

Oral History Interview: Michael E. Levine

Interviewee: Michael E. Levine

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B: This is February 10, 2021. I'm resuming the interview with Michael Levine. And Michael, we left off last time you had left the board of the CBST in 1980, as you were busy with work, but several years later the congregation begins a search process and you get engaged in leadership again, so please pick up there.

Michael L: Okay. It was a very difficult period of time for the congregation during the 1980s because of the AIDS epidemic. We had lost so many members of the congregation. And in retrospect, when we talk about it now, we kind of estimate that we lost one-third of the men who were members of the congregation in the 1980s through the AIDS crisis, because at that time there was really no intervention other than to provide palliative care for those who were dying.

We would come to synagogue on a Friday night, and look around the room and see who's there, who looks as though they're in good shape, and unfortunately who looks as though they're not in good shape. How could you tell? By how thin they were and how tired they would get easily. And then, of course, there would come a few weeks or a few months later when suddenly those people that we knew were afflicted were gone. So we had a

very, very difficult decision: what is it that the congregation needs most at this point in our history, not knowing what this AIDS crisis was all about, not knowing how long it would last. Where do we go from here?

So many members of our congregation argued that we needed a social worker, we needed someone to deal with those who are ill, and we need someone to deal with the “worried well,” as the expression goes—how do we deal with those who are concerned about losing their friends, how do we deal with those who are concerned about could it happen to me, a very big issue. And I conducted several congregational meetings—I think we did probably three or four—to try and gather as many people as possible. And at each meeting we didn’t take a vote, we took a straw poll, to find out what is it that people want.

Because a lot of people had said, once we reached the 1980s, before the AIDS crisis became really serious, our congregation is growing, we’re close to 400 people, we need a rabbi to take over our spiritual leadership and to give us a little bit finer texture of the services and holiday, the High Holy Days observances and regular festival observances. So we kind of were facing a dilemma, what do we do, a social worker or do we do a rabbi.

And in all the straw polls we took at all the congregational meetings I led it always seemed to come out 60% - 40% in favor of a rabbi. It wasn’t a clear 100% majority that this is what we need, but the feeling was somehow we will deal with the AIDS crisis, somehow in the future we

could have a social worker, but what we need now is a rabbi to bring the congregation—because now from 1973 to mid 1980s we're more than a decade old. We've grown from a dozen people to 100, 200, 300, 400, women are now joining the congregation. We're now no longer the gay synagogue, we're the gay and lesbian synagogue. We need to have rabbinical leadership, and in the future we can figure out what other services are required for the board.

We at that point appointed a rabbi search committee which consisted, very, very well balanced, of younger people and older people, men and women, lesbians and gay men, people who had been in the congregation a long time, people who had been in the congregation a short time. It wasn't that many. It was only about half a dozen people. But it did constitute a representative sample of the current membership at that time in the 1980s.

They did a rather extensive search. They advertised in all of the religious media. They advertised in the gay media that Congregation—at that time it was Beth Simchat Torah. We've since become Beit Simchat Torah at the rabbi's recommendation that it's a better name and more modern name.

But we advertised in all the locations, and we also reached out to the different movements. And the movements wouldn't take our advertisement because we were not affiliated with any of them. So we said okay, we're going to go it alone. And the movements wouldn't give us their lists of graduates unless we were members of the movement.

And we knew and understood that people who are graduating from the rabbinic schools would not apply to us at this point in time, because it would not be beneficial to any current rabbi to come onto the board, because there's no health insurance, no other benefits, if they're not a member of one of the major movements. Of course the Orthodox movement would never take us, but we did talk to the Reform, we spoke to the Reconstructionist, we spoke to the Conservative, and we made a decision at that point we are not in any position in the 1980s to determine if we should be joining a movement. We simply want a rabbi, a rabbi who understands the nature of the congregation that he or she will be coming into as an organization and as a place of spiritual belonging as Jews, as gay and lesbian Jews.

The rabbinic search committee was in business for about a year or so. They interviewed lots of members of the congregation, including myself, to determine what they were looking for. They interviewed about half a dozen potential rabbis in person after reviewing resumes. They held telephone interviews. And it was a very extensive search. And I can recall many of us going to locations where some of the candidates, including Sharon Kleinbaum, were speaking and giving d'var Torahs, or giving lectures as an invited guest of synagogues or a lecture series in school just to hear what she was like.

I was at an international conference of gay and lesbian Jews in Florida and the guest speaker at that time was Sharon Kleinbaum. And I turned to one

of my colleagues from CBST and I said wow, isn't this one of the potential candidates? And he said to me yes, but we're not supposed to know it and we're not supposed to tell anybody. Because we were kind of in the in and we knew. And we were captivated by her immediately.

And we came back to CBST, we spoke to the chair and co-chair of the rabbi search committee, and they said to us at that time keep this quiet, she is the No. 1 candidate, and we are now in negotiation to determine what the conditions would be for engaging her services. You don't hire a rabbi. You engage the services of a rabbi. And the decision was how—then she had a lawyer and we had a lawyer. It became a very complicated procedure. Then finally the decision was made public—we are seeking to engage the services of Sharon Kleinbaum as the rabbi for CBST.

And that created quite a fuss in CBST, good, bad and indifferent. There were those who said isn't that great, we'll finally have a rabbi. There were those who said well, maybe we should really have a social worker first. To which we replied the decision has been made, folks, we're going for a rabbi. And then there were those who came to me privately. And this was a great shock to me at that time to hear people talking this way. Some of the men came to me because they did come from traditional backgrounds. We had men from Orthodox backgrounds. I come from an Orthodox background, but I was mostly involved with a Conservative synagogue, a temple where I lived in Brooklyn. But a lot of the men came from that same traditional background.

And of course we had people from Reformed—I'm saying that with an E-D at the end—Reformed synagogues who couldn't have cared less. But they all said to me, a lot of the traditional men said to me you can't hire a woman rabbi for a synagogue, and if you hire that woman I'm going to quit the synagogue and never come back again. There were women who said to me at that time, who had come to services occasionally, High Holy Days, and I recognized their faces, and they knew my name because I had been speaking at services and leading services, and they came to me and they said, you know, we've never been a member of this congregation. We have given a contribution every year because we feel it's appropriate. But if you hire Sharon Kleinbaum as the rabbi I will become a member and never leave. And that happened.

And I said to both the men and the women who came to me, it's your choice. If you are not happy with the decision that will be a group decision you have every right in the world to go someplace else. And I said to the women I'm so thrilled to hear that you're happy with the choice we've made, please do join and do become members. And a lot of them did. Not all of them. A lot of them did become members and remain life members—well, we're now what, 20, we're now 35 years later. We just celebrated our 48th anniversary this past Friday night, because the synagogue was founded in February of 1973. So a lot of them did remain, which was really wonderful, and the synagogue did continue to grow.

And after the one year search, and after several congregational meetings, which I led, at which we needed to have a vote now to engage the services of Rabbi Kleinbaum, we had to get over the issue of what kind of a contract would we enter into. We came to agreement. But no one could sign any contracts, which makes sense, until we had the approval of the congregation. As part of the religious corporation law our board of trustees was charged with determining that the congregation members—because I think those are the things you vote on. You vote on engaging a rabbi, according to New York state religious law, you vote on a budget, and a few other things—you vote on bylaws. There are things that the congregation has to approve, and one of them is engaging a rabbi.

So after these several meetings, which I conducted, at several different times to make sure that we gathered as many people as possible, we finally presented to the board of trustees we now have a majority of the members of our congregation—by straw polls that we took at each of these meetings—in favor of engaging the services of Sharon Kleinbaum. And of course the vote was taken. Some men left. Not all those who threatened that they would leave left. And a lot more women came. And some of the women who have been in leadership since the 1980s. And we have now, we've had many women who were presidents of the congregation as well as men. They all came at that time when Sharon Kleinbaum officially became our rabbi in 1990.

It was a turning point for the synagogue to go from lay leadership to rabbinic leadership, not knowing exactly what we were getting into, because the lay leaders were so influential, including me, in determining what the synagogue did. It was a great choice that we made. And by 1991 I came back on the board for two years, one year as chair, and then another former chair came back on board just to help in the transition from not having religious leadership to having religious leadership, knowing how difficult the transition would be.

The other former past chair greeted Rabbi Kleinbaum when she came to work the first day. We had taken one of the storage rooms in the back of the sanctuary, because we were renting, at that time, a former museum at the Westbeth Artists Housing complex in the West Village, and it had been the Guggenheim Children's Museum, which did not succeed in that location because it was located in the backyard of a rather difficult place, so we used the main section for the sanctuary and we had a batch of offices in the back for volunteers, and we had a storage room where we kept all kinds of junk. It's amazing how much you can accumulate from 1973 to 1990.

So Irving and I got together and we got rid of a lot of junk, and we got a couch, and we got a desk, and we got a bookcase, and we set up the storage room as an office for Rabbi Kleinbaum. I was working at that time for the City of New York. Irving had an independent business. He was able to take time off from work to greet the rabbi. And it was the smartest

thing in the world. At that time we had one part-time office worker who answered phones, and you cannot guarantee that a part-time office worker to answer phones is the appropriate person to welcome in a new staff member, especially a rabbi, on her first day.

So Irving always tells the story, and the rabbi repeated that story many years later, I think during our Yizkor service during one of her reports to the congregation, how important it was that first day for Irving to greet her, not have her walk into a congregation in the backyard of the Westbeth Artists Housing complex alone. And the first thing he did was take her to the memorial board. We had grown, and he showed her names of members. He said you'll see there are men and women here, but it's mostly men, and if you look at the names of the men, none of whom you know, most of them have died of AIDS. And this, Rabbi, is the congregation you are taking over right now. We are a congregation with a broken heart, but not a congregation with a broken soul. And it will be your job to lead us out of this crisis we're in now and lead us into the future, whatever the future brings.

Those were brilliant words on Irving's part. I wish I could have said something as beautiful as he did. Rabbi Kleinbaum has frequently cited that introduction by Irving, which is why she held him so fondly in her heart all those years. He's gone now. He died of AIDS. He's gone now. And she always recollects him in a Yizkor Drush, in a service, on an

anniversary, she always references back to how important Irving was in those early years.

And then after Irving served for one year I took over for another year. Again, I was more concerned at that point with the administrative positions and how our committees would work with the rabbi. And I had to reconfigure our religious committee into a ritual committee, and we had to establish a financial committee to work with the rabbi, who now had to work on the rabbi's accounts and the rabbi's discretionary account. There were administrative details that I had to work on, and so I kind of handled the administrative part, which was not Irving's thing. And Irving really served in the background, with the rabbi, as her spiritual confidant.

One additional thing about those early years that I'm very proud of—and this was the rabbi's idea, not mine, not Irving's—to establish a rabbi liaison committee. And it was very important. And she had heard this from her colleagues in the Reconstructionist movement because she was a graduate of the Reconstructionist college. I forgot the name of it, RCC? Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Mark B: The one in Cincinnati, right?

Michael L: That's it. And also aren't they in Philadelphia? Just Cincinnati? I think they're also in Philadelphia with branches.

Mark B: You would know better than me.

Michael L: Something like that. They have two locations. And she said that a lot of her friends and former graduates had said to her, No. 1, why are you going to this congregation? My god, don't you understand that as the rabbi of this congregation you are a sacrificial lamb, and they will wear you down in one year, and the second person to serve as rabbi will walk into a much better place, having had the experience of you being the person that the congregation had to learn from. And she listened well. And the one bit of advice that she had been given to prevent that kind of burnout from happening was to have a rabbi liaison committee to meet every single week with her to go over the issues and problems she was having.

I served on that committee, Irving served on that committee, and we had three other people on that committee. We had the two co-chairs of the rabbi search committee and one other congregation member to kind of balance it between men and women. And that committee was in existence for many, many years, I guess through the year 2000, until everyone felt comfortable that it had served its purpose, and she was now fully integrated into the congregation, and had not been a sacrificial lamb, and had so far been our first and only rabbi. In future times she said she did understand the difficult time ahead of her, and she was prepared for it. And she did a good job because of the work that we did working with her to make sure that she was integrated into the congregation.

Mark B: Do you want to reflect on your observations of Rabbi Kleinbaum?
Obviously she was the perfect candidate because of how the congregation

has grown and expanded in the years since then. What was it that Sharon brought in particular in your observation that made her a right match for developing CBST?

Michael L: Very good question. At first we were concerned that we would have a rabbi who could guide us spiritually into the future. Not belonging to a movement, we kind of were “reforthodox,” a little bit of everything, and we kind of felt as though maybe we should have a stronger direction in which to go. And the one thing that Rabbi Kleinbaum brought to us is that it’s okay for us to continue the path we’re in. We can use a Conservative prayer book for our Saturday morning service, we can use a Reconstructionist prayer book for a Shabbat service, and we had already written our own Friday night Siddur, which had been in existence for several years. And she said we can always work on our own Siddur, and improve that, and have members of the congregation contribute to it.

That was wonderful. That was something that she had already said during the interview process, which made her so right for the position if we were looking for spiritual leadership. And the rabbi liaison committee made a very good choice when they heard her say things like we can continue to use the best parts of all of the movements, including the best of our own members as our spiritual guide. So that made her the perfect match for us.

The second or third thing that we were surprised about is that she was able to consider issues of social justice, which none of us really expected at that time. It wasn’t primary on our agenda. We were a gay and lesbian

synagogue. Many of us, including myself, had participated in the Stonewall and the events afterward, and she said we have to continue social justice. There are others in the world who do not—and in our city—who do not take advantage of the resources available to them to get the most out of government and out of society and out of the world, and we still have a fight ahead of us for gay and lesbian rights. It wasn't over in the 1980s. It was nowhere near over. So she brought to us issues of social justice that we really never thought of.

She also is a fair Zionist. And again, that wasn't on our agenda that the rabbi has to be a Zionist. And had a Zionist chug at that time, a group of members of the congregation who, one of whom was a frequent visitor to Israel. And it was an organization that met from time to time to talk about politics and social issues in Israel. And it thrilled the Zionist chug to hear that she was so interested in the future of Israel.

What also surprised us—and this is something that none of us thought of—we had a very mixed cantoral staff, all volunteers. No one was paid to do anything at CBST. Again, I led services on High Holy Days. We had volunteers who led services. Ba'al Tefillah is the cantor who would be chanting the verses. Everyone was a volunteer. And having gone through the first year of High Holy Days services, I can remember her sitting in the congregation, and we were so generous. We gave her one sermon to do. Wasn't that nice of us? We gave her a sermon to do on Yom Kippur to break her in because we weren't sure how good she would be as a

rabbinical presence all the time. And of course she was fantastic. But I could see as she sat there for the entire services, I could see in her mind she was making mental notes of things that she felt we could do better. And of course she was.

By the second year of High Holy Days services she was now the service leader for most, not all. We still had the Torah service in the morning which was lay led. I led Torah service in the morning. And we had volunteers do services in the afternoon of Yom Kippur before the end of the High Holy Day, but we mostly were able to give her almost all of the services for High Holy Days knowing that she had all of these ideas that she told us about during the year that would make and enhance our services better as strictly CBST, things like turn the lights out at the beginning of the last service of Yom Kippur. Watch the sun set.

Because we chant an Neilat Shearim, the gates are closing, with the lights off. How dramatic that is to end the Yom Kippur Day of Repentance, of prayer, with the lights off. Just the emergency lights on in the back. This was strictly her idea. She'd seen it somewhere, heard it, and she said this will enhance the services. She did things like that all through the year that made us feel as though she will be great up there.

And the thing that we also did not expect from her was her love of music. The Ba'al Tefillah that we had at that time were all volunteers. Some were good, some were not. One of them was a part-time cantor in his congregation, which of course didn't work for him for High Holy Days

because they hired a full-time cantor, so he sang for us. And she said we need better music. Within a year or two she had already instituted a music program, and it was through efforts a few years later that we hired our music director, Joyce Rosenzweig, who is currently our music director, and just completed, I think, her 26th year with us as the music director.

And what Joyce had done is to create a chorus—she doesn't call it a choir, she calls it a chorus—that sings for all the High Holy Days and does sing for us from time to time on special occasions, for example, Pride. For the Pride service we have a chorus up there singing with the Ba'al Tefillah all of the traditional Shabbat prayers because Gay Pride is one of our major Jewish holidays. It's a GLBTQ holiday, Gay Pride.

So all the things that Rabbi Kleinbaum introduced in the first few years made us feel as though this was the correct choice and the right fit. And the rabbi search committee was so right and so correct in identifying her as the top candidate, but also taking a risk—can she be both the spiritual leader, can she be the pastoral leader, can she be a pulpit rabbi who is comfortable speaking at the bimah leading services and doing drashot, sermons. And she fit into all of those categories.

Her pastoral calendar shocked me at one point. But I should have realized that with having a rabbi liaison committee. And she just showed us the appointment book of how many pastoral visits she had to make, not just for members of the congregation who were sick with AIDS, but at that point already in time we had older members who were dying or sick with

traditional heart attack, cancer, other diseases. And she wanted to make sure that every one of them had a pastoral visit.

And this was another one of her innovations that came at that point—and again, I think it was 25, 26 years ago—that we had one of the members of our congregation sponsor a rabbinic internship program. And we started with one rabbinic intern, and then a few years later we made two rabbinic interns. That person has continued that grant to the synagogue ever since then to make sure that we always have rabbinic interns.

That program, through contributions of others, has led to the point now where we have two rabbinic interns, we have one rabbinic fellow who was an intern the year before, we have a cantoral intern, and we have a transgender intern. So it's like we have four or five people in the internship program, all of which came from her initial outreach to us that the congregation is growing, we need more people to lead services, we need more people to be doing pastoral visits, we need more people to be doing, unfortunately, funerals and unveilings.

So again, she was the right choice. It took just a few years for us to realize that we really, really lucked out. And she lucked out because we are the congregation for her. This is the right place for Rabbi Kleinbaum.

In 1992, I guess, I felt I was no longer needed to be on the board because I felt—oh, at that point we enlarged the size of the board from—I think we went from seven—I'm trying to remember because I conducted that annual meeting—to something like 13 members to try and broaden

representation on the board. And also, let's be honest, as a board member one is responsible for contributions. And so we enlarged the board, No. 1, to expand the base of volunteers, and No. 2, to encourage more contributions. So I stepped off the board.

Again, I was still very busy with work. I was really tearing myself apart leaving the office with unfinished work. I was working for the City of New York at that time in a very responsible position, and I kind of stepped back, left the board again the second time, but I think I'm the only person who ever served as both the chair of the board and the president, two different terms. And I said it's time for me to relax. But of course, you know, I never relaxed. I continued to be members of all the committees, of all of the bylaw revision committees.

And Rabbi Kleinbaum loves to tell the story that when we did expand the board to, I think, 13 members, it was Michael Levine who led that meeting that went on until 1:00 in the morning. And I turned to her and I said, Rabbi, that's what I do best. She laughed. And she said that's why you're here. We need your talents, we need your abilities. She always continued to insist that I have a role in everything that happens, and I continued to lead an occasional Friday night service, and I continued to lead portions of the High Holy Days service throughout the years, and still do.

And until the pandemic, the year before the pandemic I led the Torah service on Yom Kippur morning at Javits Center before—and we get 4,000 people for Kol Nidre. It's difficult to count how many people we

probably get for the morning service. It builds up as the day progresses. But I always led the Torah service at Javits Center, and she insisted that I continue to do that role and to lead the Torah procession on Yom Kippur the night before when we sing Kol Nidre, the night before we start all of the Yom Kippur services. And she said Michael Levine is the Torah meister. He is the one who choreographs.

Because at that point in time we already had now five Torahs, some purchased, some contributed. We stopped taking contributions of Torahs because we don't have room for any more. And frankly, you only need two because you only read from two different Torahs on the High Holy Days. You don't need two [*sic* five]. And then it was my job as the choreographer to make sure that every chair of the board or president, past and present, was able to have a Torah to carry in a procession around the sanctuary as we start the Kol Nidre service, the chanting of the Kol Nidre prayer, before we start.

And so I had to always figure out how do I take five Torahs and divide them up. Each year the number of people grew, past presidents and past chairs, to the point where we now have like 15. So I was able to take five Torahs, divide 15 by five, and so each of us will carry the Torah for one-third of the stretch around the Javits Center. Javits is a big hole. But Michael Levine was always responsible for choreographing that service. And she would keep looking at me. We developed all kinds of facial signals like okay, or go faster, or go slower, or okay, close the ark now.

We were always able to communicate visually with each other what the next step is whenever I'm participating in a service. And to this day, and even during the Simchat Torah service, which we held live and in person not last year, but the year before, again she introduced me saying and of course Michael Levine, our Torah meister, will lead the distribution of the Torahs to be danced with for Simchat Torah. So I have continued to play a religious role and I've continued to be an advisor to the board.

Two or three years ago—I'm trying to remember the exact year, time does go by fast—the board created a governance committee. It felt as though we were at a point now where we needed to figure out, when we moved into our premises—and I'll go to that story in a moment—when we move into our premises at 130 West 30th Street in Midtown Manhattan, we need to figure out who will be responsible for what because it's the first time that we own our own space.

And so much of the work had been done at that point by volunteers, and we're not going to do that anymore. We need to have—and we have a staff, we have an executive director, we have office workers. We need to figure out who's responsible for what. Something as simple as security. Something as simple as making sure that the bathrooms are clean and that the walls are painted on a regular basis.

So the president of the congregation appointed a governance committee and asked me if I would help, would serve on it as the past knowledge of the synagogue, and I said I'm delighted to do that. So even to this day I am

called upon from time to time, because of my general knowledge, because of my administration experience, and because of my background in the synagogue. And I have sometimes joked with other people because I'm the oldest living past president of the congregation. I am still called upon from time to time even in my retirement at age 77, and with very poor vision, I am still called upon from time to time to participate in decisions. And I am also right now—and this is the perfect job for me—our executive director approached me last year after my retirement and she said now that you have free time it's time for you to chair our archive committee. So as I go into retirement now I am responsible. And I think that is how we became hooked into the—

Mark B: That's how we connected. Yes, exactly, Michael.

Michael L: I'm chair of the archive committee. And the funny part of it is so much of the archives there is mine. Things in the archives that I had done years and years ago. It's a perfect job for me.

What I'd like to talk about now for just a few minutes, if we can move on to another subject, is our home at West 30th Street. That was a difficult decision for us to make. We have to go back to 1973, when the synagogue held its first service in an outer building of the Church of the Holy Apostle on 28th Street and Ninth Avenue in Chelsea. And just a small group of gay Jews got together. One Indian Jew was the—Indian meaning Hindu Jew from India who came from an Orthodox background who wanted a place to daven where he could feel comfortable. He needed to be able to feel

that he could pray comfortably as a gay Jew. He put an ad in the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times*, “Gay synagogue, service Friday night.”

People came.

And from the original—and I think I told the story already—the shopping bag synagogue where he carried the candlesticks, and the challah, and the wine, and the wine cup with him—we grew from 1973 to 1975 and the church said to us you need to find your own premises because you’ve outgrown our space, it’s a fire hazard. We were already at that point getting in excess of a hundred people on a Friday night, and it only had a legal capacity of 80.

So we searched for a year and we found this location in Westbeth, the Guggenheim Children’s Museum, in the backyard, up the ramp, kind of hidden from the public. And people used to think we did it on purpose because we were afraid to say that we’re gay, and we were not. It was just the fact that it was the only place that would work for us. It was 6,000 square feet. Wow, that was phenomenal. We took over that space in 1975 and we lived there comfortably until 2000. We were able to do our services very well.

But that was when things got really complicated because at that point—we were able to deal with the Friday night service because we could stuff as many as 400 people in on a Friday night, which troubled some of us, but, you know, are there sufficient aisles. There were a lot of escape doors there because it was a public place up until the... But can we really

continue to stuff 400 people in or more, because we're getting more than 400 people for High Holy Days. And we even rented an additional room at Westbeth as an overflow service. That is when we rented the space at Westbeth.

I think I just made a mistake in the years. I think it was 1990. Nineteen-ninety was when we rented the space at Javits Center, just before the rabbi came, for our High Holy Days service, because we knew we had outgrown that space. So that's 1990. We knew we needed more space for the High Holy Days. And at that point we were renting additional rooms at Westbeth because we were overflowing. So that solved our problem for High Holy Days, that we were able to use the Javits Center for some of the years.

In the year 2000, ten years later, we began to realize that we really couldn't accommodate that many people in our Westbeth location, the former Guggenheim Children's Museum in the back, up the ramp. It was already too crowded. And we rented the Church of the Holy Apostles, not the small back room, but the main sanctuary, for our Friday night services, for bar and bat mitzvah services, and that started in the year 2000.

So we go from a small back room in 1973, to the Guggenheim Children's Museum in 1975, we then go to Javits Center in 1990, and now in the year 2000 we're renting space in the same church we started with 25 years earlier, but now in their main sanctuary. They cover the crosses, they cover any other religious iconography, and they make it comfortable for us

because very frankly, they needed our money. Churches don't always do well in the city of New York. They are very expensive to maintain.

At that time also we said you know, we really should have a home of our own. We're paying rent at Westbeth. Shouldn't we have a home of our own? And that's pretty much the year 2000 that we began to say well, we've been successful in the past with search committees. We established a premises committee. And I served on that committee, a premises search committee. We did it once before successfully. We had a rabbi search committee. Now let's have a premises search committee.

And it took them a long time. It took them 15 years to locate a space that would work for us. And also we had to raise money. We had a lot of fundraisers. We built a very nice nest egg knowing that all we could ever do was afford a down payment on a space. We knew that we would have to do a lot more fundraising in the future and take a mortgage.

Finally by the year—and again I'm trying to remember the exact years—but by 2015 we had located the correct space in New York City's Garment Center. As in so many other parts of New York City—and that's Midtown. That's the Midtown area around 30Th Street. It's called the Manhattan Valley. A lot of those manufacturing uses were disappearing and are disappearing, and the city had adopted a zoning change allowing conversion of a lot of these old manufacturing buildings into residential spaces, but also allowing commercial and manufacturing uses on the lower

levels. The only law that you have to adhere to is that residences must be above nonresidential uses.

Our premises search committee located, on West 30th Street, a wonderful architectural building designed by Cass Gilbert, one of the really, really famous architects who had built in Chicago as well as New York City.

And the building had been converted from a furrier building, furrier manufacturers, into residential condos above, and there was ground floor space and basement space available, as well as a mezzanine above the first level because the building had had a storage area—it was a furrier space—had a storage area in the mezzanine.

So we said this is perfect, it's really three floors. There's a basement level, it has a main level, and there's a mezzanine. In our minds I was saying this could work so well—the offices could be in the mezzanine, the sanctuary will be on the main floor, and downstairs would be the classrooms and the social hall and all the other things that you need to make a congregation work. So we worked very, very hard in a matter of a few years.

By 2017 we moved into the location at 130 West 30th Street, and we've been there ever since. We gave up the space at Westbeth, we gave up the space at the Church of the Holy Apostles. We pretty much paid off the mortgage by now, contributions from members of the congregation. And it's a very difficult thing to do, but our premises search committee never gave up and continued to raise money. We still have a bit of a mortgage

left, but also we have a bigger staff now to take care of because we have a full building.

It's literally three floors—a mezzanine, a main floor, and a basement, which we call the social hall. We don't call it the basement. It's a wonderful staircase leading down. As you come into the building you see a staircase leading up to the mezzanine where the offices are, you see a staircase leading down to the lower level, and the sanctuary is straight ahead.

Of course the pandemic has really thrown a damper into everything. Our last service was held a year ago, almost a year, I'm trying to remember now. Was it February or March when we knew that we were having our problems with the pandemic? And we always held, from the time we moved into the West 30th location in 2017, we had livestreamed our Friday night service through our Facebook page, a very complicated technology, so that people could watch it at home, and were priming directly on Facebook of all of our services. But that was expanded now to be the only way in which services are held, not just Friday night and Saturday morning, but all the holiday services.

And so here we are now in the year 2019 in the month of January, February, March, all of us now, more than 200 people, watching our Friday night service livestream on a computer. And then when it came time for High Holy Days services we went through the whole summer wondering how it would happen. We were able to work out a plan

whereby the rabbi and the—we didn't break our lease with Javits. Javits agreed to temporarily put it in abeyance, because they can't rent the space at Javits, they're not allowed to. So we still have our contractual agreement with the Javits Center to go back there someday for at least the few years left on our agreement with them.

But the rabbi and the cantor and the music director worked out with the president and the executive director to hold the High Holy Days service in our West 30th Street location, which wouldn't cost us that much money. The technology of having different cameras on each one and what happens is you see them on the different Zoom screens, which is then somehow magically combined by the talent of the technician into one continuous livestream presentation, which is extremely dramatic, but very expensive. And that's every Friday night and every special service, now everything is by Zoom. The rabbi does the Friday night service from her home, the cantor from his home, the music director from her home, and from time to time they take excerpts from some of the recordings from a Gay Pride service that we had done in 2019—

Mark B: In the past—

Michael L: —and they play it—this year they played it for Gay Pride just for ...this is what we did last year at this time. It's kind of heartbreaking, in a way, the first time I saw a service being conducted at our 30th Street location. We had just moved in. And I started crying and I said we paid so much money

for this space. It's been our dream for close to, more than 40 years, and now we can't be there. And so we all keep saying maybe soon.

Mark B: Maybe soon. So I want to—this is amazingly rich history of CBST. Let's switch a bit to your life, Michael, the last few years of your professional life and moving into retirement. Why don't you fill that in, too, what you're doing alongside CBST.

Michael L: All right. So I've managed—and again my vision continues to deteriorate because of glaucoma. I'm the first one to say that to people so they understand if I have difficulty reading things, if it's not clear, I sometimes will say can you tell me what that says, because I really can't see it too well. And I've had glaucoma for decades, so I'm used to the idea of not having really great vision. My eyesight is good. If I have good, clear print I can read it, but it's clouded vision.

I started to realize this at a point in my life when I was retired from working with the City of New York full-time—and this goes back to 1998, when I retired from the City of New York, working for the City Planning Commission, which was a great job. I worked there for 30 years. I had worked on so many wonderful projects, on the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District, the creation of the SOHO Artists Housing complex in SOHO, the creation of the South Street Seaport. I worked on wonderful projects.

But I retired in 1998, knowing that I was having certain visual problems, and at that point if I take my pension I wouldn't always have to work in

the same job. While I can still see well, let me do as much as I can with the rest of my life. I've had a successful career in terms of the things I've done since 1998. It's not a lot of money when you are a professional city planner working for government or nonprofit, but it's been a very rewarding experience.

I went to work for the American Planning Association, the organization of which I am a member, which is a very large organization, but only the New York chapter. We have chapters in every state. And for ten years, from 2000 to 2010 or 2008—again, I sometimes forget the years—2000 to 2008 I worked for the American Planning Association, New York chapter, and took care of membership lists. I had an intern that assisted me in getting the mailings out.

At that time doing the newsletter and doing up-to-date mailings all the time was a little bit more cumbersome than it is today because today you hire services to do that for you. But I had an intern help me with it because it was very taxing on my eyes. And we did a newsletter, and we did mailings every month, updates on events happening in New York City.

And the major contribution I made to the local chapter—and I wasn't paid an awful lot of money, but they really appreciated—was doing programming. I did programming in transportation, and economic development, and government services, and social service issues. And I met absolutely wonderful people for those seven or eight years through the New York Chapter of the American Planning Association, people who are

icons in the development, and many of whom are gone now, people who were icons in the development of New York City. I had the opportunity to work with so many of them at the end of their career and kind of at the end of my career, and to be welcoming younger people into the urban planning profession. It's one of my greatest joys that I was able to. And also to encourage the city planning schools that are all urban planning programs in the New York region to produce their own programs—Hunter College, where I graduated, Columbia University, New York University, Rutgers University, the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. I had an absolutely wonderful time working with the schools.

But then in the year 2007 I heard that there was a vacant position for the Lower Manhattan Community Board. Community boards are voluntary organizations. People live in the neighborhood, they're business people in the neighborhood, or they have an interest in the neighborhood. And the borough president and the city council members appoint—I feel as though I'm doing one of my school lessons now, which I'll get to in a moment—appoint 50 members to each of the 59 community boards in the city, because the city is broken up into 59 community boards, and they have a small staff.

So I went to work part-time, because I knew there was a part-time position there. They needed an urban planner. They had a district manager responsible for delivery of services, and they had a staff member responsible for advertising and arranging for committee meetings at which

land use decisions would be made, locating schools, locating highways, locating hospitals. And so I came on board part-time as a consultant as the urban planning advisor, and that's where I got to work on the South Street Seaport and a lot of the developments that we now have in Lower Manhattan, so many of which were oversized, but that's the nature of development in New York City.

When I worked on these projects I was very, very careful. I knew my job as the consultant to this community board is that if an organization seeks to build a large building, they need to give something back to the community. Are we going to get a plaza, are we going to get a garden, are we going to get a school? We need to get something back. And we always were able to get new schools in Lower Manhattan, parks, playgrounds, waterfront development that would benefit the community whenever we approved any of those large developments that you see all over Lower Manhattan, particularly on the waterfront.

At the same time my career began to blossom. And again, it was never a great big money-making deal, but I began to move on and on as I remained with the community board. I was approached by the Fund for the City of New York, which is a nonprofit organization that sponsors programs that benefit the City of New York. And they were conducting a program whereby they were bringing students from different planning schools and send them out to the community boards to work as volunteer planners in the last year of their graduate program. Urban planning is a

two year program, and they pay a stipend of \$5,000 that they get through fundraising to the urban planning students to work for community boards. And they knew that I was working for the Lower Manhattan Community Board, and they asked me if I would take over this program for them because I know about the students, having worked with them when I worked for the American Planning Association, and I know about the community boards.

So from the year 2007 to the year 2018—no '19, just before the pandemic, I worked for the Fund for the City of New York as the director of the community planning fellowship program. Again, second year graduate students, assigning them to work for community boards to bring a talent that the community boards don't have, a planning background. Because again, they're administrators, they're managers, but they're not planners.

Simultaneous to that I was approached by a friend who teaches at Pace University, which is across the street from the Municipal Building in Manhattan where the Community Board One office is located, who said Michael, I've heard you speak and we have room in our sociology department for some new creative classes, would you like to come on board as an adjunct professor—the title really was instructor—but come on as an adjunct and teach urban planning to our students.

So here I am now for the last ten years in my life, which is really 65 to 75, those last ten years, working for the Lower Manhattan Community Board, teaching at Pace University for the undergraduate students, and conducting

a graduate program, a community planning fellowship program, three part-time jobs which I really, really loved. And the fact that I was always in different locations, and that I was never in one place at one time only. That was my working life.

I continued at that time—and again, it's only because my vision has deteriorated and I can't do as much as I used to—but I've still always been very active. I'm a member of the award committee of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. I'm a member of the award committee for the American Planning Association. I'm a member of the local community board here in Greenwich Village. Now that I no longer work for the Lower Manhattan Community Board I can be a member of the community board here. And of course, as you know, I'm still very active in the gay and lesbian synagogue, GLBTQ+ synagogue. So I've maintained a very active life up to 77. My ability because of my handicaps is a little bit diminished, but I still continue to be as active as possible. And the thing that brought us together is the fact that I'm chairing the archive committee at the gay and lesbian synagogue. That kind of gets us up-to-date.

Mark B: Do you have anything to say about the fact that you saved those early records that went off into the archives? You were thinking about the importance of history years ago when you saw that the early synagogue records were actually being preserved and put into a repository?

Michael L: I have a problem with the way they're scattered, and I've mentioned this before in our earlier discussions offline, that right now our archives are in three locations. And I always saved everything I did. Everything was labeled, everything was in file folders. The early years, of course, were easier for me to do because I was so much involved in it. But the archives up to the year 2000, which I compiled very nicely for the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Manhattan, they're now located in a storage location somewhere in New Jersey, I don't know where. That was arranged the year 2000.

From the year 2000 until the year 2017, when we moved to our location on West 30th Street, we took our archives at that point and put them in a storage location in New Jersey, and that was very well documented by a volunteer, who literally went through every single file before it went into boxes. And now there is even a collection of mostly digital materials now. Very little paper is kept, and I'm glad about that. That is now in the computer system at the West 30th location which is accessible remotely to the staff of CBST. So I think we have an excellent system. We know where everything is. But no one can ever know everything we have.

Mark B: That's there for researchers to get into when they want to be able to do that, Michael. Again, an incredible story. Just to wrap up, how has CBST enriched your life? All these years you've engaged with the synagogue, Michael, how has your life been enriched by this connection and this involvement?

Michael L: That's a very good question, and I'll begin by saying most people who come from a somewhat practicing Jewish background go to a synagogue to meet a partner and ultimate marriage. That did not happen to me. And that is not why I went to the gay synagogue. I never went to the gay synagogue to meet a husband. I went to the gay synagogue because I come from the Orthodox background in Brooklyn. And for the first few years that I lived in Manhattan, from 1967 to 1974, I really had no synagogue to go to. I would go to many of the synagogues here in the neighborhood and not feel satisfied because it always felt as though the second they find out that I'm single they're going to try to get me married, and I don't want that. Do I have a girl for you, that wasn't for me.

When I found CBST in 1974 I was at home, the same way I felt when I was at the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, the Friday night that the raid occurred. When I walked into the Stonewall in 1967 when I moved to Greenwich Village, coming from that Orthodox background, although I wasn't an Orthodox practitioner I was Orthodox and felt very uncomfortable not having a synagogue. That's why I was at the Stonewall on a Friday night, because Friday night is the main service for most Jews around the world. The second I walked in there and saw men hugging men, kissing men, dancing with men, women kissing I said oh my god, I'm at home, this is where I belong.

And that's what happened at the gay synagogue. The first time I came to a High Holy Days service in 1974 in September or October, depending upon

what the Jewish calendar was like, it was either September or October of 1974, I was a little bit reluctant to go because I said to myself at that point do gay Jews know how to daven? Can gay Jews pray? Do they know what to do for a service? A friend of mine had seen advertisements for the gay synagogue High Holy Days service and he told me to go. The second I went into the location—and again, it was in a rented space for a gay Catholic organization on 14th Street. They rented the space out for High Holy Days. The second I walked up the steps—and they were all loft buildings, all former manufacturing buildings. The manufacturing buildings in New York City have become the home to so many organizations and people living in them, having converted them into residential use.

The second I walked up the steps and heard the music of the Jewish liturgy for the High Holy Days, before I even set foot through the door, I said I'm at home. I know this music. This is my place. And when I walked in I saw the same thing there that I saw at the Stonewall. I saw men sitting with men, I saw women sitting with women, I saw men kissing each other as they greeted each other—happy new year, gut yontif, etc., etc. And I said oh my god, I'm here, I'm home, this is where I belong.

And this is the way I have felt since 1974. CBST has been my spiritual home. I have brought my family there. My aunt who raised me after my parents passed away, she was single, I made her a member. I brought my brother and sister-in-law and family. When I led the service on Yom

Kippur after Rabbi Kleinbaum buried my aunt, and then of course for the first Yom Kippur service you say, the first time you say the Yizkor memorial prayer, I brought my nephews and my nieces with me to join with me in reciting the memorial prayer for our aunt. And that was so touching and so beautiful that I had a place that's mine. And the kids knew and understood this is where Uncle Michael is at home.

CBST has been my home since 1974. I've traveled with it all these years. I'm one of the few past presidents that still goes to every Friday night service, when I can. I used to always say to people the only time I don't go is when Ray and I are on a cruise ship. And you can't always find a religious service that works on a cruise ship. But this is my home. And even if I have to do it by computer, which is difficult for my eyes, I will do it. I will always do it.

We had, for the anniversary service this past Friday night, the rabbi asked those of us who were around in the 1970s to join in at the beginning of the service, meaning we all had our Zoom windows on the screen. It was about a dozen of us. And it was beautiful. To light the Friday night candles, the Shabbat candles. To see about a dozen of us on the screen at the same time, all of whom go back to 1970, I said to myself I can't believe it, I'm still here. And again, it brought a tear to my eye to know that after all these years, as I have gotten older, as I have experienced physical problems, I'm still able to participate in the synagogue that has

brought me so many riches over the years, that has brought me such joy in being Jewish.

When I think of my questions, given the world that we're in today, given what happened in the prior century, why are we still Jews? We're still Jews because of places like CBST, a place that can be formed for gay and lesbian and transgender and queers. There's always a place for us somewhere in the Jewish community because it's our community. And we build it and we rebuild it every decade, every generation. Every set of people does it. And CBST has been that way for me. I helped to build it and now, after all these years, I am happy to be part of it. This, as the Stonewall was in 1969, this has been my home for 47 years.

Mark B: Great way to end an amazing interview, Michael. Thank you so much for taking this time. Greatly appreciated.

Michael L: Mark, this has been my pleasure. I can say to you that I think that the network that you are working on is absolutely fabulous, and I am so pleased to be part of it.

Mark B: Thank you.