know, and international.

Mark B. Mm-hmm, sure.

Allen B. There's a woman in our congregation whose daughter is going to go teach English as a second language in South Korea. She mentioned it to somebody who said, "Well, I'm going to Kenya." And I said, "Well, would you look up a friend of mine in Kenya?" She said, "Who do you know in Kenya?" I said, "He was my counselor in orienteering at camp; he's from Denmark." Whoa! You know. But we talk all the time on Skype.

Mark B. Okay, wonderful.

Allen B. All right, so back to the...back...we should do this.

Mark B. Yeah, so the religious development during teen years, what do you recall of that?

Allen B. Well, I became a Bar Mitzvah and then I went away. My prep school was sort of Christian based, so I became the Jew. I think of the 264 boys that there were at the academy, 12 were Jewish. And once a month they would shuttle us off to Akron from Hudson so that we could have some interaction with Jewish teens. There was no religious stuff. Religiously, we had to go to chapel Tuesday, Thursday, Friday morning and Sunday evening. I didn't ever kneel before the cross that they had on the wall, but it was reputed to have been the last cross before which Columbus knelt prior to sailing for Miami. And I learned every Protestant hymn that there ever was, and could play them all.

Mark B. Mm-hmm, could play them all.

Allen B. Yeah. And I think I was confirmed, sort of in absentia. I mean, they sent me something to read, I read it, and then I, you know. Because they knew I was going to be a rabbi, so it counted. When I got off to – so in my senior year in high school, this would be '64, I had a roommate from Kuwait. Nice guy. Really, really nice guy. From...he was an – his name is Al Nasar, last name is Al Nasar, and I think he's related to the royal family. I mean, they probably all are, but in any case, nice guy. He was a real hotshot on the soccer team.

And we, you know, it was a one-room room in a dormitory, right, with two beds, two desks, two closets. So he would sit here and I would sit here and we'd do our homework, and, you know, if we had a question we'd help each other out. And I was sitting there one night, and I said – his name was Halid, and we called him Cal – I said, “Cal, I have a question.” He said, “What is it?” I said, “What would you say if I told you I was homosexual?” And he looked up from the homework and he said, “I don't know. Did you do the math yet?” I mean, I don't know, maybe his Arabic didn't include that.

Mark B. Uh-huh.

Allen B. I hadn't done the math, so we did the math. I never pursued it with him. But shortly thereafter, I made what was almost a fatal mistake. I needed to talk to somebody about it. Apparently it was bothering me. And I don't know why it was bothering me. Nobody ever talked about it, we just, you know, if we were on the wrestling team, we just wrestled longer, you know, that kind of stuff.

Mark B. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Allen B. But I decided to tell one of the masters, one of the teachers. And the one I chose was the guy who was on duty that night, who was the coach of the football team and an English teacher who smoked a pipe. Sherwin Kibbe was his name. And I went to his apartment in the dorm and knocked on the door, and he said, come in. And I do, and I said, “Mr. Kibbe, I think I may be homosexual.” And he almost choked on his pipe. But he really maintained his cool very well, and he said, “Well, you know, that won't do.” And I don't know what I said. I'm guessing I said something like, well, I suppose not. And he said, “Well, we'll discuss this further.” End of discussion.

The next morning I was summoned to the headmaster's office. Mr. Kibbe had decided that I wasn't the next person he should talk to about it, the headmaster was. The headmaster, John D. Hollowell, said, "Mr. Bennett, please sit," so I sat. He said, "Mr. Kibbe tells me that you had a conversation with him last night." I said, "Well, yes, I did." I couldn't figure out why Hollowell knew about it, but I wasn't thinking in those terms. He said, "Well, you know, we don't...we don't do that here." And I thought, well, maybe that's why I was asking about it. And what do you do if you don't do it here?

He said, "So you leave us with one of two choices, sir." I said, "Well, that's, you know, that's a start. What are they?" He said, "Well, one is that we will dismiss you from the school, and of course have to tell your parents. And the other is that we would send you to the school psychiatrist under confidence and see what develops." So I said, "Let's start with the psychiatrist." Because, I mean, if I said to my mom, if it were Tuesday and I said, Mom, it's Tuesday, she would want to have an argument about it, so I, you know, I figured this was...we wouldn't go there with it.

So they sent me to see a psychiatrist. They took me to see a psychiatrist in Cleveland who interviewed me and said, "You know, it's spring." And I said, "What the hell does that have to do with anything?" He said, well, you know, the sap is rising in the trees, and things are coming into bloom, and it's a time for all kinds of things to be happening, and interest in sex and other types. Said it's, it's...I'm sure it's just a phase that you're going through, and I wouldn't really worry about it, and I'll tell the school not to worry about it, and that we've discussed it and it doesn't need to be an issue. And I said, okay, fine. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. *[Laughs.]* Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Allen B. Works for me. That was it. Not another word was said. Now, it didn't mean that we didn't have all kinds of wild sex on the fire escapes of the dormitories and other hidden, secret places when nobody was looking. And I think, from what I can gather, nobody else in my entire graduating class still has those propensities. And I asked a few people, and they said, oh my god, I haven't done that since high school. Your loss, fella. So that was it.

One of the guys at school that I had the biggest crush on was dating a girl from Cleveland who I thought was the most drop dead gorgeous woman I had ever seen, and he...so my fantasies were not about just having sex with him, but watching the two of them have sex, which I never got to do. He was also – they had a sailing activity at school, and he was one of the people in the sailing activity, and so that was always fun. And he ended up being the first student in the history of the school to go into the Navy after high school, and they didn't want him to do it because they didn't think it was good enough.

But he went in the Navy, and I ended up going to college in Cleveland at Western Reserve University, which is where that girl lived, so I started dating her, because she was just hot. But I didn't know from hot. I didn't know what to do about hot. I mean, they would – the academy had dances and I took the same old chubby girl to those dances that I'd, you know, known from elementary school because she was interested in the high society stuff of the academy and I was interested in not having no date.

My life was threatened because I dated this girl in Cleveland. Her dad was in the grocery business. The grocery business in Cleveland was run by an organization. In fraternity terms you would have called in the “*May-fi-ay*.” And Giuseppe Gunta did not want Nina Anne Michelle to be dating some Jew, so he told her that if she insisted on seeing me, he would have that taken care of. So she was kind enough to tell me that. I mentioned it to my dad, who was thrilled that I was dating somebody gorgeous, a woman of means from Pepper Pike, or wherever it was. And my dad happened to mention to one of his golf buddies that this had happened, and well, that golf buddy was the guy who put Giuseppe Gunta in the grocery business, a Jewish guy—

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. —who called Giuseppe Gunta and said, you lay one finger on that boy and you won’t have a family left to mourn for you. Nina went her way, I went my way. We just...she found somebody more interesting, apparently people who were going to be sexual. And for the next four years I was a sexual celibate, absolutely repressed.

Mark B. By choice, by accident?

Allen B. I think probably a little of both.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. Except in the spring of ’65 I went to the rabbi at the Hillel House, came out to him and said, you know, I think I’m homosexual. Another mistake, because he was in the closet, and behaved extremely inappropriately, but suggested that if I were really tormented by this, I should probably see somebody about it. So he set me up with

a psychoanalyst...psychiatrist, the same putz that I had seen the year before from the academy.

Mark B. [Laughs.]

Allen B. Who did not remember that I had been there the year before, and basically said the same tripe that he had said the year before, and sent me packing, and that was that. So I didn't have sex with women, I didn't have sex with men. I had incredible amounts of fantasies and put all of that energy into other things. It was a miserable four years. Just miserable.

Mark B. So you decided to go to Hebrew Union College.

Allen B. Well, then I...then I...

Mark B. How did that happen?

Allen B. Then I, then I decided that when I got out of college, if I didn't want to go to work in the scrap business, I better figure out what I was going to do. And so I thought I was going to be a psychologist.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. Applied to seven psychology grad schools and seminary, because seminary was where you became a rabbi, and I was rejected at seven psychology grad schools. And my dad's golf partner put some pressure on the admissions people in Cincinnati and I got into the rabbinical school.

Mark B. Do you have a sense of why you were rejected at all the grad programs?

Allen B. Because my...I think my GPA wasn't good enough.

Mark B. Oh, okay. Okay.

Allen B. I was certainly – I mean, if they were looking at other kinds of nonacademic stuff I was quite fine. I mean, I...

Mark B. Okay, right.

Allen B. But I had two bad starts. When I got into high school, I'd been...I placed second in the state of Ohio in an algebra scholarship test in eighth grade, I think, and took the same class at the academy and almost flunked it. So, I mean, started out, almost got kicked out of the academy. But I graduated on the honor roll. Started college, almost flunked out in my first year and graduated on the dean's list with honors, right? So there wasn't enough time to catch up for all the nonsense that I'd done at the beginning of both of those four year periods.

So I got into the Hebrew Union College. My admissions interview was stupid. It was the – it's 1968. The dean of admissions asked me the question that he'd asked everybody else, "Are you applying here so that you can get out of the draft?" Well, I was in Cleveland. We didn't even know there was a war going on. It wasn't until two years later that Kent State happened. So I said, "What are you talking about?" And he thought I was lying, you know, and he said, "How can you say that with a straight face?" And I didn't even know what straight meant. This is '68, so '69 hadn't happened yet, right?

Mark B. Mm-hmm.

Allen B. So I got in, and I don't think it was because of anything that I had going for me, in particular. But I aced the first two years. I just was...because it was all language stuff. And I didn't have to do any thinking. I mean, it was like music, you know. If I could hear it or see it, I could do it. When I got into theology and history and philosophy, I was just...I was...they might as well have shot me. But the Hebrew stuff and the Aramaic stuff, you know, that, I just was like a pig in shit, I was having such a good time.

Mark B. Mm-hmm. Through this time were you thinking of becoming a rabbi, or you weren't sure?

Allen B. Oh, yeah. No, no. Once I got to rabbinical school, yeah. I didn't know what I was going to do when I finished. I mean, I hadn't – I didn't particularly want to be in a congregation, but I thought the idea – I mean, it was a...I...for the first time in a long time I was enjoying studying, you know? That was a good thing. And the people that I was with seemed pretty nice...for Jews. [*Laughs.*] You know, for...and for people who were going to be, like, rabbis, I mean, they were human. They smoked dope, they played around, they had fun, they played bridge, you know. I don't play bridge, but, I mean, you know, they were regular people. And I was better at academics than some of them, so they came to me for help, and that made me feel good, you know, valued and stuff.

 But something was going on. Sixty-eight, I was not at camp for family camp because I had to be in the intensive Hebrew summer program at the seminary so I could be up to speed when school started. But in 1970, after my first...after my second year at the seminary, word got out that I had made an inappropriate overture to an underage

young man, and in a matter of an extremely short period of time, I was told that my days at that camp were now officially over.

Mark B. This is at the camp where that happened?

Allen B. It actually wasn't.

Mark B. Oh, okay.

Allen B. But it was a, it was a young man—

Mark B. But the accusation was at the camp, not the seminary?

Allen B. The young man and his brother had both been campers at the camp. His older brother had been a camper of mine for three consecutive summers, and is still one of my best friends. The younger brother had the good sense then to say thanks, I'm not interested, which he wasn't. And so I...fine, I just went to sleep – [*laughs*] – you know. Somebody else, for whom this shouldn't have had any meaning at all, mentioned something in passing – a counselor mentioned something in passing to his father about a conversation that we had had, and his father reported to the camp director that I had been talking to his son, the counselor, about this, and he thought it was inappropriate.

The camp director started fishing around just to make sure that everything was okay and discovered, because he knew who to ask, that it wasn't. Done. I was in Denmark when I got the news, and I didn't know that when I got the news I was under a suicide watch because they knew the impact that that piece of information, that I wasn't

coming back to camp, was going to have on me, and the reason that I wasn't coming back to camp.

Mark B. You were in Denmark for...?

Allen B. I was taking a year off from seminary.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. I had...I had sort of come to grips with my sexuality and...and something was wrong. I didn't know what was going on, but I was...I was at the beginning of – beginning stages of what I sort of felt was like a meltdown. And I said to my folks, look, I got – I'll give you a couple of choices about where I think things should go from here. Either I should get into therapy or I should just take a year off from school and maybe do some traveling. And my folks, who thought that therapy was something that only the devil engaged in, and you wouldn't want anybody to ever know that you ever heard the term, da-da-da-da, said, where would you like to go? And I said, well, I was thinking about around the world. They said, good. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. So I had spent the first four months of the academic year in Jerusalem learning spoken Hebrew, and then went back to Europe so that I could do my touring of Europe before heading to the Far – the Middle East, Far East and back that way. And so I spent three and a half months in the home of one of Camp Nebagamon's Danish counselors, a guy who was the only Dane up to that point who had refused to do

orienteering. I don't know if you know what the sport is. It's a hiking sport, cross country hiking using a map and compass.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. And they're all world champions, right? Well, Jacob comes over from Denmark and says, I'm not doing that if I can go out in a sailboat, so he was on my sailing staff. We had – and he's now a Lutheran minister, so, I mean, you know, we had a lot in common.

Mark B. Yeah, great.

Allen B. He's a great guy. Sort of a Danish version of the Pied Piper. And when I had said, hey, I want to travel around Europe, do you want to join me, he said, I won't join you, but you should use our home as your base of travel. So when the decision was made that I wasn't coming back to camp, the camp director called Jacob and said this is what we're going to be saying to Allen, this is why we're going to be saying it, and you're one of his best friends, please make sure he doesn't do anything that we'll regret.

One sidebar on this, because I really did contemplate suicide. Jacob's family – he's one of four siblings – his parents were just the sweetest people who ever lived, ever. Ever anywhere. His dad spoke English like I speak Urdu. I mean, just...it was just a nonentity for him, just no way. His mom struggled a little bit. Jacob was totally fluent in it. His older brother Lars, no chance. Thomas was okay and Greta was learning. She now teaches English in Danish schools.

But after I got the news, I'm sitting in their living room at their piano. Jacob's dad was learning to walk for the third time. He learned to walk when he was born, he'd been in an accident and had to learn to walk. Then he was in another accident and was learning, so he was home on crutches. I was so intensely into whatever I was playing I didn't hear him come into the room on his crutches. But knowing now what I know about him, I shouldn't have been at all surprised.

He walked up behind me, put his hands on my shoulders, and he said – every time I tell this story I get choked up – he said, “Your music speaks very sad. If you can't go home again, you must live in my house and be my son.” I hadn't said a word. Nobody had said a word to him. He had no verbal cues as to what had gone on. He just pulled out of my music that something horrible had happened. So, you know, I wasn't going to tell him what had happened. I, you know, I just...no way. By the way, before I left Jerusalem, I had come out to my parents.

Mark B. Ohh. How did that happen?

Allen B. I had – well, the intensive Hebrew summer program in Jerusalem was fabulous. It was six days a week, mornings, and then you had 12 hours to study – [laughs] – so you could be ready for the next day. But in between I was taking walks with my old college girlfriend, because she and her husband were living in Jerusalem at the time, and I was reading, just reading endlessly. And I'd brought some books on gay themes, which I was hiding very carefully, but I also read *Zorba the Greek*. And it was like somebody had just turned on the lights.

November 17th, 1970 I wrote a 17 page letter to my parents describing how absolutely wonderful the Jerusalem experience had been. And, by the way, I just finished reading Kazantzakis' book *Zorba the Greek*; if you ever have a chance to read it, it's *really* a good book. And by the way, I'm homosexual. Love, Allen. That was it. Subsequently, there was a shry heard round the world.

Mark B. [Laughs.]

Allen B. I get a cable, a telex, something from my parents, "We're coming to Israel." My mother, in a wheelchair, with Multiple Sclerosis, and my father with a heart condition, they're coming to Israel. Prepare for them. Right, I'm in an apartment. No room for them in the apartment. It's my parents, so I go to the King David Hotel and I said, "I'm going to need the best room in the house." "For how long?" I said, "Until they leave."

So they arrived. My mother looked like a ghost and my father looked like a bullfighter. I mean, he was bright red, she was white. We took the long drive in the car from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Not one word passed between us. We get into the hotel. Sixth floor of the King David Hotel with a view of the old city, and it's the best – except the fact that David Ben-Gurion was in the next room, it was the best room in the hotel.

And my father says – and it was so emblematic of my family – my father says, "When we get back to the States, I'm going to have you locked up." And my mother, ever the narcissist, said to him, "Honey, you can't do that." And he said, "And why the hell not?" She said, "Because if you have him locked up, I'm going to have you locked up, and then who will take care of me?"

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. So you know how much of this was about me.

Mark B. Mm-hmm.

Allen B. So the agreement was when I got back to the States I would see a therapist and, you know, I would... So it was a two-fer, because I got the trip around the world and the therapist, yeah? So anyway, we spent the rest of the week not speaking to each other very much, but touring Israel, which I thought was grand. It was really nice, right?

Mark B. Uh-huh, with your parents.

Allen B. So then they left and I left in December and went to Denmark and spent three and a half months traveling around Europe, came back to Israel to change clothes, sent all my winter clothes back to Ohio and got my summer clothes out of storage in Jerusalem, and headed off to the Far East. And I came back in April of 1971.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. And I guess I spent the rest of the summers in Cincinnati. So one does not – one did not come out at the Hebrew Union College in those days. But one was – this one in particular was very lucky that Cincinnati is configured in such a way that the Hebrew Union College is across the street from the University of Cincinnati, and in between the two, the buffer between the university and the college is a wooded area called Burnet Woods.

Burnet Woods was one of the main gay cruising parks of Cincinnati. I didn't know that initially. And being the outdoors type, I surprisingly hadn't made it over there much, didn't, you know. I didn't know that I had much cause to go there until somebody pointed it out to me, at which point I then sort of became the unofficial chaplain of Burnet Woods.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. Met lots of people there who remain good friends to this day, the ones that haven't died. Fully accepted my being gay, but didn't do much acting on it because I didn't know where to go or what to do. I don't drink and I don't smoke. Never did, so... So I was uncomfortable in... And since I didn't drink, I didn't go to bars. I didn't even know about gay bars. I don't think I ever went to one until I left Cincinnati. Or maybe my last year, but it was still too risky at that point.

So I was having sex with people at Burnet Woods. Nobody ever came back to the dorm or my apartment, because I had roommates, and they were all rabbinical student roommates. I even had a gay rabbinical student roommate who wasn't my type, and we never had sex, and he dropped out of school because he decided you couldn't be a rabbi and be gay. He didn't tell me that was his reason, and I never deduced that that was his reason, and I hadn't made that conclusion because I never thought about it. I just thought this is who I am, but I've got to finish school. When you finish school, that's what they tell you, so...

Mark B. Mm-hmm.

Allen B. So the next attempt on my future life was in my senior year. It was getting toward graduation time, and, you know, spring really does this. Sap rising in the trees.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. It's a good time of year.

Mark B. Good time. Mm-hmm.

Allen B. I thought it would...the seminary was the only one, the only Jewish seminary that I knew of that had an Olympic size pool, so I thought, you know, I'll have a swimming party for my friends from the woods.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. So I was in cahoots with the maintenance staff. I got them to unlock the gym, but not ask any questions, because I'd given him a six pack of beer. The lights were off. I was on *extremely* good terms with the matron of dormitories, which was right next to the gym – I mean, her apartment was next to the gym. It was a full moon night and there were probably 20 or 30 guys from Burnet Woods naked in the pool, and I hear a knock on the door to the gym. So I figured, oh my god, I never thought about that. I mean, I don't know what I was thinking taking such risks.

But it was the matron of dormitories, Ruth Frankl, and she...I came to the door in my towel. She said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm having a swimming party." She said, "Why are the lights off?" I said, "It's a full moon, you can see perfectly well, in there, and we didn't want to disturb anybody." She said, "Well, who's in there?" I said,

“Just a bunch of my friends.” She said, “Well, how did you get in?” I said, “Well, Walter let me in.” She said, “Oh, okay.” She said, “You’re swimming in the dark.” I said, “Sweetie, we’re using the buddy system. Nobody swims alone.” “You sure?”

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. I said, “Ruth, trust me, I’m from Camp Nebagamon.” And she knew about camp. She said, “All right, well, just make sure you lock it up and turn off the lights when you leave.” I said, “Not a problem.” I didn’t throw up when I went back into the gym, but I should have, probably. That was it. So nobody knew.

The day I was ordained there were...it was the largest ordination class in the history of Judaism. There were two guys in order, we went alphabetically. The guy who was right after me, who was also gay, turned to me just before we got ordained and he said, “Don’t ever tell anybody that you’re gay or you’ll never, ever get a job as a rabbi.” And then he gave me a kiss on the lips. Okay. So he was always giving me advice, and I never listened, so who cared. But I had not, indeed, told anybody at the seminary because you’d get kicked out. I mean, if they knew going in, you wouldn’t get in, and if they found out while you were there, you were out.

Not being much of a competitor, I didn’t look for jobs in synagogues. The job, my first job was as a Jewish chaplain at the Mayo Clinic hospitals. And it was...I did it because I was interested in it, not because it wasn’t a synagogue job. I mean, actually, it was a positive reason for going. But it also took me out of the horrific competition for jobs. Since they had so many students graduating, there was a real fight for good jobs. And I just, it just didn’t seem like what I wanted to do, to be in a synagogue.

Well, it turns out when I got to Rochester, they said, by the way, the chaplaincy is only half the job, the other half is being the rabbi of the synagogue here in town. So I did it for three years. I was the first Reform rabbi who ever was certified as a chaplain going through a CPE program.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. Not the first rabbi, but the first Reform rabbi.

Mark B. First Reformed rabbi.

Allen B. So that was terrific. And I also had a boyfriend while I was in Rochester. A wonderful, creative guy who was the tech director for the theatre, Rochester Civic Theatre. But it was very, very quiet. But I also got engaged to be married while I was in Rochester, and my future bride knew about my gay side.

Mark B. Was she from Rochester or from...?

Allen B. She was from St. Paul.

Mark B. St. Paul, okay.

Allen B. So she was living 90 miles away. And we didn't get married until...we married in August of '76. But she insisted that my gay partner come to the wedding and that I invite any of my gay friends from Rochester that I wanted to have at the wedding, so we did. And thank god Gary came to that wedding because when the florist forgot to bring the runner, right, he commandeered tablecloths from the temple kitchen, he had his sewing machine in the back of his VW squareback, and sewed them together, broke a

broomstick to use as the – I mean, you know, that’s what he did as a tech guy for the theatre.

The marriage lasted for less than a year. We separated in May of ’77. I, in the meantime, had been accepted into a doctoral program at the GTU. I moved out here and both of them stayed back there. They have never spoken to each other since the wedding, I don’t think. We never lived – she and I lived together between August of ’76 and May of ’77. I thought that the marriage wasn’t going anywhere, but I also thought there were some...that both of us were a little less aware of our realities than we had thought we were.

There was one straw that broke the camel’s back, and it was when I came home from services one Friday night and Wendy was home, and she – it was late and she was on the phone. And I said, “Who are you talking to?” She said, “I’m talking to your parents.” I said, “It’s three hours later on the East Coast. What are you doing talking with them at this hour?” She said, “Well, they want to talk to you.” I said, “Now? What’s going on?” She just handed me the phone, and my mother said, “How could you do this to us?”

And now you know as much as I knew she knew when she asked that question. I didn’t even know what the frame of reference was. And I said, “How could I do what?” “How could you lie to us? We thought you weren’t gay anymore. We thought that all was nailed in the coffin when you got married.” What am I supposed to say? I had just been outed by my wife. And my mom said, “This is going to kill your father.” As you

might expect, I didn't feel very good about that. So I said, "You know, I think we're going to have to talk about this later, because I don't think I can talk about it right now."

So I hung up the phone and I went and sat on the couch in the living room, and Wendy went in the bedroom, and finally came out, and she said, "Aren't you coming to bed?" And I looked at her and I said, "How could you possibly imagine that I would want to be in a bed with you after what you just did?" I said, "I'll sleep on the couch tonight, but you need to figure out where you're going to live the rest of your life, because it isn't going to be under my roof." So the next day we started making arrangements for her to move back to St. Paul, and we filed for...soon after filed for – we jointly filed for divorce. We tried to make it as amicable as we could.

I mean it was clear she was completely not connected to reality, and I was certainly not nearly as connected as I thought I was, to have been as oblivious to what was going on as I was. But she'd also been sleeping around with some guy while we were married, so she didn't bother to mention that to me either, so...she still, you know, she married that guy, which is fine, I hope she's happy. So...

Mark B. [*Laughs.*] Was there appeal to San Francisco? GTU just happened to be the school you got into? How did that happen?

Allen B. There was a rabbinical convention here in June of '76. My college sweetheart, the one that I had walked around Jerusalem with, had since gotten divorced and was living in San Francisco. She's a practicing psychologist. And I stayed with her during the rabbinical convention because I couldn't afford to – I think because I couldn't

afford to stay in the hotel, or maybe I was staying in the hotel and when the convention was over I stayed with her for a few days. She was a psychologist, right?

She said, you know, there's a program out here I think you'd be interested in. Maybe you should check it out. So I schlepped over to Berkeley to this place and took a look at their catalog, and I got really choked up because all of a sudden there were four different areas of study that I was *really* interested in that were all packaged as one thing that you could do in a PhD program. They call it Area Five, which tells you nothing, but it was psychology, sociology, anthropology and theology. I mean, I was in there.

Mark B. Yeah, okay.

Allen B. So I thought, there's no way. No way that I'm going to get into this program. But there was no way I could get in if I didn't apply, so I applied, and I got in. I think they were short on Jews that year, which is...

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. And actually, I think they told me that at some point. So I got in, and I was just...I was *ecstatic*. It was way too threatening for Wendy. I mean, I had said, look, we'll move to California. She'd never finished college. I said, so you'll work while I'm getting my PhD. When I get my PhD, you can go ahead and finish school if you want. Well, that sounded good, but she never did. And it all fell apart anyway, so it worked out okay. So I got into the program. I was in that program for 12 years and never finished.

Mark B. Oh, you – oh, I didn't – okay.

Allen B. I finished all my coursework, I passed all my exams, I did all the research on my dissertation, and then I asked the fatal question, who am I doing this for? And the answer, which was truthful, I mean, I'm – if – I am nothing else if not truthful. The answer was I'm doing this for my dad so he'll be proud of me. And I thought that's not really a very good reason for doing this. Hello, wake up and smell the coffee. So I went over to the registrar and I said, "I need to leave the program." She said, "You can't." I said, "What do you mean I can't?" She said, "I've grown accustomed to your face."

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. I mean, I really did know everybody around the school so well.

Mark B. Of course, of course.

Allen B. I mean, I think I knew the heads of all the seminaries, I knew most of the students, nine schools and all the rest. It was great, you know? But I wasn't doing anything. You know, I just...in order to earn a living, I didn't have time to work on the dissertation stuff. So I just said, hey, this is, you know, let's get honest here, let's not do that.

Mark B. Did your gay identity change, blossom, coming to San Francisco, to that area?

Allen B. Well, understand that when I got here in '77, it was – I lived in the East Bay. I wasn't in San Francisco. It didn't even occur to me to think much about gay stuff except for the fact that when I was there in June for the rabbi's convention, several other rabbis who were there and I discovered each other as being gay, because I think we all

bumped into each other at the gay pride celebration. I had never heard of a gay pride celebration. But it was one of the hottest days on record. The thing after the parade was at Mark's Meadow in Golden Gate Park, so there were a quarter of a million mostly naked men running around that meadow of the park.

And I'm walking around there going, *oh my god*. I mean, I'm sure it was a theological statement. *OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD*. And then I saw Chuck Libben(?), *oh, my god*, you know? And here's Phil Schecter. *Oh, my god*, uhh-uhh. And, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Wh-wh-wh ye-ye, b-da be-da-da." So one of them said, "Well, I'm going to the baths later, do you want to go?" I'd never heard of the baths.

So that rabbinical convention was a very important convention. So I knew then that there was gay life in San Francisco, but that's all I knew. I didn't know anything about the Castro, I'd never heard of Harvey Milk, you know, none of that stuff. I don't think Harvey had heard much about Harvey Milk at that point.

I spent three months in Berkeley, because I thought that's where I had to live to be in the doctoral program. When I found out that I didn't have to live there, I moved into a studio apartment in Haight-Ashbury. Two hundred bucks a month. A block from Haight Street and two blocks from Ashbury. Again, my college sweetheart Susan had helped me find the apartment, and that was that.

And I had come out here with an 18-year-old male nurse from Rochester thinking we were going to be together for the rest of our lives, and when he was spending his entire day, instead of looking for work, picking up tricks at the Berkeley Marina, I sent him back to Minnesota on the next bus.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. So I didn't need a two or three bedroom apartment in Berkeley. A studio in San Francisco was fine. It was that year, it was either '76 or '77 – it must have been '77 because I was already living here – somehow on Yom Kippur I ended up at Sha'ar Zahav. It had already been founded.

Mark B. They were founded in '77, I think I recall.

Allen B. They said it was their first Yom Kippur.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. So there's Daniel and Bernard and the third guy, who has five different names, so... And they were meeting in the basement of Glide.

Mark B. Oh, okay.

Allen B. And I was not out as a rabbi. I mean, there a lot of different closets, you know?

Mark B. Sure.

Allen B. So...Derrick Durst was the third guy. Peter Durst, Derrick Durst. He had all kinds of names. So I went for Yom Kippur, I started coming back on Friday nights, and Bernard Pechter, one of the three founders, at one point came up to me and made sure he introduced himself, because he wanted to know everybody who walked through the door. He was a self-proclaimed important person. And said, "So what do you do?" I said, "Well, I'm a graduate student at GTU." "Oh, that's nice. What did you do before

that?" Uh... So I said, "I'd rather that you not tell anybody." He said, "Your secret is safe with me." I said, "I'm a rabbi." He throws his arms around me and yells in my ear, "We've been waiting for you!" So that was my first engagement at Sha'ar Zahav. I was not their rabbi.

Mark B. Did they have a rabbi at the time?

Allen B. No. They'd only been in existence for a couple of months. And it was quite a while before they had a rabbi. I was the first, but it was very, very part-time. It was, again, it was the second consecutive synagogue I didn't want to be the rabbi of, and I stayed there until they fired me through the extremely devious connivings of the cabal that got me out. And it's been just fascinating to see how those individuals' lives played out subsequently, not in relation to me, but just as who they were as people.

Mark B. What were your impressions of the synagogue? What was it like? What was happening then?

Allen B. Well, it was a magnet for Jews who had been alienated from Judaism, and who I think were not necessarily particularly sure that this was going to be a place to drop an anchor or call home. It was a good cruising place if you were interested in Jewish men. Well, one of the things I learned early on was that most Jewish gay men weren't interested in Jewish men, they were interested in non-Jews. Well, how unusual is that? But for the people who did gravitate to it because it was a synagogue as opposed to because it was a place to cruise, they made it in – for them, they made it into a holy space wherever it was. And it became a real central focus of people's lives.

Mark B. Did it stay at Glide? Did it move around?

Allen B. No, we moved around.

Mark B. Moved around?

Allen B. Moved around. We ended up in a Buddhist monastery for a while, we were at the very bottom of Page Street renting some space there, we were at the Jewish Community Center on California Street, and there may have been other places before they bought the Mormon church up on Danvers. And that's before they bought the funeral home on Delores.

Mark B. Did they have an association with a denomination? They were independent?

Allen B. Initially they didn't. While I was their rabbi, since I was a Reform rabbi and had already learned, because the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations had come into being, had learned that there were other gay synagogues, and which ones were affiliated with – and not very many were, because I think BCC was the first. But they got such a warm welcome from the Union, as did I, by the way, when I came out and the then president of the Union, Alex Schindler, sort of took me under his wing, and I'll tell you that part of the history, too, because it's really interesting. In fact, it's, I think that's coming out in a book, *Torah Queeries*, have you heard about this?

Mark B. I haven't heard about that, no.

Allen B. I think it's going to be published this year. In any case, it was a movement that I knew would be receptive. The question was, since there were already a couple of Reform synagogues in San Francisco, would they allow another one to affiliate.

Mark B. Oh, okay.

Allen B. And the answer ended up being yes, because they didn't think the folks in the other synagogues would join this one, so we weren't going to be competing for folks, right? And it really was about competition. So they knew that the Conservative movement wouldn't be welcoming. The Reconstructionist movement might, but there was no infrastructure there for that. The Orthodox was not a possibility, so if they were going to affiliate at all, it would need to be the Reform movement. Their concerns basically were would we have to use their liturgical materials, or could we create our own.

The answer was we could create our own, that's not a problem. We didn't have to use their religious school curriculum if we had a religious school, but in those days nobody had kids, so it wasn't an issue. But should it become an issue, was it an issue? No, we could use any curricular materials we wanted to, but, by the way, the Reform movement has the best curricular materials of any Jewish denomination, so if you're going to, you know, this is – you can use those resources and take from them, you don't have to use them. So, I mean, there were all kinds of good reasons to affiliate, and so they did.

Relatively slowly, but relatively surely, the synagogue got integrated into mainstream Jewish life in San Francisco. Just because it's San Francisco didn't mean

that the Jewish community was going to automatically be accepted, and it wasn't initially. Part of the reason that I ended up not being the rabbi at Sha'ar Zahav, I think, was because of the externally projected internalized self-hate of the Jews who belonged to that congregation who were very uncomfortable with somebody who passed as a gay person so comfortably in straight society.

And as an openly gay rabbi, you know, I came out during the Briggs Initiative stuff, I didn't have anything to hide anymore, and all those people who didn't want to like me, if they knew me, had a different choice to make. They had to find a different reason to not like me because I wasn't threatening to date their sons, I wasn't threatening to date their daughters, I wasn't trying to throw anything in their face. I just didn't want them to say that I couldn't be who I was, and they left me alone for the most part. So on that basis, the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Board of Rabbis and so on were favorably disposed toward Sha'ar Zahav, and didn't stand in the way of any kind of community involvement, and so it sort of grew naturally in a healthy way.

Mark B. You want to say a few words about, you said coming out around the Briggs Initiative, want to say...?

Allen B. Well, there was a guy working for the *Chronicle* at that point in time, his name was Lenny Gitek, who was doing a series called "Gays in the City." As opposed to Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*. They could have been done together, I think. And Lenny wanted to do a piece about me, but I wasn't out, and he was concerned about that. And I said, let's use a pseudonym. So he did. I was David.

But somebody in the Briggs campaign heard about this and wanted to know if I would come out as a way of really adding some fire to the campaign. And I thought, you know, I'm never going to look for a job in a congregation, and da-da-da-da-da, what do I care, and if this will help, I'll help. I mean, I'm a rabbi, I want to help. It's that sort of DNA, right? So I said whatever you need me to do, I'm happy to do.

So they're making all kinds of plans for me to make a big splash in the media, but as a rabbi, first openly gay rabbi, da-da-da-da-da. And then they called me and said we're not going to do that because we've decided that if you did that it would take all the focus off of the campaign and put it on you, and we need to focus on the campaign. Not that we don't love you, not that we don't appreciate what you're doing and your willingness and so on, but we think it would end up backfiring. So thank you very much, but never mind, okay?

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. So I didn't come out until immediately after the campaign, when Lenny decided I didn't need a pseudonym anymore, so I was out in the paper. And it got picked up worldwide, because I was the first, okay? At least as far as I know. Lionel Blue thinks maybe he was the first. So I was the first American. It doesn't really matter. I don't care.

Mark B. Response. Can you tell what that experience was like, what did you hear, what happened?

Allen B. Death defying silence.

Mark B. [Laughs.]

Allen B. Now, *Time* magazine picked this up, right, and did a story, a big story with a picture. My mother was an avid reader of *Time* magazine, but always was months behind. There were stacks of *Time* magazines all over our house.

Mark B. [Laughs.]

Allen B. So I wasn't particularly worried that she would have seen that, right? And we talked to each other every Sunday morning wherever we were. I mean, I would call them, they would call me, just kind of checkin. That particular Sunday morning after the article came out, I called and said, "Oh, by the way, I wanted to tell you..." My mom said, "I saw the article." I said, "How could you see the article? You must be two and a half years behind." She said, "Selma called." It was her best friend called. "Selma told me about it, so I looked." I said, "And?" Now, this is my mother, right? We've already talked a little bit about my mother. Her entire response to the article was, "You couldn't have worn a nicer shirt?"

Mark B. [Laughs.]

Allen B. Now, this is a society woman who would sooner have died than to have somebody know that her son was gay, so it was her way of expressing her ultimate displeasure. And there was...I mean, what do you say after you say something like that?

Mark B. We could look it up. Do you recall the year this was? Was it '78?

Allen B. Probably, probably.

Mark B. I'll look it up and see for sure. Okay.

Allen B. There was also an encounter with the then executive vice president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. He was here for a conference that I attended under the auspices of the Board of Rabbis. And it was the first and maybe only one of its kind ever where the heads of the three denominational seminaries, the heads of the three congregational organizations, and the heads of the three rabbinical denominational organizations were together for a panel discussion over a day or two. And so this guy, who was the head of the Central Conference for American Rabbis, was here.

And I don't remember what the circumstances were, but we were at 14th and Clement Street, in front of Congregation Beth Shalom, one of the Conservative synagogues in San Francisco, and he, with his ubiquitous cigar, and we're walking, and he's saying to me what a stupid jerk I was, and what damage I was doing to the Reform movement, how divisive this was going to be, and da-da-da-da-da, and absolutely unforgivable, and if there were a way for them to take back my ordination... He was the most powerful, or the second most powerful Reform rabbi on earth telling me how much he loved me.

And I don't remember what I said to him other than – and it became sort of a mantra for me – I don't know if you realize that asking me and the others of us who are gay to remain in the closet is tantamount to your ordaining a bunch of liars, and I just can't do that, Joe. I mean, what if I said to you, for whatever part of your personality you might have any problem in society with, whatever it is, maybe cigar smoking, to say not

only can you not ever do it, but you can't ever tell anybody you ever did it. You can't be who you are. I mean, I've never seen you without a cigar. I know you love cigars, right?

He said, well, that's absurd, it's ridiculous. I said, it may be ridiculous for you, but it's not for me. When I came out to my mother – and I said this to him – I mean, all my life she used to say, and she thought she was being so clever when she said it, “Honesty is not the best policy, it's the only choice.” Then I came out to her and she said, “You don't have to be *that* honest.” I said, well, I think I *do* have to be that honest. I really get it that it's not okay for you guys to say that I can't be who I am. I'm not doing anything to hurt anybody, anybody at all. So if I were doing something that was immoral, and I don't think it is, illegal in the sense that I was violating some code of civil conduct, and I'm not, then I wouldn't be surprised if you said you shouldn't do that. But you don't know what you're talking about, and I don't think you should be saying this stuff if you don't know what you're talking about.

He said, “Nobody talks to me that way.” And I said, you know what? I don't want to be talking to you this way. I didn't start this conversation. But I cannot be who I am not. So I'm sorry if you don't like it. I wish it were some other way. But I can't un-be who I am any more than I can make you love who I am. By the time he died, he was one of *the* strongest advocates supporting ordination of openly gay and lesbian rabbis. And the day he stopped smoking, he called me to say, “I finally kicked that goddamn habit.” I said, “That's really great.” He said, “Unfortunately, it's too late, and I am dying from cancer. I wish I had listened to you sooner.” And I said, “Well, it's too bad, because I wish everybody had listened to me sooner about this.” [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. But that's just not the way it was. But for me that was really wonderful that he heard and he listened. And I wasn't the only one who influenced him. The guy down in Los Angeles, Irv Herman, who was the guy that got Beth Chayim Chadashim into the Reform movement, was really the rabbi that people listened to. But it didn't hurt that I was doing that. So where do you want to go?

Mark B. Highlights of the years with the synagogue. Anything else you want to relate about the time you were with Sha'ar Zahav?

Allen B. Another one of my mantras was I'm looking forward to two things in the future. One is the time when we stop playing synagogue and start being one, and the other is when we are so normative that we can go out of business as a gay synagogue and just be a synagogue, that every congregation in town will be so open to lesbian and gay people – and we didn't talk about bisexuals and transgenders in those days – that the need for a gay identified synagogue will disappear. It's like the Anti-Defamation. They're in business to go out of business. Well, you know, it's been 26 years, 30 years, whatever it is, and we're still in business, so if they need them, they need them, and that's fine.

But that was... The experience, for me, was...it was exhilarating and it was heartbreaking. It was exhilarating because Jews were coming out of the woodwork who had gone into the woodwork to hide, and with hostility that was palpable. But I didn't think we were ever offering them enough to make their coming out of the woodwork as good an experience as it should have been. And if you think about it, it makes sense. People, when they were becoming aware of their own sexuality, left the congregations, so

what they remembered of synagogues was what they remembered as preadolescents or adolescents, or even late adolescents. So all the people that they didn't like, who were the authority figures in synagogues, were what they were mentally bringing back in with them when they came back to the synagogue, and they were relating to the rabbi as that person that they loved to hate who hated them when they were still at the old place.

So the ambivalences that people brought to gay synagogue life in the early days of gay synagogues were, in many cases, unbearable. They just couldn't handle the conflicting emotions, and so they projected stuff onto whoever they could project that symbolized or represented whatever it was that had dumped on them previously. I mean, I still think that that's a problem in gay identified synagogues. What they did to me, what they did to Jane Litman at Sha'ar Zahav, I think they would have done it to Yoey(?) if he'd have let them. I mean, how he lasted 11 years I'll never know. And when Camille came to work there, I said, my sweet friend, if there's anything I can do to protect or defend you at any point, please don't hesitate to let me know, because I know of what they are capable. I've seen it twice.

So the exhilaration was that we were drawing people. The heartbreak was that I didn't think we were healing very well. And there was an awful lot of walking wounded going around.

Mark B. Good, good. Want to talk more about, you mentioned the World Congress, connections there. Were you involved? I know they had some gatherings then. Was that a supportive place?

Allen B. It was supportive. I mean, people who were loving being involved in the gay synagogue movement were involved and showed up and slept with everybody they could as quickly as possible, because the events weren't very long. I mean, they were really wild and wooly events, and just...sometimes the programming was good and sometimes it wasn't. And then there were the bitch fights among the leadership. You know, this one wanted this, and that one wanted that, and they were going to scratch each other's eyes out. I mean, it was very, very gay. And it was like, it was a bad scene from "Boys in the Band" – *[laughs]* – right?

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. But they got a lot of stuff done. I mean, they expanded, they touched people in countries all over the world. I mean, they... In that sense, it was good. And at one point I think I had a personal listing of about 200 organizations that were affiliated with the World Union. And I still have, in my current Palm, a category of my database that's the World Congress. I think it's probably hopelessly out of date, because I've never done anything with it since I stopped being affiliated with it, but it was places I've never – countries I'd never even heard of in those days that had something going on, you know? So I don't know if it still functions. I guess it must still be around.

Mark B. They're still around.

Allen B. I haven't heard much about it.

Mark B. I don't think they've had gatherings for a while, but they have a web site and they have listings and things on the web.

Allen B. Yeah. I mean, I was at World Pride in Jerusalem a couple years ago, and I think they were involved in that to some extent. So that was kind of fun.

Mark B. You left the synagogue and you went to the American Jewish Congress. Was that an easy move? Any difficulty getting the job?

Allen B. Well, they're the... I left Sha'ar Zahav under the worst possible circumstances. That was the second time I almost committed suicide, because I internalized all of the culpability for what went wrong, and subsequently found out that that was exactly the wrong response. I should have become homicidal, not suicidal. Fortunately I didn't do that either. But we ended up going through a mediation process. And one of the three people who was on my mediation team was the office person at the American Jewish Congress, a very out lesbian, sort of a militant, not terribly separatist, but give her a chance and she would have been separatist, friend of mine. I mean, she remains a good friend of mine.

 And one day they let go the assistant director of the American Jewish Congress, so Catherine calls me on the phone and she says, "I think you should call Joel Brooks and just say hello, because he knows you." We'd met. "And have him invite you out for lunch." I said, "Why?" She said, "Trust me." I said, "Catherine, I can't throw you, so I can't trust you. What's going on?" She said, "Trust me," and then she hangs up the phone. So I called Joel Brooks, the executive director, and he said, "Wow, what are you doing?" I said, "I'm calling you on the phone. What are you doing?" He said, "Can we get together for lunch?" I said, "Why?" He said, "Do you have a job?" I said, "No, I'm

looking for a job.” He said, “I think I may have a job for you. I think you may be just what I need. How soon can you get down here?”

Boom. The next day I had a job, and I was there for 11 years. When Joel retired I became the executive director. No relationship to gay things whatsoever. But here’s where being in San Francisco made no difference whatsoever – I mean, it made a lot of difference, I guess, because Joel didn’t care if I was gay. He was ordained as an Orthodox rabbi, never practiced a day in his life. But he’s a social activist, and social justice was what he lived, ate, and breathed, so gay rights stuff he thought was just fine. It wasn’t something the American Jewish Congress was institutionally interested in, but he was certainly supportive. And I was a rabbi. He thought it would be interesting to have a real rabbi on the staff, by the way.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. So I came to work and I loved it. I got interested in social justice stuff, but never, ever, other than the Sha’ar Zahav stuff that I was no longer involved in, never got... Well, step back. My now ex-partner founded the rump group that left Sha’ar Zahav called Ahavat Shalom, so it became the second gay synagogue in San Francisco. So I was involved in that, but under the terms of my separation from Sha’ar Zahav, could not be employed by Ahavat Shalom. Not that I wanted to. I mean, I already got burned. I didn’t want to, you know. And by the way, when I left Rochester, Minnesota, they all knew that I was gay. And the biggest upset about that—

Mark B. By “they” you mean the synagogue folks?

Allen B. They synagogue knew, right. Word was out. The president of the synagogue called me when he found out. This was long before I left town. Called me when he found out and he said, “There’s a rumor” – he was South African – “There’s a rumor circulating around Rochester that...we need to talk.” So we got together. “There’s a rumor circulating that you’re a homosexual. Is that true?” I said, “Well, it’s not a rumor exactly, Jerry. I am.” He said, “Damn!” I said, “I’m sorry, what’s wrong?” He said, “Well, my wife was very upset.” I said, “Why was your wife upset?” He said, “Well, she’s upset because she said if you’re a homosexual, you’ll be the first openly homosexual rabbi and you’ll become very, very famous, and you won’t have time to baby-sit for our children anymore.”

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. And I thought, okay. I said, “Jerry, I’ll tell you what. No matter what happens, if you need me to baby-sit for your kids, I’m on it.” That was the worst reaction that I got in beautiful downtown Rochester, Minnesota. So here, the American Jewish Congress, I got into stuff that just set me on fire. I was having so much fun living out the dream of being a social activist, but not involved in a lot of gay stuff. Women’s rights, seniors’ rights, nursing home reform, housing, employment, I mean, you know, just all kinds of good stuff.

And Stephen and I were partners. I mean, we were certainly openly together for almost ten years, and that was lovely. People were occasionally jealous of the rebbetzin, you know, which I found quite tasteful, personally. But then at the end of that 11 year period, the American Jewish Congress office said we need to expand your job description

to include fund raising. And I said I don't have that competence. I can't do that. Then you'll have to leave. Okay. So I left.

Immediately got a job as the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Oakland. The last thing they were worried about was my being gay. I'd already been gay openly for enough years that they didn't care. They just wanted a warm body in the office to interface with the interfaith community, so I did. I *loved* it. I had such a good time. Every one of these jobs was wonderful for me in terms of getting to meet really, really good people.

And there were occasional gay things that would go on. If somebody wanted me to talk about gay things, I would do it. If a seminary wanted me to talk, any seminary or any church or synagogue, whatever. So that was fine. And I just, it wasn't my presenting symptom.

Mark B. Right. Mm-hmm.

Allen B. I mean, I had done my coming out, and I never went back in the closet. Actually, a couple years ago I said to somebody, "This year for National Coming Out Day I'm going back in the closet, but I'm going to do it officially."

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. So I'll be the first openly gay rabbi to go back in the closet. One other little piece of history, just because it's fun. There was a prescreening of "Milk" at the Castro Theatre, so my ex-partner Stephen and his current partner Ron and Stephen's oldest son Michael and I went to see the movie. Stephen and I haven't been partners for

15 years, maybe, but we remain each other's best friends. Stephen adopted all three of his kids. He was the first single gay parent in California to adopt children as an openly gay man. And Michael was the first of the three.

So Stephen is here, Michael is here, I'm here and Ron is here. Just before the movie starts, Michael, who is now 25, turns to me and he says, "You involved in any of this stuff?" And I said, "Uh, yeah. Why?" He said, "Well, are you in the movie?" I said, "No, no, no. This is not about Harvey Milk's Jewish life. This is about the political career and death of Harvey Milk." I said, "But I was Harvey's rabbi." And he turned to me and he said, "No shit!" The lights weren't down yet, but it was loud enough that an awful lot of people around turned around, and I said, "Michael, you know, you don't have to yell." He said, "Well, tell me about it." I said, "You know, how about after the movie?"

So what...and I actually called Cleve Jones after I saw the film because I wanted to...well, two things I wanted to tell him. One was that I lied and I said that I thought he was cuter than Emile Hirsch when he was that young.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. I mean, because I've known Cleve since about that time. The other thing was to tell him that I was awfully glad that they did what they did in the movie, but the result for me was very unexpected. I walked out of that theatre so depressed, so...I just...I mean, completely bottoming out. And I figured out what was going on. Harvey was assassinated when I was becoming – I wasn't exactly elected yet, but I was becoming

the rabbi of Sha'ar Zahav. So the first service that happened for him, I conducted. Stephen was the sign language interpreter for that service. That's how we met.

Mark B. Ahh.

Allen B. And I said that to Michael. I said that's, you know, that man you're sitting next to whom you call your father, we met at Harvey's first service on Page Street, the Sha'ar Zahav service for him on Page Street. Then the city and county decided they needed to do a public service for him. They held it at Emanuel, and they asked me to do the eulogy. And the rabbi at Emanuel, Rabbi Ascher, said, "I would sooner rot in hell than have that faggot on my pulpit." And I delivered the eulogy anyway because the city required it. I said, so yes, I was around, and I was, to the extent that Harvey had a rabbi, I was his rabbi.

To what extent did he have a rabbi? He was, in fact, a member of Sha'ar Zahav. I don't believe he ever came there to pray, P-R-A-Y. I believe he came there to prey, P-R-E-Y, and to get votes. But he was there often enough, and he certainly enjoyed himself and made himself known. And as his political career was starting, so was Sha'ar Zahav, and it was a Jewish place, and he was identifying as a Jew. So it wasn't completely out of place. So when I told, like Denise Eger I said...she asked me if I was his rabbi, and I said, yeah, to the...I mean, I don't think he ever identified me as "his" rabbi, but I was the rabbi of the congregation that he belonged to. So for historical purposes, I'll add that to the notches in my belt.

Mark B. Yeah, that's perfect. Yeah.

Allen B. So then the JCRC stint ended because I refused to do fund raising.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. And I was casting around looking for a job, because I was really worried that I wasn't going to find one. And I got a call from this place, from the publisher of the Jewish newspaper here who was then a past president of this synagogue, saying, "Are you still looking for work?" I said, "Yeah, why?" He said, "Well, our rabbi has decided to go to Stanford, and she's leaving rather precipitously. We need an interim rabbi while we find a real rabbi. Would you be interested in that job?" And I said, "That congregation has such a *horrible* reputation as a viper pit, I would never want to be the rabbi there." He said, "I'll give you a couple days to think about it.

So I thought about it, and at the end of a couple of days I thought, oh my god, there's nothing else going on, they're offering me as much for a half-time job as their interim rabbi as I was getting as a full-time job in Oakland, I said, and it's short-term. Okay, I'll do it. That was 13 years ago, okay?

Mark B. Good. They don't have you do any fund raising here, huh?

Allen B. I do *lots* of fund raising.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Allen B. I'm not the best at it, but I'm good enough.

Mark B. I see on your bio there's a lot of organization affiliations, which we won't even try to cover, but I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about HIV-AIDS in terms of being a rabbi and the unfolding of that, and how you saw it and how you were involved.

Allen B. Well, I certainly was – I was here and around when it started. And it started hitting when I was still at Sha'ar Zahav. I remember...my dad had remarried in '82. That's the year I left Sha'ar Zahav. And about two-thirds of the—

Mark B. Your dad remarried, so your mother died?

Allen B. My mom died in '82. My dad remarried a woman who was in the clothing business, women's clothing business, so all the people she knew were gay men. So she was better about this than my dad ever was. But I – my dad asked me to do their wedding, and I had said I wasn't going to do it unless I met her. So they came out here so I could meet her. Anyway, that's a whole other story.

In the early days of the epidemic, somehow or other Stephen and I were going to New York and were going to stay in my stepmother's apartment. Maybe she married my dad earlier than that. I don't know. In any case, somebody from Sha'ar Zahav came to me, one of the hottest guys in the congregation. He and I...I always thought that I was never his type, never good enough, he would never want to go out with me, and it was inappropriate – and I never let that stop me – to date anybody from within the congregation. He asked me out and I was just beside myself. I mean, this is the...this was not only my type, but, you know, it's my Prince Charming. He was the suavest, coolest guy who ever walked, and we were going to get together. I called him that

afternoon that we were going to get together and said I'm feeling lousy, and whatever I've got, I don't want to give it to you, so we didn't go out.

About three or four days later he called and said, "I still want to get together, are you feeling any better?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, let's not call it a date. Let's just get together. I want to talk to you about something." He wanted to know if I would fly back to New York with him so he could tell his parents that he had what they weren't yet calling AIDS. And he was the first – and so I actually was flown to New York for the express purpose of being with him and helping his parents deal with this news that he was likely going to die. His name was Mark Feldman. I don't know if you know the...not Marvin Feldman, but Mark. Boy, he was a real sweetheart. He was the poster child for AIDS. I mean, with a crown and everything.

Mark B. Okay.

Allen B. So at the height of the AIDS epidemic, while I was still at Sha'ar Zahav, I was losing a friend or an acquaintance to AIDS about, at minimum, one a week for five years. And what I realized when I walked out of the "Milk" film was what I subsequently realized, and I realized a lot sooner with the AIDS stuff, was I never had a chance to go through grieving. I was too busy taking everybody else through it. So when I walked out of "Milk," I saw all the things that I had not had time to grieve about, and I just, I just was...I was a wet rag by the time I walked out of there. But that's, I mean, 250 people. It's like combat deaths, you know, just way too fast. And some really fabulous, fabulous, fabulous folks.

I was around – there were people in my congregation who were working at Ward 5 and Ward 86 at General Hospital. They were in on the ground floor of helping address the AIDS crisis, doctors that I knew who were working on it, so we had lots to talk about, and positive things to offer and share and so on, but it was...it was hard. I mean, it was just...it seemed...the only choice was to try to somehow be hopeful. But the obligation was to simply be there for people no matter what.

I remember one psychologist called me and asked me to come over, so I did, and we talked, and he was clearly dying, and he said, “Can you come back tomorrow?” And I said, “Yeah, sure, why?” And he said, “Because I’m going to kill myself tomorrow, but I don’t want to be alone.” [*Laughs.*] I said, “Hey, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. You know it’s illegal for – I mean, I’ll be an accessory to the crime.” He said, “You’re not going to know what I’m doing. I’m going to be eating applesauce.” I said, “Is there something I should know about applesauce that I don’t know?” He said, “Yeah, it’s going to have enough sleeping pills in it and I’ll die from respiration stuff.” I said, “That’s a yucky kind of way to go.” He said, “No, no, no, I’ll die in my sleep. But I’m not doing any more of this.”

So I sat there. And at the agreed upon time, I left and didn’t say anything to anybody, and somebody discovered him later that day, and he was dead. It was hard. Really, really, really hard. And I’m still available to do that kind of stuff, and, you know, I’m still wearing this. People occasionally say what is that? And I tell them it’s an awakening the Jewish heart pin and I promised—

Mark B. And why don’t describe it, since we’re on audio?

Allen B. It's a black six pointed star with an AIDS ribbon in the middle of it, a ceramic AIDS ribbon. And my promise was that when the pandemic is done, I'll take the pin off. And until the pandemic is done, I'm not taking the pin off, so... It's just, it's a little bit of an in your face reminder. It's the least I can do. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. Yeah, yeah, good. Sort of jumping around, I've done some research on Council on Religion and the Homosexual, and you showed up on the board or a president of that or something for some period of time. I forget exactly when that was.

Allen B. And I don't remember. And it was early enough in what was going on – I had...I had a roommate in San Francisco who was a Unitarian seminarian, a gay Unitarian seminarian, and he was involved in CRH.

Mark B. I got his name somewhere. I forgot about that.

Allen B. David Fanning.

Mark B. That's right.

Allen B. Okay? So he must have been the one who got me into it.

Mark B. Mm-hmm. Okay. I've got to follow up with David. David's name is one that's been on our list from a long time ago that we never—

Allen B. Yeah, he's in Palm Springs now.

Mark B. He's in Palm Springs now, okay. Let me get back to you about getting his contact information. Other things, you know, I'm embarrassed, there was, way back you

mentioned something that you were going to get to later and I didn't write it down at the time.

Allen B. I think I did.

Mark B. Okay, you think you did.

Allen B. And if I didn't, then—

Mark B. That's fine, yeah. Other things you just want to...we've got a little time left. Any other recollections, connections, people you think have been—

Allen B. Well, how much time do you have left? What time do you have to be where you have to be?

Mark B. Three fifteen, 3:11 I need to be over at the Coliseum Station, so we can leave a quarter of, right, be okay?

Allen B. Yeah, ten minutes.

Mark B. Yeah, so... Other significant leaders in LGBT Jewish movements that have an impact upon you that you've respected?

Allen B. Well, I wouldn't say LGBT movements, but I what I would say, for example, is that Alex Schindler, who was the president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, shortly after I came out – I was back in New York again for something else, and I don't know what it was – he and I had never met. People think that the president of the Union is the most powerful Jew in America, and they're usually right.

Alex was. And I'd never met him. But I was in New York and I came by his office because I thought it would be cool to meet him.

He wasn't there and his gatekeeper, Edie, said, "Who in the hell are you?" And I said, "My name is Allen Bennett. I'm a grad student in San Francisco. I'm a graduate of HUC." "What do you want to see him about?" I said, "I just wanted to meet him. You know, it's like I like meeting famous people." And she said, "Well, he's not here." I said, "Is he ever coming back?" She said, "Well, he'll be back tomorrow." I said, "So if he has time, I'd like to see him." "Give me your number." So I gave her my number and I got a call. "Rabbi Schindler will see you at 9:00" – no, "RABBI SCHINDLER WILL SEE YOU AT 9:00 tomorrow morning."

So I showed up. And while I'm waiting for him to arrive, some [farshlept] kind of guy walks by looking like a cross between Albert Einstein and the maintenance man and goes into a door. And a minute or two later the intercom goes off and I hear a German voice, and Edie says, "Rabbi Schindler will see you now." So I go into his office. It's that guy. And he says, "Please, sit." So I sat. He said, "You're Allen Bennett." I said, "Yes." He said, "You're in San Francisco?" "Yes." He said, "You're the gay one." "Yes." I said, "How'd you know that?" He said, "It's not a very well kept secret." "Okay."

He said, "So let me ask you a question. How many gay Jews do you think there are in America?" I said, "I have no idea." He said, "I suppose it's not really a good question. I mean, if I were in Europe and you came over there and you told me you were from America, I wouldn't say, 'Do you happen to know So-and-So, a Jewish guy from

Milwaukee, right?" He said, "What would you guesstimate?" I said, "Ten percent." He said, "Ten percent of the Jewish population, you think, is gay?" I said, "Yeah, it's a nice ball park statistic."

And he leans forward on his desk and he says, "That means we have potentially six hundred thousand gay Jews in America. How many of those do you think are affiliated with synagogues?" I said, "Jeez, I don't know. At the outside, maybe a couple thousand." And he looked at me and he said, "Well, we have some work to do." Because he didn't care if they were gay. He wanted people to belong to the Reform movement and build up the movement. And he said, "Do you know any creative gay Jews?"

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Allen B. I said, "Yeah, I think I...yeah." He said, "I don't know any gay Jews who aren't. Can you imagine what they would be like if they were part of our movement? We have some work to do." So, I mean, what a fabulous beginning. And every chance he had to have me as part of a dog and pony show talking about social justice things within the Reform movement, he would grab me to do that, so that was nice. That was a good...

Mark B. Good, good. Any of those experiences that are memorable in terms of traveling around and speaking and sort of talking about homosexuality? Most significant—

Allen B. There was one opportunity. The student body of the Hebrew Union College of New York wanted me to come and speak, and the dean of the school say absolutely, positively not. Never—

Mark B. Around when?

Allen B. I guess shortly after I came out.

Mark B. Okay, okay.

Allen B. The dean was Paul Steinberg. And I don't remember what year. I'm a terrible historian.

Mark B. That's okay. Don't worry.

Allen B. Steinberg said absolutely not. Steinberg then immediately left to go to Jerusalem for some conference. The students took up a private collection, flew me to New York, arranged for a conservative rabbi to be on a panel with me at the college. We did it. Steinberg, to his dying day, never forgave me for that, or the students. It caused such an incredible uproar. When we were done with the panel discussion one of the three faculty members who came to that meeting stood up and said he knew that homosexuality was wrong because God had told him so. The other two faculty members spent the rest of the morning picking their jaws up off the floor because they couldn't believe the guy had said that or that he believed it.

Every student who was there said they were all going to – and that faculty member who said what he said said I need any gay students to tell me that they're gay so

that I can exercise my right not to sign your ordination certificate. So they all decided they were going to tell him that they were gay, and none did it. None. So it was – that was – I thought that was a really important event.

The other important event in this process was after I came out, the president of the seminary then, [Alfred Gottschalk], took me aside at a rabbi's conference in Palm Springs and brought a witness with him, because he wanted to have this guy hear what I said, and said if I had known – and he's the guy who ordained me, Gottschalk – he said, "If I had known then what I know now, I would never have ordained you." And it was the first time Stephen had ever gone to a rabbinical conference with me. He wasn't with us when that happened, but...

What I said to Gottschalk was, so you understand, of course, why I didn't tell you? Because you are such a Neanderthal when it comes to this kind of thing that you would have done something that many more of us would have regretted than you ever would have. And I understand – and I said it, and I said to him, I said it to Joe Glaser – you're in the business of ordaining liars, and that's what I'm telling people. So if you don't want a bad reputation about ordaining liars, you need to examine your own policies. But don't threaten me with what you would have done if you had known. A little late for that. And you don't have to demonstrate any more than you already have how stupid you are about this.

Mark B. Mm-hmm.

Allen B. So he doesn't like me. I figured that out.

Mark B. Mm-hmm. Want to share a particular joy?

Allen B. I'm still here.

Mark B. You're still here. Good. Delightful story. Thank you for the time, Allen.

It's just really a treat to get this, so...

Allen B. My pleasure. Let's get you loaded up. Let me get me loaded up.

[End of recording.]