Jessica Goldstein
Temple Beth-El
Birmingham, Alabama
***

Date: November 8, 2019
Location: Ms. Goldstein's Office, Vestavia Hills, AL
Transcription: Technitype Transcripts
Length: Fifty one minutes
Project: Faith and Foodways in Alabama

Michelle Little: So today is November 8th, 2019, and this is Michelle Little, and I am here with Jessica Goldstein for the Southern Foodways Alliance [Faith and Foodways in Alabama] project, and we're here in Jessica's office in Vestavia Hills, Alabama.

And, Jessica, to get started, if you'll tell us your name and your date of birth for the record.

[0:00:22.8]

Jessica Goldstein: Sure. I'm Jessica Goldstein, and I was born May 23rd, 1969.

[0:00:27.6]

Michelle Little: Okay. And where did you grow up, Jessica?

[0:00:30.4]

Jessica Goldstein: I grew up here in Birmingham. We moved here when I was about three.

[0:00:34.3]

Michelle Little: Okay. And who's "we"? Can you tell me a little bit about your parents and any siblings that you had?

[0:00:42.5]

Jessica Goldstein: Sure. My mom is Punky, and my father is Reb, and my maiden name is Burwinkle. So I grew up as the kid of Punky and Reb Burwinkle, which is kind of

awesome. They met at the University of Georgia when they were both students there, and they got married and they moved to Birmingham when I was about three, with my older sister, who's about five years older than I am, and her name's Jennifer. And my younger sister Hannah, who's about a year and a half younger than I am.

[0:01:15.4]

Michelle Little: And why did they come to Birmingham?

[0:01:16.9]

Jessica Goldstein: Work, naturally. [Laughter] Why does anybody move when they have three small children? But, yeah, they came to Birmingham because my dad's job brought him here from Georgia, and I grew up here in Birmingham, in Homewood, in the Hollywood section of Homewood.

[0:01:33.9]

Michelle Little: And for anyone that's listening that doesn't know what the Hollywood section is, years from now, what is the Hollywood section? What was it like when you were growing up?

[0:01:42.7]

Jessica Goldstein: Well, when I was growing up, it was a very unfashionable part of town to live in. It's where a lot of old people live, not a lot of families with young children, and the bathrooms were twenty years out of date and not everybody had central

air. But they had these *beautiful* houses. It's a mix of sort of all brick houses with Tudor-style houses, with stucco houses, just sort of a hodgepodge altogether. And my parents were on the front wave of younger families moving in and installing more of the modern conveniences, and now it's the most exclusive part of the city that I live in, and I could never afford to live there [Laughter], but I still love the graciousness of the houses and the mix of styles in that area. It's lovely.

[0:02:31.4]

Michelle Little: And where did you all attend church at that time? Were you already at—

[0:02:38.4]

Jessica Goldstein: No, we didn't go to Temple Beth-El. I grew up actually Modern Orthodox. The synagogue I currently attend is part of the Conservative tradition, and that's Temple Beth-El, but I grew up at K.I., which was Knesseth Israel, which still exists today, but it's very, very small. There's not a large Modern Orthodox presence in Birmingham, and there's never really been a large presence in Birmingham.

But I grew up what they call shomer Shabbos, which means that we didn't use electricity on the Sabbath, and we walked back and forth to synagogue no matter what the weather was, and we were observant in a way that most people aren't today. We kept kosher, which back in those days was a little bit more difficult because you had to order all your meat in from out of town. There's no kosher butcher here in town, can't just run down to the grocery store and pick up a chicken if you're out, to think ahead and have a

big freezer in the basement, and eat a lot of vegetarian meals if you don't think ahead. [Laughter] And it was a really good way to grow up for us.

We grew up in a neighborhood where there were not a lot of other Jews and no other observant Jews, so we were unusual, but I never felt that that was anything wrong or different or wished I was different. It was just the way we were. And we walked to synagogue from the time I was about three and my sister was two. We would walk the two miles to synagogue, there and back, every weekend, because that's just what you did, and all the holidays. I don't know, it was a good way to grow up. So that's where I grew up, at K.I.

[0:04:24.4]

Michelle Little: So, I mean, were there any other Jewish families that you all knew of in that Hollywood neighborhood?

[0:04:32.2]

Jessica Goldstein: Old Mrs. Goldstein. [Laughter] Her house was right behind ours, that we shared a back fence, but she was the only other Jew that I knew that lived in our neighborhood. Like I said, it wasn't a fashionable place to live. My parents found a house there that they really loved and moved in, and now it's where most of the Jews in Homewood do tend to live, is in that area. So we were just ahead of our time is all. [Laughter]

[0:05:02.6]

Michelle Little: And what do you remember most about the Shabbat dinners on Friday night? Would you have a big dinner on Friday nights during that time?

[0:05:12.9]

Jessica Goldstein: Every week, and Shabbos dinner was always pretty much the same thing. It's always gefilte fish, which is a very traditional Eastern European fish dumpling kind of thing, followed by soup with homemade challah bread, and then a roast chicken of some kind with a few vegetables and some fruit for dessert, and that menu never changed in all the years that we had Friday night dinner. There was never any variation whatsoever. [Laughter] It was as regular as clockwork and very comforting. It was really a nice thing, and I loved that my mom baked the bread herself. There was a kosher bakery here in town, and we could have bought it, but she didn't think that that was the right way to go about it, so she always made it, and I remember it being the best part of my week. It was really lovely. Homemade bread is such a homey thing.

[0:06:14.5]

Michelle Little: And I know you said you all had to order the meat, but were other ingredients that you needed pretty readily available in town?

[0:06:24.0]

Jessica Goldstein: The deal with kosher food is that it has to be fresh. If it's prepared food that you buy that's somehow been manipulated, then it needs to be marked with a hechsher or a little symbol that tells you that it was overseen by a rabbi and it was treated

in a trustworthy manner. But all vegetables are kosher. Eggs are kosher. Fish within certain parameters are kosher and don't require a hechsher. It's butchered animals that need to be dealt with in a humane manner and under the supervision of a shochet, which is a butcher who's specially trained, and then a rabbi. So if you're willing to be vegetarian, you can keep kosher without any trouble whatsoever. [Laughter] That's easy.

[0:07:16.5]

Michelle Little: And did you learn to cook from your mom or your dad, or who did most of the cooking?

[0:07:21.4]

Jessica Goldstein: My mom definitely did most of the cooking, I think, like in a lot of households where the mom doesn't work outside the home and the dad does. He would special occasion cook and make something really wonderful, and we would get excited about that, and that was seen as a treat. But Mom's cooking every day was just what happened all the time, and she's a really good cook. She was talking, even back in the [19]70s, talking about eating the rainbow, so there would always be something yellow and something red and something green on the plate, because it made sense to her. And she was health-conscious without being a nut about it, and just about every meal would contain some sort of black-eyed pea or field pea, because that's what she loved. But she was good. She wasn't very adventuresome. She never really strayed outside what she was comfortable with, but what she did was really, really good. I have great memories of that. And she taught me more than anything not to be afraid to cook, which is a real gift.

[0:08:22.3]

Michelle Little: What were some of the special things your dad, say, would make for a holiday?

[0:08:30.0]

Jessica Goldstein: Never for a holiday, always on a Sunday, and barbecued chicken wings were the *absolute* most exciting things, because we didn't get a lot of food like that. It was just so exciting, and there was fire involved. [Laughter] And because there was no kosher barbecue sauce available at the time, he would make his own, and it was just sort of a—there was a big buildup to it. There was a lot of anticipation. It was really, really nice. So that was probably the most exciting thing that he ever did. And one time he made Chinese rice balls with meat inside. That felt very exotic. It was very exciting. [Laughter]

[0:09:20.1]

Michelle Little: Okay. So take me through—and I know from talking with you earlier that you went to Israel and went to college there.

[0:09:26.7]

Jessica Goldstein: Mm-hmm, I did.

[0:09:28.0]

Michelle Little: But what led up to that decision?

[0:09:30.7]

Jessica Goldstein: Honestly, I knew that I wanted to travel, I wanted to get out of Birmingham and out of the United States, and I wanted to go meet interesting people and do fun things and sort of a road less traveled. That was very compelling to me. And I wanted to go to France, and the French program that I was looking at cost a lot of money, it was many thousands of dollars, and I just didn't have it.

At the same time, someone had told me that there was a program going to Israel, and I thought, "Well, okay. Why not?" It was a lot less expensive, and I wasn't particularly called to go to Israel rather than France, but it just seemed more financially doable, and, like a lot of things in my life, I sort of fell into it backward.

It ended up being a service program, which was so much better on a lot of levels. It was much more interesting and compelling once I figured out that was available, and so I went. During that time, I spent some time learning Hebrew on a kibbutz, I got to experience that kind of lifestyle.

And then I worked in a boarding school for about six weeks where it was my responsibility to get eighth-graders into bed [Laughter], forty eighth-graders into bed with almost no language skill. We had very little language in common, because learning a language in a classroom just doesn't tend to work all that well. So I got very proficient in speaking, in communicating quickly, and particularly in the imperative, you know, "Go take a shower," "Turn your light out," that kind of thing, and that gave me just enough of a base that when I went into the community where I was going to work for six months, I

had enough Hebrew skill to make it happen, and I was able to work with little kids, I was able to work with seniors. We were put into the community in different places just to do volunteer work. It was really interesting and fun, and I was sort of functionally fluent by the end of that time, which was really helpful.

Then I came back to the United States thinking that I was done with my program, and I just found it to be kind of dull. I wasn't really interested in doing the things that were available to me here or that occurred to me to do here, anyway, and so I packed my bags and went back, and I did another Kibbutz Ulpan to try and get my reading and writing closer to where my speaking level was, which was helpful, and then I enrolled in the University of Tel Aviv, and I studied anthropology and linguistics and really, really enjoyed myself. It was a really interesting thing to do.

Right about the end of my time at the University of Tel Aviv, I realized that a degree in anthropology and linguistics wasn't going to put food on the table, and I felt really called to be a midwife. I really wanted to go to nursing school and to become a midwife, and at that time I decided that it would be too difficult to do that in Hebrew, and I wanted to spend a little bit of time with my family, so I came back to the United States to get a nursing degree. I met my husband and never did end up going back to Israel, but that was always my intention.

[0:12:55.6]

Michelle Little: And can you explain a little bit about what a kibbutz is?

[0:13:00.5]

Jessica Goldstein: Oh, sure. So a kibbutz is a collective-living settlement, and the original ones were made in the 1800s, I believe, by people from Eastern Europe who came to Israel, what's currently Israel but wasn't at the time, it was Palestine, and they would put together a communal-living settlement based on socialist principles. So everything was perfectly equal and the women did equal work as men, and it was done very much on a philosophical basis of social living experiment. There were a bunch of them and they developed along different lines, and some really took to heart the socialist piece and stayed there, and other ones privatized and became a little bit more independent. Even though it's a social living experiment, still there's a lot more autonomy and a lot less socialist idealism involved in that particular community. Some are big and some are small, and some have industry and some don't, and they're all just a little bit different.

The kibbutz movement, there are several different kinds of kibbutzim. There's some that are religious and some that aren't, and they're still functioning today, and a lot of them have at least two or three different kinds of industry, plus some agricultural focus, and that helps sustain the entire community.

[0:14:44.9]

Michelle Little: Does everyone pitch in with cooking on the kibbutz, or how does eating and how do meals work there?

[0:14:52.1]

Jessica Goldstein: I think it's very kibbutz-specific. The couple that I've been on have central kitchens that provide a hot meal at lunch and breakfast, and some provide dinner and some don't provide dinner. Sometimes dinner is eaten as a family unit within your individual family, and sometimes not. And there's single people in the kibbutz as well. But in Israel, it is much more common to eat the heavy meal in the middle of the day, and you start the day with salad and cheese and things like that, and hummus and pita, and then toward the middle of the day, you're more likely to have your what we would think of as dinner-type food, hot and heavy. Then at the end of the day, you sort of mirror the beginning of the day, and it's not typically a big dinner and it's often cold. So I don't know. And on kibbutz, when you're a volunteer or you're in the program, you absolutely eat in the common dining room, but when you have a family, you might make a different choice.

[0:16:00.6]

Michelle Little: So you came back to the U.S., and how did you meet your husband?

[0:16:04.7]

Jessica Goldstein: He was a teacher at the Blue Dragon Kung Fu Academy [Laughter], and I started taking classes there with a friend of mine who really wanted to take Tai Chi classes, and he was one of the instructors, and he was cute. [Laughter] We started to date, and the rest is history.

[0:16:31.6]

Michelle Little: So then you went on, you did some other schooling here in the U.S.?

[Recorder turned off]

[0:16:43.9]

Michelle Little: So we took a brief break. You'd met your husband.

[0:16:47.2]

Jessica Goldstein: Yeah.

[0:16:49.1]

Michelle Little: Then you went back to school.

[0:16:51.1]

Jessica Goldstein: I did. I went to nursing school, and I came out of nursing school, and my husband and I got married just six months after I graduated from nursing school, so all this was very contemporaneous. I got a job working in the surgical intensive care unit [SICU] at UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham], and shortly after, they split the SICU from—they took the trauma patients out of the surgical intensive care unit where they always had been treated and moved them into a separate unit called the trauma burn intensive care unit, and I worked there for ten years. About a month before I hit ten years, I took a research job at UAB and worked at orthopedic trauma research, dealing with animal research and also human research and also bench work, so all different kinds of research, and I wrote grants and I saw patients and I worked with some animal stuff, and

I really enjoyed that. That was intellectually really stimulating, and it felt like it was important work.

Then a friend of mine told me that there was a job available that was a nine-to-five-y kind of job, which is a little less usual in the nursing world, at the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, and I've always been interested in women's health. The job here is to coordinate the Ethics and Practice Committees, and I thought that was really interesting work. I interviewed, and before I knew it, here I was.

[0:18:18.5]

Michelle Little: Here you are. [Laughter]

[0:18:20.0]

Jessica Goldstein: Yeah.

[0:18:21.8]

Michelle Little: So at what point—were you also attending Knesseth Israel when you got married? When did you switch over to Beth-El?

[0:18:32.8]

Jessica Goldstein: My parents divorced when I was about twelve, and when my parents divorced, we had been living in New Jersey for a year when they divorced. And when we came back down, my mom decided that she was less comfortable in the Orthodox world and wanted her daughters to have a more egalitarian religious experience, and so we

switched over from the Orthodox synagogue to the Conservative synagogue. It was bigger, there were more children our age, so she felt that that was important, and she also felt that she wanted us to have more than a secondary role. She felt uncomfortable with the roles assigned to women in Orthodox Judaism, and I don't know that that's necessarily true. I mean, if you speak to other Orthodox women, they wouldn't necessarily feel that way, but that's how she felt, and so we switched over to the other synagogue, and I was confirmed at Beth-El when I was fifteen. When my husband [and] I were looking for a synagogue as adults, he came from a Conservative tradition, and we interviewed, for want of a better word, the different types of synagogues available here in Birmingham, and Beth-El felt the most like home.

[0:20:08.9]

Michelle Little: And I know at one time we spoke on the phone and you explained the three or four different types of synagogues in town. Could you review that a little bit?

[0:20:21.9]

Jessica Goldstein: Sure. So in Birmingham there are two big synagogues. There's Temple Emanu-El, which is part of the Reform tradition, which would be the least religiously observant.

[Recorder turned off]

[0:20:40.8]

Jessica Goldstein: So Temple Emanu-El is part of the Reform tradition, who are the least religiously observant sect here in Birmingham, and then there's the Conservative synagogue, which is Temple Beth-El, and that's where we go. There is also an Orthodox synagogue, K.I., which is the one I grew up in. They are a very small congregation, and they now operate out of a house rather than a typical synagogue building and are shrinking. Then there's another congregation that meets in Birmingham that is associated with the Chabad-Labovich movement, and they are ultra Orthodox, though the people who attend that gathering are not ultra Orthodox, but they provide a community which any Jew is welcome to join and worship with them, and it's a very warm community, one that we really enjoy having as a resource here in town.

[0:21:49.1]

Michelle Little: And you said you were confirmed. What does that process—what does that mean?

[0:21:56.5]

Jessica Goldstein: So at twelve or thirteen, you typically have a bar or bat mitzvah, and that is where the responsibility of Jewish adult life are accepted or given to you, and so you become a Jewish adult at thirteen, which is a great starting place, but it's not where you necessarily need to end up when you're fairly young. So at least in the Conservative tradition, and I believe also in the Reform tradition, you tend to do some more adult-type education after your bar mitzvah to sort of understand a little bit better what the responsibilities that you're now supposed to be doing. And you talk about more adult

topics, you talk about matters of faith and matters of observance, and it's much like any kind of teen program in any church. Then at the end of that, you're confirmed. At least in the Conservative tradition, you're confirmed. That's what they call it. You run a Saturday morning service, typically, and you do a service project and you write a speech about your experience and how you feel on a particular topic, and you get up and sort of share that reaffirmation of what you did at your bar mitzvah as a slightly older, more informed person with the congregation.

[0:23:27.0]

Michelle Little: Wow.

[0:23:28.9]

Jessica Goldstein: Yeah.

[0:23:30.3]

Michelle Little: And have all your children done that?

[0:23:32.3]

Jessica Goldstein: They have. Of the three, one was happy to be confirmed, one was miserable to be confirmed, and one just managed to get through the process. So I imagine that's about average. [Laughter] You know, it comes at a difficult time when you're probably the least you will ever be interested in talking about big esoteric issues, so a lot of it depends, I think, on who your confirmation teachers are and how they've managed

to make that interesting and relevant to a fourteen-year-old who would rather be literally anywhere else. [Laughter]

[0:24:13.0]

Michelle Little: And can we talk a little bit about Temple Beth-El? I mean, when I visited, there are photographs on the wall going back to the [19]20s, even?

[0:24:27.6]

Jessica Goldstein: Yeah, absolutely.

[0:24:29.4]

Michelle Little: I mean, this is a very old institution.

[0:24:31.6]

Jessica Goldstein: It is.

[0:24:32.5]

Michelle Little: I mean, it was just amazing.

[0:24:34.0]

Jessica Goldstein: So I'm not a terrific historian about Beth-El, but some highlights are originally the Jewish population of Birmingham was more toward the north side of Birmingham, so the original Beth-El building was on the north side of Birmingham and

then moved to its present location—ooh, I'm going to get the number wrong, but I think about seventy-five years ago, but the congregation is older than that. So there's that piece.

The current building, I think, is really, really beautiful, and it looked different when I was a child. There was a conscious effort back in the—I guess it was the [19]80s, to lower the bimah or the stage area, so it was a little more accessible and there was a way to step up all the way around rather than having to use the staircase, to sort of bring the congregation together with the service leaders. The color scheme was lightened up a little bit, so it didn't feel so oppressive or solemn, I suppose is the right word. So there have been little things like that that have happened over the years that I think are really important.

So the congregation itself has always been fairly strong. It's been involved in the Civil Rights Movement at really important junctures. There was a time right around the time of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing where Beth-El also had a bomb placed. Fortunately, it didn't go off, it didn't hurt anyone and it didn't destroy the building, but that was part of the civil rights experience back in the [19]60s. There's a lot of history there, and there's been a lot of connection between Beth-El and civil rights, and we've got a Social Action Committee right now that's working very hard for other kinds of rights. There's a strong historical connection between Judaism and matters of social justice, and Beth-El is no exception.

[0:26:43.4]

Michelle Little: And one of the things that really struck me when you were showing me around was the wall at the back of the sanctuary with the plaques of the—

[0:26:54.9]

Jessica Goldstein: The Yahrzeits wall, yeah.

[0:26:58.8]

Michelle Little: For someone to kind of envision what that is and what all that means, can you talk about the plaques and the lights and the—

[0:27:06.8]

Jessica Goldstein: So at the back of the sanctuary there are all these plaque holders that are installed across the back of the sanctuary, and when someone passes away, you can get a little plaque that goes in this wall with your loved one's name on it, and on the anniversary of their death, there's a little light bulb next to each name, and they'll twist the light bulb so that the light comes on for that person on the anniversary of their death. It's a lovely way to have a visual reminder of the passing of someone who is very important to you. There are a few times a year when we have special services for people who've passed on, and the services aren't so much for the people who've passed on, but they're for the people who are remaining to remember those people who've passed on, and we light all the lights at once, and it's a really powerful, beautiful physical reminder. In the daylight, you don't see it so well, but in the evening services in particular, they shine, and they're really a lovely memory, I think.

[0:28:14.7]

Michelle Little: I went to a Friday night service with you, and I hope to go to a Saturday service as well, but for anyone that's never been to a service at your temple, can you explain a little bit about—I mean, there was a lot of singing. [Laughter]

[0:28:38.1]

Jessica Goldstein: There was a lot of singing.

Michelle Little: And just the flow of the service, it was a little—you know, like you said, you and I were able to talk a little bit through it. I mean, I grew up Baptist, so this was a very different experience. [Laughter]

[0:28:53.9]

Jessica Goldstein: Oh, I imagine. So the thing I always tell people when they come to synagogue for a service when they didn't grow up Jewish, especially around like a bar mitzvah, the bar mitzvah invitation will say services start at 9:30, and you always know who's not Jewish because they show up at 9:25. [Laughter] And the Jews just kind of trickle in, and some come as late as 10:30. In some ways, it's not nearly as formal as the church services I've attended, which are very much a performance. In a church service, the ones that I've been to have been very solemn, and you go in and you sit down and you listen and you sing when you're told to and you stand up when you're told to and you

sit down when you're told to, and it's very regimented, and it's so respectful. [Laughter] It's so polite and so quiet when it's supposed to be. At least the synagogues where I've attended, it's a lot more organic [Laughter], I think would be the nicest way to say it. People get up and walk in, and they walk out as they're comfortable, and people come late when they want to, and they leave early if they need to. Part of the thing, I think, is that Saturday morning services for Jews can take three hours on a quick day, so sometimes it's three hours, sometimes it's three and a half. That's a long time to sit in a pew and just be still.

And I think that there's sort of a different relationship that Judaism has with prayer. We sing or we pray a set liturgy. There's very little movement that goes on, or there's no extemporaneous prayer that happens sort of as a community. I mean, you might choose to think about something on your own, but there are set prayers that we do in a set order, and it never changes, it's always the same, and I find a lot of comfort in that. I *love* that. I love the way the words feel in my mouth that I've said over and over and over again and my grandfather said the same way, and I really like that. I think other people find it very restrictive [Laughter] and just not what they're used to.

So it's different. It's not that there's no way for self-expression. It doesn't feel that way to me at all. The challenge is to bring enthusiasm and real—there's a Hebrew word for it—Kavanah, like a purpose to prayers that are the same as they've always been. I mean, how do you bring that special piece of yourself to this what could be rote experience? So it's really different, but, yeah, it can be very fluid. [Laughter]

On Friday night, in particular, it tends to be—Shabbat is a celebration that happens every week, so the Sabbath is a celebration. It's meant to be joyful; it's meant to

be special, and it happens every week. I mean, how do you bring that energy every single week? And one of the ways that Jews do that, or at least in the synagogues and the traditions that I'm more familiar with, they sing in Shabbos.

You were talking about how there's a lot of singing, and we're really fortunate at Beth-El to have Sarah Metzger, who has a beautiful, beautiful voice and not a cantorial voice at all. Many synagogues have someone whose job it is to sing you through the service, to lead you in prayer through the service, and it was very traditional in the United States for a really long time to have someone who has an operatic-style voice, and many synagogues really liked that and that was good for them. And we certainly had those at Beth-El when I was younger, and we don't have a cantor at Beth-El right now, someone whose job it is to do that. Instead, we have Sarah. She works with our youth, youth engagement, and she also does some liturgical heavy lifting, sort of leading us through prayers. She's lovely, and she's younger and she's a little quirkier and she comes from a slightly different background, so she's able to bring a freshness to our prayer service, which is really nice to have tunes that are a little less familiar sometimes. She works in synergy with the rabbi, our new rabbi who we love, Stephen Slater, and music is very, very important to him and he sees that as a vehicle for bringing people along to a spiritual place. He and Sarah work seamlessly together to deliver that piece of it to the congregation, and that's something that our congregation has really appreciated about those two together. It's really special, actually. I like that.

On Saturday morning, it has a different feel. There's a Torah service involved, so we do the whole—so there's prayers on the front end and then there's the morning prayers, which I really love. They tend to be very sung as opposed to chanted. They're

special tunes, and that's really lovely, and they can get you in the mood and get worked up. Then there's the whole ceremony about taking the Torah out of the ark, and we process around the synagogue and we lay it down on the special table that it's supposed to, and we read from the Torah.

In some synagogues, the same person reads all the Torah portions week in, week out, and we don't do it that way at Beth-El at all. Different members of the congregation have learned this skill, and we have a patchwork of people at varying levels of Hebrew ability, varying levels of singing ability, various experience levels, and it knits together in sort of this eclectic mishmash of intent, which is really lovely and different. And I value that we have a Torah-reading program that's a little different and not maybe as—we don't have a hugely proficient reader who does it all and does it perfectly every time, but instead we have something a little more varied and a little more interesting and certainly more inclusive, which I like.

[0:35:59.6]

Michelle Little: That's wonderful. How big is the congregation? I mean, how many, just to get a sense of—

[0:36:08.4]

Jessica Goldstein: Just under four hundred families, I think, which is not a lot. [Laughter] I wish it were bigger.

[0:36:17.3]

Michelle Little: Was it larger or smaller when you grew up there?

[0:36:22.8]

Jessica Goldstein: Oh, much larger.

[0:36:24.5]

Michelle Little: Larger?

[0:36:25.0]

Jessica Goldstein: Mm-hmm. I think the Jewish population in Birmingham has decreased somewhat. I think that people in my generation and younger don't use the synagogue the way that people in past generations did as sort of a center of life. I think that's really interesting, and I think that's true for most congregations across the United States. I don't know how it is in churches. And it's something that we talk a lot about, about how to engage our younger members and how to engage people who aren't members who are younger and what value can we bring to their experience in their life, what are they looking for and how can we help provide that, because it's an important question.

[0:37:15.0]

Michelle Little: Do you all have any answers? [Laughter]

[0:37:18.9]

Jessica Goldstein: No. One of the best things that we've done is bring in clergy that speak to the younger people just in terms of being open to different questions and different ways of doing things and different approaches to the same stuff. I think that's worked really well for us, and we're offering more programming that's directed toward not just being in services, but we're making the Social Action Committee more robust and having more conversations around, well, what does it mean to be Jewish or what does it mean to keep kosher in today's age, and why would you choose to do that, and how does your Judaism inform how you vote and how does your Judaism inform how you decide to learn, and why learn texts that are so old, is there anything new for you to learn, that kind of stuff, and talking about the important ways that people can connect with stuff that's been around a really long time that can seem really remote.

[0:38:38.9]

Michelle Little: So do you think are there definitely less Jewish families in Birmingham now than twenty or thirty years ago? I mean, do you think there's just a shift in population?

[0:38:53.4]

Jessica Goldstein: I actually am not sure. They do a census every now and again, and I'm not sure. It's my impression that the younger people have moved away, but I don't know that that's actually true or just the people I know.

[0:39:07.0]

Michelle Little: So on Friday nights as you and your husband have children, and, I mean, did y'all always go to Friday night service and have a Shabbat dinner? I mean, was it like when you were growing up where you'd have this ritual, or did you change things a little bit?

[0:39:28.9]

Jessica Goldstein: Oh, absolutely. [Laughter] You know, when I was growing up, it was very prescribed. We did the same thing every week, it was always the same, and there was a huge amount of comfort in that. I really enjoyed that. As I got older and I started exploring building this tradition for myself, I actually—my husband worked in the evenings, he worked at Bottega [Café] and Highlands [Bar & Grill] for twenty years, and so I was home alone on Friday night, and I just was having a hard time getting that kind of energetic curve going, if you know what I mean. So I asked my friend Martha and my mother-in-law if they would come keep me company on Friday night and help me make Shabbos, you know, light candles, sing the Kiddush, which is the blessing over wine, and have a slightly more intentional dinner.

When my kids were little bitty, I mean, Ellis was maybe two and Avie was one, and I wanted to get the ball rolling myself, and I just didn't feel like I could do it alone because it felt like a very community thing, and my community was at work, so they started coming over every Friday night, and before I knew it, my sister came and then my mom came and then a friend came and then another friend came. And it grew within the first six or eight months to having somewhere between twelve and twenty guests every Friday night.

[0:41:01.0]

ML: Wow!

[0:41:01.5]

JG: And it sounds like it's a lot, but it just kind of organically grew. It wasn't anything I was trying to do necessarily, and because I was doing it, it just kind of grew up. I did not make baked chicken every Friday night, because that just wasn't [what] I was interested in doing. I would make challah sometimes and not make challah sometimes, because, you know, sometimes it just didn't work out. And sometimes we had tacos and sometimes we had lasagna and sometimes we had whatever I felt like making, and so the food was very free-form, and it could be anything I felt like making.

Most of the people sitting around the table were not Jewish, and so that's sort of an interesting thing, that I made this seminally Jewish thing that I did particularly to uphold my Jewish tradition, with a bunch of people who weren't Jewish. Some of them were, but not a lot of them were. I always find it kind of fun that they learned to sing the prayers with me every week, and there's a whole generation of five or six kids who were my kids' age, who were the children of my friends who came, who can sing their way through Kiddush without missing a beat, even though it's not part of their faith tradition, because they came to my house every Friday night for fifteen years and they learned along with my kids, which is kind of fun. And we celebrate those moments together, and to this day, every one of them comes to my house around their birthday, the Friday night after their birthday, and we have Friday night dinner and they get to pick what's for dinner that night, and we sing "Happy Birthday" afterwards, and it's become this sort of

central part of our lives, even though they're not Jewish necessarily, and I really love that.

[0:43:02.8]

Michelle Little: That's really beautiful. I mean, what do you make of that? I mean, I like the way you put it. You've taken this thing that was very much a part of your Jewish tradition and expanded it to members outside of the faith, and it's turned into this amazing tradition.

[0:43:26.1]

Jessica Goldstein: Well, I think what Shabbos was always for me was this oasis of calm in the middle of a hectic week. It was restorative. I mean, if you think about what the Sabbath is supposed to be, God worked and worked and worked and on the seventh day he rested and he commanded us to rest, right? And so that's why we do Shabbos. He sort of set that up from the outset, and so it's supposed to be a time of replenishment, it's supposed to be a time of community, it's supposed to be a time of rest, so I think those principles and that intent is universal. I think everybody needs that, and whether it comes under the framework of a Jewish tradition or not is not important. I think what's important is the community that's involved with that.

[0:44:22.6]

Michelle Little: That's beautiful. What do you remember about Shabbat dinner—am I saying it correctly?

[0:44:34.4]

Jessica Goldstein: You are, absolutely.

[0:44:35.1]

Michelle Little: Okay, okay. [Laughter]

[0:44:36.2]

Jessica Goldstein: I flip back and forth between "Shabbos" and "Shabbat." "Shabbat" is Hebrew, and "Shabbos" is Yiddish.

[0:44:42.0]

Michelle Little: Okay. All right. Thank you. I'm glad to understand the difference. [Laughter] All right. When you were living in Israel, what do you remember about these dinners, and how did you celebrate that in Israel?

[0:44:56.1]

Jessica Goldstein: So there's a family in Israel that adopted me, they were my assigned host family, and I was supposed to go there once in a while on the weekend and on a holiday just so that I would have somewhere to be during my year of service program. Their family name is **Pasz**, which means treasure or gold, which I love. They took me into their family, and we formed a super-deep connection, and, in fact, my son is still going to dinner over at their house while he lives in Israel and has connected with the

kids and their children, which is just so lovely. But I would go there every Friday night that I was free. Certainly, when I was in college, I would go there and spend my weekends there.

In Israel, the entire country stops on Friday. If you've ever been there, you know the buses don't run and you can't get a kosher license for a restaurant if you're open on Shabbos. I mean, the country just stops. Not that everybody is observant or religious, but absolutely you can totally feel a difference on Shabbos. I think that is as much a part of me feeling like I needed that oasis or would seek that oasis in the middle of my week or at the end of my week periodically to sort of recharge. I would go to the Pasz's house, and we would have a special meal on Friday night and we'd hang out, and because you're not using electronic devices, there's no distracting TV, there's no distracting radio, it's all about connection with other people and very low-tech communication, and we would play cards and we would tell stories and we would just sit around. I think I have been chasing that my whole life, and I hope that my kids feel it, because I would like that.

[0:46:57.0]

Michelle Little: That's beautiful. So is it about the food or is it about setting aside this time and the space for this connection and this rest?

[0:47:16.9]

Jessica Goldstein: Well, it's both, clearly. It's not about what you serve for dinner, it's that dinner is prepared specially for this event, I think, and which is why sometimes we

have tacos and sometimes we have chicken wings and sometimes we have chicken salad and egg salad. I mean, it's a lot of different things.

One of the things that I was really happy for when my kids were little and before I had a nine-to-five kind of five-day-a-week job is that I would never work on Fridays, and I always had the whole day to make it happen. It was part of the ritual for me was to sort of prepare and to think about what I would make and go to the grocery store and make it at my leisure, as opposed to just throwing it together. And one of the hardest parts about being a nine-to-five five-day-a-weeker is Fridays are hard, because you've got to make this meal happen and it's hard to get that feeling of specialness when you've got a compressed time, but we manage. [Laughter] We do the best we can. It's fun.

[0:48:29.8]

Michelle Little: Well, is there anything that I have not asked you that you wanted to talk about or that you wish people knew about the Jewish faith?

[0:48:39.9]

Jessica Goldstein: No, I think you did a really good job. There's an old joke that says every Jewish holiday is pretty much the same. "They tried to kill us. It didn't happen. Let's eat." [Laughter]

So each holiday has its own special food tradition that comes with it, and people keep it to greater or lesser extents and it varies from family to family. But I find that Judaism tends to be associated with very specific food traditions and food moods that come with different events. On the New Year, you eat apples and honey and you eat

enriched bread that's shaped round, and these things are meaningful because they sort of call little pieces out. On Sukkot, which is the Feast of Tabernacles, which happens right after the High Holy Days, we always eat pomegranates because they're in season at that time of year and they're a symbol of abundance. There's an old wives' tale that says if you were to count the seeds, the arils inside the pomegranate, there would be 613, which is exactly—it's supposedly 613, which is the number of mitzvot, of commandments that you have to follow in observance of Judaism. And I've actually counted them, and the one I had did not have 613. I have to say that out loud. [Laughter]

[0:50:14.9]

Michelle Little: I love that.

[0:50:17.5]

Jessica Goldstein: But, you know, around Passover, there's lots of food prescriptions, and around Shavuot, which is another holiday, tend to eat dairy. I mean, there's just all these sort of food traditions that intensify the specialness of a particular time, and I love that connection, that there are specific things that you eat at specific times to call up specific intent and intensity, and I think that's really cool.

[0:50:45.5]

Michelle Little: It really is. Well, thank you for sharing so much with me today.

[0:50:52.6]

Jessica Goldstein: It was my pleasure.

[End of interview]