INTERVIEW BEGINS

Nat: This is Nat Gozansky interviewing Rabbi Emanuel Feldman on June 27, 1991 for the Jewish Oral History Project of Atlanta, co-sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, Atlanta Jewish Federation and the National Council of Jewish Women. Rabbi Feldman, what I would like to do is start out by just asking you to reach back and talk about your family’s history. As far back as you can remember, grandparents, great-grandparents, immigration to the United States. If you will, I will sort of sit and let you chat for a little while.

Rabbi Feldman: I never knew my grandparents who were from Poland. My father and mother came to the United States in 1927, new immigrants. I was born three or four months after they arrived here in the United States. I never knew my grandparents. My father came over as a young man and he is a rabbi. He is still living. He lives in Jerusalem. He's about 90 now. He served as a rabbi in several cities in the Northeast [United States] and finally settled in Baltimore [Maryland] where he was rabbi for many, many years. Then he went to Israel about 20 years ago with my mother who passed away about a year ago. I’m a rabbi’s kid, you know a preacher’s kid.

Nat: Was he a preacher's kid?

Rabbi Feldman: He was a preacher's kid too. We go back seven or eight generations of
rabbis on my father’s side and actually my mother’s side of the family as well.

**Nat:** Both on the fraternal and maternal side?

**Rabbi Feldman:** We have rabbinic blood in us, rabbinic genes.

**Nat:** Poland . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** Poland primarily, yes. Warsaw is where my father was born. He went to yeshiva and was ordained in Poland.

**Nat:** Was the decision to come to this country, obviously from a timing standpoint, that would have been around the emergence of World War II?

**Rabbi Feldman:** No, 1927.

**Nat:** Nineteen twenty-seven. I’m sorry. This predates all of the . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** This is between the wars. It was 12 or 13 years before World War II and ten years after World War I.

**Nat:** A lot of family left back?

**Rabbi Feldman:** A lot of family left back. During the Holocaust, my mother—who had seven sisters and a brother—lost track of all of them. We were able to bring one sister over just about two weeks before World War II broke out. She now lives in New York. My father lost his entire family during the destruction of European Jewry. My brothers and I—I have two younger brothers—were raised in the various cities where my father had his pulpits. He was learning the English language when he came over. I still remember as a child he used to practice diligently his sermons in English because he wasn’t used to the language. I was born in upstate New York. My second brother was born in Baltimore, Maryland. My youngest brother was born in Manchester, New Hampshire. We lived in different places but most of the time he was rabbi in Baltimore. That's basically a bare bones outline.

**Nat:** Let's talk a little bit about your reflections on your relationships with your mother, your father, the kind of people you can recall being as a youngster. I assume since you followed in your father's footsteps, did your brothers as well also?

**Rabbi Feldman:** All my brothers, all of us are rabbis. We're not all pulpit rabbis but we're all rabbis.

**Nat:** Let's talk a little bit about . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** My son is a rabbi.

**Nat:** . . . the kind of home that enabled this household, suffering with the

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tragedy of the Holocaust, to pursue a life of . . .?

Rabbi Feldman: The home was very warm, giving, and at the same time extremely disciplined. I never realized when I was growing up how disciplined it was, but it was. We were under tight control and we never knew it. My father and mother had the genius of being able to keep us on a short leash while we thought we were on a long one. There were certain parameters beyond which we knew we were never going to go. We were never going to violate the Shabbos [Yiddish: Sabbath]. We weren't going to movies on Saturday afternoon. We weren't playing ball on Shabbos. I have always been very athletic, for example, and I went to a public high school in Baltimore. I was asked by the football coach to come out for the team—which was a tremendous honor to be asked by the coach—because he saw me playing around the school. I couldn't come out for the team because they played only Friday night—Shabbos. I remember telling him, “Mr. Lawrence . . .” Harry Lawrence, "... can't do it." "Why not?" "Religious reasons." He says, "I'm proud of you. That's much more important than football." I'll always remember that.

Nat: That's extraordinary.

Rabbi Feldman: Extraordinary, yes. That's why he was probably the most successful high school coach in history in America. They won 60 or 70 straight games. But that's beside the point. At any rate, the home was very warm, open. Other kids growing up knew we were rabbi's sons. We also didn't have the normal adolescence rebellion of any serious sort against Judaism, or against religion, or against parents. As I told you, I went to a public high school.

Nat: Do you have a theory why you didn't go through that rebellious . . .?

Rabbi Feldman: I don't know, I think we had very good models as parents. My father was not, and is not a phony. He was not telling us to do anything that he wasn’t doing.

Nat: He wasn't playing golf Saturday afternoon . . .

Rabbi Feldman: . . . and telling you to go to shul [Yiddish: synagogue]. Or he wasn't watching—there was no TV, but he wasn't, metaphorically speaking, watching—TV at night while telling you to go study. He was studying. He always was a student. Unspoken modeling that we had. Many of my early years, five or six of my early informative years, pre-bar mitzvah,1 were in Manchester, New Hampshire, where there were no observant Jews.

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1 Hebrew for ‘son of commandment.’ A rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on tefillin, and may be counted to the minyan quorum for public worship. He celebrates the bar mitzvah by being called up to the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath.
There were maybe 100 Jewish families and my father and mother were the only observant Jews in the town. He was rabbi of a little shul up there. Nevertheless, we did alright. I went to public school. I was the baby Jesus in the annual Christmas play until my father found out.

Nat: That's before you had the beard?

Rabbi Feldman: Somewhat before. The teacher said I was the only one who looked semitic enough to be the Baby Jesus. At any rate, that's the personal thing. I have only good memories of growing up with my parents. Very warm, people of integrity, honest, very intelligent. My mother used to write poetry. She used to write plays. She was a linguist, Hebraic and Yiddish.

Always all come from the typical Jewish intellectual stock.

Nat: Did any of her work get published?

Rabbi Feldman: In Jewish papers, Jewish press. She used to do a lot of creative stuff around the communities where she worked. She worked with the Jewish Community Center. Did their plays, did their productions, that kind of thing. Amateur stuff, but she was a very good, talented writer. My father is an extraordinary Talmudic scholar. He's one of those guys who knows Talmud by heart from studying all his life. My children and grandchildren still know that they ask zeyde [Yiddish: grandfather] where is such and such a topic mentioned in the Talmud.2 He'll tell you not only the name of the book in which it is, but the page and how many lines from the bottom of the page that it is. It's classic. He's an extraordinary scholar, he still studies.

Nat: Did you and your brothers spend a lot of time studying with him?

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, up in Manchester particularly. He used to study with me, privately, every day after public school. In Baltimore when I went to public high school, he used to study with me. He set up a time, and now I realize how—I don't know how he did it—a busy rabbi, a pulpit rabbi, to put aside a couple of hours every afternoon to study with his kid. He just did that because it was important.

Nat: Your early religious training was . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Was from the home, exclusively from the home.

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2 Hebrew for ‘study.’ The legal code spanning a thousand years and based on the teachings of the Bible, the Talmud interprets biblical laws and commandments. It also contains a rich store of historic facts and traditions. It has two divisions: the Mishnah and the Gemarah. The Mishnah is the interpretation of Biblical law. The Gemarah is a commentary on the Mishnah by a group of later scholars.
Nat: From your father.

Rabbi Feldman: . . . and mother. My mother taught me Hebrew, the language. My father taught me the classic text, the Bible, the Talmud.

Nat: He was your yeshiva\(^3\) environment?

Rabbi Feldman: Right, he was my rebbe [Yiddish: mentor, teacher]. There was no environment except at home. I was always more interested in playing ball than studying. One little resentment I have is . . .

Nat: Do we want to admit this to the world?

Rabbi Feldman: We can admit this to the world. Growing up I much rather would have played ball. I'd still rather play ball than study. Let's face it. I was a normal American red-blooded boy. I'm still a crazy baseball fan and I still enjoy athletics, both participatory and looking on, spectator. I still play tennis regularly.

Nat: This is a part of you that I assume your father and you did not share.

Rabbi Feldman: He didn't mind. He also taught me how to play ball. I remember in the summertime his taking us out for picnics and teaching me how to catch a ball. No problem. He took great pride in us. Which we all felt. That was very important.

Nat: You settle in Baltimore, and by now you're in high school. You're the oldest of the three brothers?

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, right.

Nat: Much older than the other two?

Rabbi Feldman: Couple of years. Three or four years between each of us.

Nat: Enough distance between each that you weren't treated as the same. As he taught you, he couldn't be teaching the younger ones because they wouldn't be ready. Each of you had a sort of individual . . .

Rabbi Feldman: By the time my younger brother—three or four years younger than I—went into high school, there was already a yeshiva high school in Baltimore for him to go to. I didn't have that. I went to public high school. In any case, we were not grouped together by any means.

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\(^3\) Yeshiva (Hebrew for “sitting”) is a Jewish educational institution for religious instruction that is equivalent to high school. It also refers to a Talmudic college for unmarried male students from their teenage years to their early twenties.
You, as the oldest, are the benefactor of his exclusive teaching.

Rabbi Feldman: Correct.

Your younger brothers, because Baltimore started to mature as a Jewish community, were able to be . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Correct. Exactly. It so happens, incidentally, that my second—my younger brother—went into full-time Jewish scholarship as opposed to the pulpit rabbinate. He's been a teaching rabbi all his life and he is really an outstanding Talmudic scholar. He's like my father now. He's outstanding.

Where does he live?

Rabbi Feldman: He lives in Jerusalem. He's been there for 25 or 30 years. Published three, or four, or five books. He's an outstanding scholar even though his father didn't teach him exclusively.

And the youngest?

Rabbi Feldman: The youngest lives in Baltimore and is a principal of a yeshiva high school, of a large school which runs from elementary through high school, a Jewish school.

Is that the school that they got to go to?

Rabbi Feldman: No, that was not the school at the time.

You're the pulpit rabbi of the three.

I'm the pulpit rabbi of the three.

The second is the scholar of the three.

Tenacious scholar. The third is the educator rabbi.

The third is the educator rabbi. When the three of you get together . . .

We kibitz [Yiddish: chat, converse].

Do we argue and debate?

No. I just got off the phone before you came with my brother in Jerusalem. I always send him . . . he's an outstanding writer and scholar, so whenever I do some serious articles on Judaism, I always like him to look at it before I send it in. He always has something good to tell me. I just discussed one of my papers with him. We never argue.

This is marvelous. Now, you finished high school. Then when have you formulated in your mind that you, like so many of your forbears, want to pursue a career of . . .

Probably not until I was two or three years into college. I finished high
school and just went on to a *yeshiva*, a college level *yeshiva* because that's the only way you can continue your Jewish studies, and simultaneously I went to college. I went into *yeshiva* in Baltimore, Ner Yisroel⁴ from which I was ultimately ordained. Not with the thought of becoming a practicing rabbi but just to get some additional Jewish training. Simultaneously, I was enrolled at Johns Hopkins [University—Baltimore, Maryland] where I just majored in English which was my original major. I was going part-time to each. I was actually going full-time to the *yeshiva*, and part-time to Hopkins. I used to compensate for the part-time by going full-time for eight weeks in the summer at Hopkins to keep up my unit credits. As you can see, I have a bachelor’s degree from Hopkins, a master’s degree from Hopkins, and a doctorate from Emory, and that's my ordination.

**Nat:** You're at Hopkins studying English, you're at the *yeshiva*, and somewhere two or three years around age 20 you started to focus on ‘what am I supposed to be when I grow up?’

**Rabbi Feldman:** Right. My dad never pressures me or persuades me, even subtly, to enter the pulpit rabbinate. He wants to be sure that whatever decision we make is ours. He knows the pulpit rabbinate is agonizing in a thousand different ways. He'd be proud if we'd do it, but never at all persuades. If anything, he leans the other way. The decision I ultimately had to make after two or three years was; I was interested in medicine as a possibility . . . and pediatric medicine particularly because I've always loved little children. I didn't know which way I would go. I chose . . . I don't know why (unlike the Christians we don't have a mysterious calling from heaven) . . . but in a way it was a pull to this more than to that. I guess it was a calling if you want to say that.

**Nat:** But you obviously always enjoyed studying.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, always, eternal student.

**Nat:** Your peers—your friends—were at that point, I assume, going down different paths. As your high school friends were going on to college, you were, by your description, college was somewhat supplemental rather than primary.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, but college was tough. I studied hard in college too, even though it

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⁴ A prominent *yeshiva* near Baltimore, Maryland, founded in 1933 by Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, a disciple of Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, dean of the Slobodka *yeshiva* in Lithuania. As of 2015 it was headed by Rabbi Aharon Feldman, a disciple of Rabbi Ruderman. It has about 950 students.
was supplemental because it was Johns Hopkins. It was tough, high standards.

Nat: A part of you was going to meet whatever those standards were.

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, and I enjoyed English. I majored in English simply because I enjoyed reading and writing. Had some good people there. I enjoyed the studying. First of all yeshiva training is . . . you never get to think in college. Period. You get to think in yeshiva. You cannot study Talmud . . . you are forced to think. I'll give you an example that you, as a lawyer, can appreciate. It could be that in law school you get to think, I'm not sure.

Nat: Sometimes. On a good day.

Rabbi Feldman: I'll tell you this story. I was teaching this course at Emory [University] . . . History and Methods of Jewish Law. I really prepared what I thought was a wonderful syllabus for this course, February to May. One of the things I wanted to introduce to the students, most of whom were Jewish—there were 25 students in that class, 23 were Jewish—I wanted to introduce them to the Talmudic method of logic which is a little different from Greek logic. So I gave them the whole background and by the time we got to the Talmud we were in about the sixth week of the course. One day I came in with a translated Talmudic text and I was going to give them a feel of what it is, what is Talmudic dialogue all about. I gave them something in a classic text. Outlined it and the argumentation that went on, and the new theories, and this and that. We spent the whole two-hour session on Talmud. We argued, which is the way you do in a study hall in yeshiva when you study. You argue with each other, fine points, our subtle points of law, and I was outlining, diagraming on the board. Fine. It was a great session. Afterwards, going down the elevator, one of the students said, "I went to a fine Ivy League school and I'm here at Emory. It's my third year. It's the first time in any class in my college career I've ever been forced to stretch my brain, to think." It was a great compliment. Yeshiva training is unbelievably intense. We laugh that the kids going to college, are taking ten hours a week. We were taking ten hours a day. And we were expected to be there Sundays and Saturday afternoon to study.

Nat: One problem is you can study on Shabbat [Hebrew: Sabbath].

Rabbi Feldman: That's right that's the one problem. That's all you can do on Shabbat. To this day, I'm a compulsive reader and student. There I was going to school. I enjoyed studying. The only problem I had with the rabbinate, the major problem, was I had no time to study.
Nat: Somewhere in this process, at age 20 or so, you make the career choice, but you finish at Johns Hopkins and you even go on and go to graduate school.

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, I get my master’s degree and ordination the same month. Try that sometimes.

Nat: So there's an enthusiasm for learning in the general sense, as well as the logical sense. An insatiability that seems to be there. One could ask why a pulpit? Why not the [Greenfield Hebrew] Academy?

Rabbi Feldman: I don't know. I enjoy the Academy to this day very much. That's probably because I'm not in the Academy\(^5\) full-time. I don't know if I'd enjoy the stuff that goes on in academia if I had to make my living from it. But I enjoy being in there as a visiting professor. I've taught at Emory and I've taught at Agnes Scott [College—Decatur, Georgia] and I've taught a couple of schools in Israel over the years. I enjoy that very much. As to why I chose . . . I don't know whether there were opportunities available then really for a young man of 24 just to go into academia. There were no Judaic studies in school as there are today. It could be that today if I were coming out I would apply to an Emory Judaic Studies program because I enjoy that.

Nat: So you go through and you know you want to be a rabbi.

Rabbi Feldman: The other thing, in academia you don't really have a chance to affect people's lives. Do you know what I mean? In the rabbinate you have a chance to do something for the religion in which you believe. In academia, you're an academic. You teach math. You teach this. You teach Judaism. It's a subject. That's not my cup of tea. Judaism for me is not a subject among subjects.

Nat: This is a need to take your love and enthusiasm and your knowledge . . .

Rabbi Feldman: I want to change the world . . .

Nat: . . . and share it in a way that . . .

Rabbi Feldman: I don’t want to share it. I want to change the world. I want to come and revolutionize it, which I learned you cannot right away.

\(^5\) The Katherine and Jacob Greenfield Hebrew Academy was the first Jewish day school in Atlanta, and was founded in 1953. In 2014 the Hebrew Academy and Atlanta Yeshiva High School merged into the Atlanta Jewish Academy.
Nat: When do we get married?

Rabbi Feldman: We get married four months after I get my master’s and get ordained and get the pulpit in Atlanta. The ordination and the master’s come in May or June of 1952. I'm asked to take this pulpit in August of 1952—which is a little *shul* downtown, which we'll get to in our next segment—and I get married in November of 1952. I'm engaged practically the same time I get my ordination.

Nat: Let's talk about this woman that has been with you all these years. We've got your path. Where does she enter your life and what is her background?

Rabbi Feldman: Her background is an Orthodox[6] background although her parents are lay people. They're business people from New York. I meet her in a summer camp where I'm a lifeguard, of all things. A rabbinic student, a scholar, but enjoys the outdoors. There's a boys’ camp and a girls’ camp. I happened to meet her. Knew her five years before we were married. In her wildest dreams she didn't think she would ever be the wife of a rabbi. She always wanted to marry someone who was an observant, learned Jew, but a pulpit rabbi was the farthest. She turned out to be really a perfect wife for a rabbi. In terms of the professional needs of a rabbi, if a rabbi goes out to find a wife who will be a good rabbi's wife, he would pick Estelle [Samber]. She deals with people very well, and they're fond of her, and she doesn't have any airs about her. She's a perfectly natural person, and she's bright, and she doesn't push herself on people. They like her. Universally liked by the ladies and by the men. Whatever. She's fine. We come down here in 1952 together after we're married.

Nat: You've known Estelle then throughout your college, pretty much.

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, pretty much because I knew her five years before we were married.

Nat: She was living in New York and you were in Baltimore?

Rabbi Feldman: Difficult courtship, a kosher courtship.

Nat: Does she play any role in your decision to pursue the rabbinate?

Rabbi Feldman: No, she does not. By the time we were engaged, I've already firmly cast my decision. In the last couple of years that we were going out she knows. I told her that this is it.

Nat: Your first pulpit brings you to Atlanta?

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6 Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the Written *Torah* and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.
Rabbi Feldman: The only congregation that would take a young man was here.
Nat: The only congregation that would take a young man is in this city?
Rabbi Feldman: With no experience. The only place that I could find that would take a gamble with me.
Nat: Let me back up a little bit. Were there pulpits while you were a student that you served?
Rabbi Feldman: Yes, I went to Ashland, Kentucky one High Holy Day\textsuperscript{7} period. I went there two or three years in a row. They loved me but I didn't want to be a rabbi in Ashland, Kentucky. Ten Jewish families and two shuls. I'm exaggerating. Maybe 40 Jewish families and two synagogues, one Reform\textsuperscript{8} and one Orthodox. You know, you need the shul that you don't go to, the old joke. It almost soured me on the rabbinate, those experiences, what I was going through. I also filled in for my dad in his congregation often when he couldn't, when I was already in my senior year. Sermon occasionally. Teach classes. I taught a lot of classes. Writing bulletins. I was also involved in a lot of sort of internship that the yeshiva does for you. They send you out to hospitals and to funerals, whatever. You learn the ropes, the practical ropes, you do a marriage.
Nat: You were doing some of that with your father?
Rabbi Feldman: With my father, and as part of my rabbinic training.
Nat: Let's come to Atlanta. Let's talk about having children. Let's talk about the private time in Atlanta and then we'll come back and talk about the congregation and the city. You come here in 1952. Let's bypass the professional for a while and stay on the familiar. You and Estelle come here in 1952 married just a few months.
Rabbi Feldman: We come here the week after we're married in November, 1952, after Thanksgiving. We're married and this is it. We're moving to Atlanta. I had already come here in August, had already rented an apartment and that was it.
Nat: My understanding is the expectation of both of you was this will be your first pulpit but you're not coming to the south to . . .

\textsuperscript{7} The two High Holy Days are Rosh Ha-Shanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).
\textsuperscript{8} A division within Judaism especially in North America and the United Kingdom. Historically it began in the nineteenth century. In general, the Reform movement maintains that Judaism and Jewish traditions should be modernized and compatible with participation in Western culture. While the Torah remains the law, in Reform Judaism women are included (mixed seating, bat mitzvah and women rabbis), music is allowed in the services and most of the service is in English.
Rabbi Feldman: Two years maximum] to learn the rabbinate. I had an opportunity to be assistant rabbi in Yonkers, New York to a very prominent rabbi—whom I interviewed with, and who was willing to take me on as his assistant—and this, come to Atlanta. I wanted to go to New York because that's New York. My dad said, "You really ought to go to Atlanta because you will not learn to be a rabbi when you're an assistant. You will learn to be a rabbi when you bloody your nose alone in the pulpit. Even a little pulpit like 40 families." I listened to him.

Nat: Your dad was . . .
Rabbi Feldman: Instrumental in my not going to New York.
Nat: . . . perfectly capable of making it clear to you . . .
Rabbi Feldman: . . . he was perfectly capable of persuading when he needed to.
Nat: You can make your decision about whether to be a rabbi, but once you made it, he was certainly going to be helpful.
Rabbi Feldman: Right. Very.
Nat: You had been his assistant rabbi.
Rabbi Feldman: Unofficially. Just nominally. I was assisting in many ways. It wasn’t a formal job and it was just once in a while. But I learned. Listen, growing up in the home of a rabbi is equivalent, I've always thought, to ten years’ experience before you take your first pulpit. Nothing like it. You don't get shocked by anything. Nor are you overwhelmed by the negative and the positive. You don't get overwhelmed when the sisterhood lady says she adores you. Because it’s a way of speaking. Nor do you get overwhelmed by them telling you that your sermon was terrific. Nor do you go crazy if they say you're no good. It's wonderful being brought up in a rabbi's home if you're going to be a rabbi.
Nat: Certainly you understand the pressures of helping people.
Rabbi Feldman: You understand. You don't get shook up if the phone rings at four in the morning or one in the morning. It's normal. That's it.
Nat: Your dad wisely advises you to just come here.
Rabbi Feldman: Right. Which I thought was good advice in retrospect.
Nat: So you come here, and when do we have children?
Rabbi Feldman: We have children about a year-and-a-half later, first son. We end up having five altogether.
Nat: First son is?
Rabbi Feldman: Ilan. He was born here and raised here.
Nat: And the other four?
Rabbi Feldman: Are another two boys. Three boys altogether and two daughters. All of them are married. One of them lives in Israel.
Nat: The oldest is a rabbi here?
Rabbi Feldman: The oldest is a rabbi here.
Nat: We'll come back to him.
Rabbi Feldman: Right. The second one is also a rabbi but . . .
Nat: And his name is?
Rabbi Feldman: Jonathan. They all went to the same yeshiva by the way. They all went to the same Ner Yisroel, the same Johns Hopkins.
Nat: That was going to be one of my questions, how you dealt with their education.
Rabbi Feldman: They all have college degrees. One is a lawyer, the third one. Black sheep. What are you going to do? There's one in every family.
Nat: Were there lawyers in the background at all?
Rabbi Feldman: Rabbis are really lawyers.
Nat: All rabbis are lawyers?
Rabbi Feldman: All rabbis are lawyers. Jonathan is the second son. He is a computer whiz and he works with a computer firm in Baltimore. Programming. He's a rabbi, ordained but he doesn't practice at all. Third son, Amram, went into law school, also went to yeshiva all his life, then he went to law school. All of the boys continue their rabbinic Talmudic studies. Every evening they have it with their friends and stuff.
Nat: And the girls?
Rabbi Feldman: The girls are each married to rabbis. Let's put it this way. One is married to a young man who is finishing his rabbinic training in Jerusalem. American, but he's living over there. That's the youngest. The next to the youngest child is our daughter, living in Los Angeles [California], married to a teaching rabbi, not a pulpit rabbi. Ilan is the oldest and he’s the pulpit rabbi.
Nat: He's the pulpit rabbi here?
Rabbi Feldman: Right.
Nat: Now these children are born between roughly 1953 and the mid 1960's.

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, 1967. Between 1953 and 1967, 1968 is when they were born.

Nat: Let's talk about this household in the city of Atlanta in this period of the Fifties into the Sixties when there's a very small observant Jewish population. Is there any Jewish day school available?

Rabbi Feldman: Jewish day school begins about 1960. I forget when it began. Hebrew Academy began . . . I was instrumental in helping found it around 1959 or 1960. No, I'm wrong. The Jewish day school begins in 1954. Three years after I got here, 1954 or 1955. I remember that my wife was pregnant and was the first teacher of the kindergarten in that new school.

Nat: Where was that new school at that time?

Rabbi Feldman: It was housed in a room in the Jewish Community Center, the old center, which was on Peachtree Street. Same site, different building.

Nat: So this place, Atlanta, is not so devoid of a Jewish community when you get here, if within two years it's able to stage . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Within two years we started a Jewish school. However, we started with a tremendous battle. People don't want it.

Nat: Let's talk about that.

Rabbi Feldman: The powers that be in Atlanta say that this young Orthodox rabbi is pushing too hard, too soon, too fast. He's unrealistic.

Nat: There's you at Beth Jacob, the young Orthodox rabbi.

Rabbi Feldman: There's Rabbi Harry Epstein. ¹⁰

Nat: There's Harry Epstein at . . .

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⁹ Beth Jacob is an Orthodox synagogue on LaVista Road in Atlanta founded in 1942 by former members of Ahavath Achim who were looking for a more Orthodox congregation. Beth Jacob is now Atlanta’s largest Orthodox congregation. The first location was a converted house on Boulevard.

¹⁰ Rabbi Harry Epstein (1903 – 2003) served as rabbi of Ahavath Achim Synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia from 1928 to 1982, when he became rabbi emeritus. Under Rabbi Harry Epstein, the congregation began to shift to Conservatism, which they joined in 1952.
Rabbi Feldman: Ahavath Achim. There's Jacob Rothschild at the Temple. That's it. Those are the rabbis in the city at that time.

Nat: Or VeShalom is not . . .?

Rabbi Feldman: Sorry, forgive me. Those are the Ashkenazi rabbis of the city. There's a Sephardic rabbi, Rabbi Joseph Cohen, may he rest in peace. Those are the rabbis of the city, five rabbis.

Nat: What about the little shul just up the block from Shearith Israel?

Rabbi Feldman: Anshi S'fard? They were not . . . not really . . . they didn't have a

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11 Ahavath Achim was founded in 1887 in a small room on Gilmer Street. In 1920 they moved to a permanent building at the corner of Piedmont and Gilmer Street. The final service in that building was held in 1958 to make way for construction of the Downtown Connector (the concurrent section of Interstate 75 and Interstate 85 through Atlanta). The synagogue moved to its current location on Peachtree Battle Avenue in 1958. Rabbi Abraham Hirmes was the first rabbi of the then Orthodox congregation. In 1928 Rabbi Harry Epstein became the rabbi and the congregation began to shift to Conservatism, which they joined in 1952. Cantor Isaac Goodfriend, a Holocaust survivor, joined the congregation in 1966 and remained until his retirement. Rabbi Epstein retired in 1982, becoming Rabbi Emeritus and Rabbi Arnold Goodman assumed the rabbinic post. He retired in 2002. Rabbi Neil Sandler is now the rabbi. (2015)

12 Rabbi Jacob Rothschild was rabbi of the city’s oldest Reform congregation, the Temple, in Atlanta, Georgia from 1946 until his death in 1973 from a heart attack. He forged close relationships with the city’s Christian clergy and distinguished himself as a charismatic spokesperson for civil rights.

13 The Temple, or Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, is Atlanta’s oldest Jewish congregation. The cornerstone was laid on the Temple on Garnett Street in 1875. The dedication was held in 1877 and the Temple was located there until 1902. The Temple’s next location on Pryor Street was dedicated in 1902. The Temple’s current location in Midtown on Peachtree Street was dedicated in 1931. The main sanctuary is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Reform congregation now totals approximately 1500 families (2015).

14 Rabbi Arnold Heisler was first the assistant rabbi of Shearith Israel in the 1940’s and when Rabbi Tobias Geffen semi-retired, becoming rabbi emeritus, he assumed the position of running the daily life of the synagogue until 1956 when Rabbi Sydney Mossman came.

15 Founded in 1904, Shearith Israel began as a congregation that met in the homes of congregants until 1906 when they began using a Methodist church on Hunter Street. After World War II, Rabbi Tobias Geffen moved the congregation to University Drive, where it became the first synagogue in DeKalb County. In the 1960’s, they removed the barrier between the men’s and women’s sections in the sanctuary, and officially became affiliated with the Conservative movement in 2002.

16 Congregation Or VeShalom was established by refugees of the Ottoman Empire, namely from Turkey and the Isle of Rhodes. The congregation began in 1920 and was based at Central and Woodward Avenues until 1948 when it moved to a larger building on North Highland Road. The current building for OrVeshalom is on North Druid Hills Road.

17 Ashkenazi is an ethnic division of Jews which formed in the Holy Roman Empire in the early 1000’s. They established communities in Central and Eastern Europe.

18 Sephardic Jews or Sephardim are the descendants of the Jews who left Spain or Portugal after their expulsion in 1492. The word comes from the Hebrew word for Spain. The Sephardic community scattered across Europe, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. Sephardic Jews use Ladino, a combination of Hebrew and Spanish, and a Sephardic style of liturgy. Many continue the customs and traditions that originated in the Iberian Peninsula.

19 Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen (1896-1985) was born in Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey. He was trained for the rabbinate in Turkey and accepted his first pulpit in Havana, Cuba in 1920. In 1934 he moved to Atlanta, Georgia where he was installed as the rabbi of Congregation Or VeShalom, a Sephardic congregation. Rabbi Cohen officially retired in 1969, but remained active at both the synagogue and in the community until his death in 1985.

20 Congregation Anshi S'fard is an Orthodox synagogue located in Atlanta. It was founded in 1911 to provide a
rabbi then. Still don't have a rabbi.

Nat: They're there but they're not . . .

Rabbi Feldman: They have a minyan$^{21}$ but they don't have . . . they were not really ever an active part of the Jewish community.

Nat: So who is resisting the idea of a Jewish day school?

Rabbi Feldman: Not the rabbis. Rabbi Epstein was very cooperative, wants it. Rabbi Heisler, subsequently left . . . very, very, right on the front lines with me. Who's resisting it . . .

Nat: Of course, [Rabbi] Rothschild simply has other kinds of interests.

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, he doesn't think it's important. This takes an interesting turn because right now the Reform movement is going to start its own day school which I think is wonderful. Resisting it were the community leadership at large. The head of the [Jewish] Federation does not think it's a good idea, although the head of the Bureau of Jewish Education thinks it's a good idea and does help. But the money people in the city don't think it's a good idea.

Nat: But my understanding of that generation is that the money people are by and large, if affiliated, more likely to be affiliated with the Temple, the Reform congregation.

Rabbi Feldman: Or Ahavath Achim, many of them were with AA.

Nat: But there wasn't a . . .

Rabbi Feldman: We were able to overcome the resistance after a year. We brought in some people from all congregations. We were able to overcome the resistance but there was clear resistance on the part of the [Jewish] Federation [of Greater Atlanta].

Nat: Who were the lay leaders as best you can recall in getting the Hebrew Academy started?

Rabbi Feldman: There was the president of my synagogue and a couple of people. There were people like . . .

Nat: Do you remember their names?

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$^{21}$ A minyan refers to the quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for certain religious obligations. According to many non-Orthodox streams of Judaism adult females count in the minyan.

home for Hasidic worship and fellowship for Jews from Poland, Galicia and the Ukraine who had settled in Atlanta. At first the congregation met in the Red Men’s Hall on Central Avenue, but by the end of 1913 a wooden building at the corner of Woodward Avenue and King Street was secured. A few years later the congregation moved to the corner of Woodward and Capitol avenues. After 1945, the settlement of Jews where Anshi S’fard was located disappeared. Anshi S’fard moved to its present location on North Highland, in the Morningside area. It is the oldest Orthodox congregation in Atlanta.
Rabbi Feldman: Jack Goldberg.
Nat: Jack Goldberg is?
Rabbi Feldman: The president of this synagogue.
Nat: Beth Jacob.
Rabbi Feldman: No longer living. There was David Katz also was president. No longer living. Rabbi Epstein himself was a big help in getting us entrée to some of his more powerful people. There was a guy like Barney Medintz for who the camp was named, who was not really a shul Jew, but saw the need for having something like this in the community, for the future of the community. He was very helpful. There was the late Samuel Rosenberg, who was a professional head of the Bureau of Jewish Education, was extremely helpful in getting it going. But we had to beat the bushes the first summer . . . Dr. Irving Greenberg, who also we brought in. I was the one who went to see Dr. Greenberg to try to convince him to have a parlor meeting in his home to bring some people in, because he had a lot of entrée.
Nat: He was a member of . . .
Rabbi Feldman: He was a member of Shearith Israel. He was very enthusiastic from the very beginning, so we were able to make breakthroughs.
Nat: The support comes from some Beth Jacob members, Shearith Israel members, AA members.
Rabbi Feldman: And the head of the [Atlanta] Bureau of Jewish Education.\(^\text{22}\)
Nat: The Sephardic community?
Rabbi Feldman: Not heavily. They're a small community.
Nat: They're a small community and at the time a bit isolated?
Rabbi Feldman: Certainly Rabbi Cohen was helpful, but not too strong in the city.
Nat: So you start the academy. Do your children go there?
Rabbi Feldman: When they get old enough. They're only one year old at that point. Ultimately they all went there.

\(^\text{22}\)The Atlanta Bureau of Jewish Education (ABJE) was created in 1946 to foster Jewish education in the city. In 1947, it was instrumental in forming a Hebrew High School is Atlanta. Over the course of four decades, the Bureau offered services to schools, the community and individuals including curriculum guides for Atlanta-area public schools, Holocaust education programs, conferences, workshops, programs for teenagers in Israel, festivals, adult education, classes, lectures, and extension classes for Sunday school teachers. The organization also operated a lending library of Jewish books and resources.
Nat: That becomes their school. Now, there've been other schools started since then; the Epstein School, Torah Day School.

Rabbi Feldman: Now a Reform school coming up a year from now.

Nat: That appears to be a reality. While we're just talking about the day schools, why was the Hebrew Academy not enough?

Rabbi Feldman: Not enough for what?

Nat: For the community.

Rabbi Feldman: You mean all subsequently? The Hebrew Academy was not enough for the Conservative group because that's why Ahavath Achim started the Epstein School, because they felt that it was a community school and it had to appeal to everybody. They wanted to preach, or teach their Conservative ideology. So they started their own school. There was also pressure at that time because of the busing. You know the start of the Jewish school, a lot of busing. Busing helped the Jewish schools here very much in those days. It helped the Hebrew Academy and it helped start other schools. The emergence of the Torah Day School—which is fundamentally an Orthodox school—was also for the same reason. By this time, we at Beth Jacob have about 150 children in the Hebrew Academy. We had like 40 percent of the population. But we feel that the Academy is not meeting the needs of an Orthodox community because they have to appeal to everybody. We wanted more intensive this, and more intensive that, and more pushing to that, and they couldn't do it for us. There was a lot of discontent. So I found that we must start our own school. Which we did... called Torah Day School. It's an Orthodox school.

Nat: Torah Day School is...

Rabbi Feldman: An unabashedly Orthodox school.

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23 The Epstein School (the Solomon Shechter School of Atlanta) is a private Jewish day school in the Atlanta area located in the City of Sandy Springs. In 1973, Rabbi Harry H. Epstein and the leaders of Ahavath Achim Synagogue wanted to create a Conservative Jewish day school. The first campus was housed at the Synagogue. In 1987 the school moved to Sandy Springs.

24 Torah Day School was founded in 1985 with an enrollment of approximately 25 students in grades 1 and 2. Over the years it has grown and moved several times. In 2003, it moved to LaVista Road with a state-of-the-art, full service school on 11 acres and 360 students. Its mission is to inspire students to observe the Torah, strive for personal excellence and to pursue a lifelong earning.

25 A form of Judaism that seeks to preserve Jewish tradition and ritual but has a more flexible approach to the interpretation of the law than Orthodox Judaism. It attempts to combine a positive attitude toward modern culture, while preserving a commitment to Jewish observance. They also observe gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and bat mitzvahs).
Nat: . . . unabashedly Orthodox. Epstein is unabashedly Conservative.26

Rabbi Feldman: Unabashedly Conservative, whatever that means.

Nat: How does the Hebrew Academy . . .?

Rabbi Feldman: The academy tries to spread its wings over the whole community. There are many Orthodox kids that go there from this shul. Many of our kids go to Epstein School.

Not many, some. So widespread was the attendance of our children at Beth Jacob to the Hebrew Academy that—when I came and we had an afternoon Hebrew school and Sunday school of 150 kids—after 10 or 15 years there were no kids in our Sunday school Hebrew school because they all went to the day school, which was self-destruct, which was what I wanted.

<interruption in interview discussing the end of the tape>

Nat: Let's finish the day school thing. Let's talk a little bit about . . .

Rabbi Feldman: It was also then, of course, the Yeshiva High School begins. That began about 18 or 20 years ago. As a result, they felt the need that the children graduating from the Hebrew Academy can't just be lost to us. Which they were being lost by going to public high school. Not just lost in terms of their learning, but lost Jewishly. The [Atlanta] Yeshiva High School27 started on that yellow couch right behind you.

Nat: Yeshiva High School starts as a Beth Jacob . . .?

Rabbi Feldman: No. Beth Jacob starts it, yes. It's an independent entity but it starts from . . .

Nat: It is the Beth Jacob community that recognizes . . .

Rabbi Feldman: . . . that pushes it.

Nat: We need it. By this time have your children left the Hebrew Academy?

Are you personally experiencing the dilemma of nothing?


Nat: So your children are in Baltimore?

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26 A form of Judaism that seeks to preserve Jewish tradition and ritual but has a more flexible approach to the interpretation of the law than Orthodox Judaism. It attempts to combine a positive attitude toward modern culture, while preserving a commitment to Jewish observance. They also observe gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and bat mitzvahs).

27 A modern Orthodox high school founded in 1971, which offered a well-rounded, Torah-based, college preparatory education to young Jewish men and women. As of mid-2014 the Greenfield Hebrew Academy (grades pre-K through 8) and Yeshiva High School (grades 9-12) merged into one college preparatory day school now called the Atlanta Jewish Academy.
Rabbi Feldman: Yes.

Nat: Where zeyde is, and that city is obviously sort of a generation ahead of this city in terms of Jewish education opportunities. So these children keep leaving mom and dad in Atlanta to go to Baltimore, so they can have what they now could have here.

Rabbi Feldman: Two of my children had the benefit of the school here. Three of them have the benefit, and two of them go off.

Nat: That's the two oldest . . . ?

Rabbi Feldman: Right.

Nat: . . . that have to go off. Do they live with . . . ?

Rabbi Feldman: No. Only for one year did they live with my parents, but they live in a dorm most of the time. They have their zeyde and bubbe [Yiddish: grandma] there. They would be there for Shabbos. It's very good.

Nat: They get . . .

Rabbi Feldman: . . . they get the benefit . . .

Nat: . . . they get the benefit of having the opportunity to be very close to obviously two people that you and your wife respect and adore. It's fine for your children to have that exposure. Let me digress a little bit. To the extent a parent or grandparent influences career choices, do you want to take credit for your sons, or do you give that to zeyde who had his hands on them?

Rabbi Feldman: Credit for what aspect of my sons? Every aspect?

Nat: Just the choice of the rabbinical training.

Rabbi Feldman: I did with—and what my father did with me—no pressure, no persuasion.

Nat: We start the Yeshiva High School and the Epstein School supporters don't perceive a need to replicate that the way that they . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Ultimately they do make noises about that but they never consummated it. There is a desire to do it, but it's tough . . . they don't do it. They started . . . Epstein School did start an eighth and ninth grade I think, but it was kind of aborted.

Nat: If you're a Torah Day School student you would probably go on to Yeshiva . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Many Hebrew Academy students also [go to Yeshiva] . . .

Nat: . . . if you're Hebrew Academy, you might go to Yeshiva or you might go
into the public sector . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** . . . the Epstein School also goes on . . . we get a goodly number from the Epstein School as well. Almost every Torah Day School student will go into that, or else go out of town. Many of the Academy kids will do it, and some of the Epstein kids.

**Nat:** More Academy than Epstein.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, I would think so.

**Nat:** Let's go ahead and stop.

<End of Tape 1, Side 1, 02>
<Begin Tape 1, Side 2>

**Nat:** While we're talking about day schools, why don't we take a minute and talk about the emerging Reform day school, which you apparently are very enthusiastic about. Let's talk about why you're enthusiastic about that.

**Rabbi Feldman:** I'm happy with it even though I know they're not going to be training Orthodox Jews there, but that's not the point. I take no delight in being right and saying, "I told you so" because I've been saying for a generation now that without Jewish learning our kids will be lost to us. The second generation will certainly be lost to us. I've said over and over again that you judge your success as a Jew by who your grandchildren are, not by who your children are. Who your grandchildren are going to be. Reform has been going down the tube of almost total assimilation and intermarriage. I'm talking intermarriage not where there's a *pro forma* [Latin: as a matter of form] or quickie conversion, but without those, they know it. The leaders of the Reform movement know this on the inside. They know that they had to do something. They were going to be totally obliterated within a generation from now because they're losing their young. This to me is a way of stemming the tide of bloodletting that's going on in the Reform Jewish communities. These are Jewish people. I don't give a damn about the labels, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, it doesn't matter. They're Jewish people and we're going to lose millions of them unless they do something about it. So this is to me an important trend that they've seen. They've gone too far. They've reached the abyss. They've seen it. They've looked down into it. They say, "We've got to do something." They've bit the bullet and said, "We've got to do something Orthodox. We've got to start our own system," which they've fought for years. It's to their credit that they're doing it. I have no illusions that they're going to be Orthodox or whatever. I was the first one in the city who backed it publicly from the pulpit. Shocked my
congregation. That's why I think it's good for the Jews. Teach Jewish kids Judaism. Even a watered down Judaism is better than what they're going to get at the public schools or [the] Westminster [school], which is where most of the Reform kids go.

Nat: Apparently there is some reevaluation of that in light of the recent . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Recent brouhaha.

Nat: . . . confrontation with what was always a reality. Do you suppose that part of that interest in the day school is the emergence of a number of Reform Jews who want to move towards some level of more tradition?

Rabbi Feldman: That's certainly true.

Nat: There does seem to be a correlation with this . . .

Rabbi Feldman: There's been a reaction to the far leftward movement of the Reform group back to the right. We have a number of people in this congregation who were brought up in the Reform congregations. Some of them were leading members who moved over to us because they were looking for something more substantive and they found it here. So I think that that's certainly so.

Nat: The children, your children . . . two of them go off to Baltimore because of the lack of educational opportunities that you and your wife are comfortable with. Three of them are able to stay in Atlanta through high school. Is your wife teaching at the Hebrew Academy all this time?

Rabbi Feldman: No. She only taught the first year of its existence, 1954. After that she doesn't teach.

Nat: Who else teaches in 1954?

Rabbi Feldman: They have another teacher. My wife is in charge of the Judaic studies and they have another teacher in charge of the general studies. That's it. It is kindergarten or first grade, I forget.

Nat: And then the next year they add.

Rabbi Feldman: They add a grade, and then they get a principal. My wife was also the first Judaic teacher in the Yeshiva High School years later. She helped them get started. She also took over the Judaic studies part of the program. Only she doesn't really enjoy teaching kids, so she only does it where absolutely mandatory.

Nat: So her involvement as a teacher is to be helpful to get it going?
Rabbi Feldman: Right.

Nat: That's not a career choice.

Rabbi Feldman: Her career is a rabbi's wife. That's her career. She has worked here and there but primarily . . . she's a mother.

Nat: She's got five children, and a rabbi who's getting up at four in the morning to worry about this or that.

Rabbi Feldman: Right.

Nat: Where do the boys get their rabbinical training? Do they go to Baltimore?

Rabbi Feldman: They all go to Baltimore. They all get their rabbinical training at the same yeshiva that I got mine, Ner Yisroel.

Nat: Do you have a theory why they all end up at Ner Yisroel?

Rabbi Feldman: No. I thought it was a fine yeshiva. I think it's a good Orthodox yeshiva. Always was, and it's not extreme. It's not far out right. Even though in Atlanta I have this reputation of being a really wild, far out, ultra-Orthodox, that's only a reflection of Atlanta's standards in that I'm ultra-Orthodox. But the yeshiva is a very Orthodox yeshiva. Very fine faculty. It's a normal place. It's not crazy. Do you know what I mean?

Nat: I'm not sure.

Rabbi Feldman: There are things within Orthodoxy, as there are within Reform that are far out, either far right or far left. I don't go for that particularly. It's a normal place that recognizes the importance of secular studies. They do a wonderful job in training the character of a student, as well as giving him knowledge. A fundamental part of yeshiva training is training in ethics, living as a human being. That they do very well there as well. Besides which, it was geographically convenient to Atlanta. That is, relatively speaking it's closer than any other place that we had available in New York or Chicago.

Nat: That's right. I guess that would be the closest to the South you could get.

Rabbi Feldman: Secondly, or thirdly, their facility was very, very—still remains to me—very beautiful facilities out in the country. It's on a nice 40-acre campus. They take wonderful care of the students. They feed them well. They house them well. They have very good supervision. They just run a good tight solid ship. They run through from high school through college.

Nat: Of course, the boys were there for high school?
Rabbi Feldman: Right. It doesn't hurt that I know the boss, the head man who ordains me, and who cares for me very much, and I care for him, and he gives my kids special attention. Ultimately, my oldest son Rabbi Ilan, marries the daughter of the man who succeeds as the dean of the yeshiva. Rabbi [Yaakov Yitzchok] Ruderman was the head man who ordained me died, and Rabbi [Shmuel Yaakov] Weinberg takes it over, and Rabbi Weinberg's daughter is now my daughter-in-law. My son is his son-in-law.

Nat: So your son marries a woman who is an observant Jew who has rabbinical blood as opposed to business.

Rabbi Feldman: Right. She's really a rabbinical girl.

Nat: Now, what happens with . . . he graduates or gets ordained.

Rabbi Feldman: He gets ordained and he stays on in a graduate program for married students there for two or three years, which they have now. They give them a small stipend and they go on doing some additional work. For two or three years, then Atlanta decides that they need an assistant rabbi. We had already had one who left. To my great surprise they said, "Why don't we think maybe Ilan would like to come here. I'm afraid about this. Who knows what it could mean, having a son on the job with you. But they interview him. They like him. He comes down. I hold my breath. It worked out very well.

Nat: This has to be very difficult.

Rabbi Feldman: Very difficult. It wasn't as difficult as I anticipated.

Nat: For both of you.

Rabbi Feldman: It was very difficult the first couple of years, for him especially. Born here, raised here. Some people remember him in diapers. He comes down to be their rabbi. But fine. He did it.

Nat: But he's not worked side by side with you for years because he had gone off to school.

Rabbi Feldman: Right, but they knew him here. I mean he was always coming home.

Nat: No, I mean between you and he.

Rabbi Feldman: No, we hadn't worked side by side. But he knows the rabbinate inside out because he was brought up in my home.

Nat: Did you work with your children the way your father studied with . . .?

Rabbi Feldman: No, I did not.
Nat: You were not able to figure out how he found the two hours every day?

Rabbi Feldman: Not only that, but there were always schools here. My sons already had the . . . my kids already had the Academy. I didn't have any schools like that. Besides which, I probably couldn't have found the two hours. I did study with them but not in that same level.

Nat: What happens when Ilan comes back to be your assistant? Does he come back expecting to stay? Ultimately to succeed you?

Rabbi Feldman: No, no.

Nat: Or does he come back thinking this is a . . .

Rabbi Feldman: This is his training.

Nat: You came for two years?

Rabbi Feldman: Yeah, it almost repeats itself. This is where he gets some training. He loves Atlanta anyway. He gets some training, and see what . . . play it by ear. There's no glimmer in my eye then of leaving, of retiring 10 years ago. I don't know what I'm going to do in 10 or 12 years.

Nat: This is ten years ago.


Nat: So at that time he comes thinking he'll be here for a couple of years and then go find his own pulpit?

Rabbi Feldman: Right.

Nat: Two years turns into three . . .

Rabbi Feldman: To four, to ten. Like my two years turned into almost 40.

Nat: Then you decide to retire? When do you make the decision?

Rabbi Feldman: I made the decision . . . we made the decision . . . about 18 months ago. I informed the synagogue immediately. So they had 18 months to make the transition.

Nat: Is it assumed that Ilan would succeed you?

Rabbi Feldman: No. It engendered some bit of discussion in the congregation as to how they should go about getting a successor. Some people say, "Look, he's the obvious, logical choice. Go ahead and do it." Others say, "We need to interview people around the country." This is a nice Orthodox pulpit now. It's a desirable pulpit. They had a big discussion within the congregation and the board of directors. They decide, it's just an interesting process, it's dynamic. They decide, "We're just going to interview people," which my son wanted them to do and I
wanted them to do . . . interview people. I didn't want him coming in under a cloud that the rabbi's kid got it. They said, "Alright, we'll do that and we'll interview him first." They called a big mass meeting and everybody was invited to come. Hundreds of people show up. I was on sabbatical in Israel, which was very good. I was five months in Israel. Apparently he just did so very well at the interview, which was a very tough public interview, he called it a ‘crucifixion.’ He did very well that they decided that maybe it was silly to go interview others if they know someone who is—using their words—"this talented." Let's not just cut off our noses. Let's just give him a crack at this position. That’s what happened. Then there's a vote. They bring it up to the congregation and they voted him in. There was opposition. He won like by about 80 votes to 20 votes, something like that.

Nat: Which given the culture we're in, to get that kind of . . .
Rabbi Feldman: You know, a presidential candidate . . .
Nat: . . . that's close a consensus as you can get. So this last year . . . that was decided about a year ago?
Rabbi Feldman: About a year ago, right.
Nat: You and he have now been dealing with the formal transition. You're trying to get him to understand that you're not around to be helpful.
Rabbi Feldman: Yes. First of all he's had three periods where I was away for four months at a shot on sabbatical
Nat: During the ten years?
Rabbi Feldman: In the last four years. There were three four-month periods where I was away so he's been a rabbi alone for 12 months. Three different four-month periods. He's had the feel of being by himself with no one to rely on. My intention—my wife and my intention—is as soon as we retire, which is August 1 officially, not to be in Atlanta for the High Holy Days. Wherever—we hope to be in Israel—but if not, we're going to go somewhere else. I don't want to be around. What he has to do is jump in this water and swim on his own. I don't want to be around. It will be easier for him and easier for me. He'll be fine because he's handled this ship alone [unintelligible: 15:15].
Nat: He and his wife have how many children?
Rabbi Feldman: Seven.
Nat: Seven children.
Rabbi Feldman: So far.
Nat: So that's seven grandchildren in Atlanta. What have we got in Baltimore?
Rabbi Feldman: We have a couple in Baltimore, a couple in Washington, and one in Los Angeles [California], and two in Israel.
Nat: You could spend your retirement simply going from grandchild to grandchild.
Rabbi Feldman: We've done our bit for Jewish population, this young couple who got married in 1952.
Nat: So now you have to go visit all these grandchildren.
Rabbi Feldman: Visit everybody.
Nat: But you'll stay in Atlanta, I assume, in terms of your anchor?
Rabbi Feldman: We're going to keep our house and we plan, with G-d's help, to live in Israel six to seven months a year where I will spend most of my time doing what I like best. Guess what? Studying.
Nat: You’ll be studying as you haven’t been free to do . . .
Rabbi Feldman: And doing writing. I do edit the Journal [Tradition Magazine]. It's right there by the way . . . in front of that . . . Tradition . . . that blue magazine. It's a rabbinical . . . it's a journal of Jewish thought. I've been the editor for about five years. I'll still be doing that. It's a very, very good journal, even if I say so myself. It's at a good intellectual level. It keeps me busy. All this is the magazine.
Nat: Somewhere I seem to recall having read that you are, or have sat on the Sanhedrin in New York City.
Rabbi Feldman: Not a Sanhedrin [Hebrew: council] but I sat on a Bet Din—which is a rabbinic court—for about three or four years.
Nat: But that's not something you're doing currently.
Rabbi Feldman: No, I'm not doing it right now. I had a three or four year stint on that, which handled problems with Jewish law.
Nat: You'll take into retirement the editorship of this.
Rabbi Feldman: I'll continue my own writing, which I like very much, which I hope I inherited from my mother. I enjoy writing very much. I've got a lot of things I want to do yet. I'll do some additional editing for pay in Israel. This I do for free but I'll get some work editing.
Nat: Will you accept opportunities to teach?
Rabbi Feldman: Yes, I definitely would. I enjoy teaching probably more than anything else I do. I like teaching. I will. There are opportunities to teach both here and there.
Nat: If you could arrange to teach one semester there and one semester here.
Rabbi Feldman: Right, I would clearly do that . . . that would fit in well.
Nat: You'd have seven grandchildren when you were here. We know where grandma is going to be.
Rabbi Feldman: That's for sure. We have two in Jerusalem.
Nat: And your father?
Rabbi Feldman: Is in Jerusalem.
Nat: Is in Jerusalem and in good health?
Rabbi Feldman: He's almost 90.
Nat: For a man of nearly 90?
Rabbi Feldman: His mind is superb, which is a testimony to keeping it active. He's always studying. Eyes are bad. He can hardly read because of that. Physically weak, but he's 90. It's not bad.
Nat: But as you go to Jerusalem soon, you'll have an opportunity to see him, and to visit, and to study Talmud, and that very special, unique opportunity.
Rabbi Feldman: Right. Relive my youth.
Nat: That sounds exciting.
Rabbi Feldman: Yes. He's still a fine scholar.
Nat: You're obviously proud of all of the children.
Rabbi Feldman: We are very proud of all of our children.
Nat: Do the other four feel sometimes that maybe Ilan, because he's here taking your pulpit . . .
Rabbi Feldman: They may feel that. They've never articulated. They may feel that. There's interaction between children on some kinds of things sometimes parents are not aware of. I'm sure they must think that Ilan is always here. The children are here.
Nat: Do the children get together?
Rabbi Feldman: Not often enough.
Nat: They're too far physically.
Rabbi Feldman: Too far apart. That's one of the prices you pay for modern mobility. Everyone is all over the world.

Nat: Your brothers are . . .

Rabbi Feldman: One brother is in Jerusalem and one brother is in Baltimore.

Nat: How about your wife's siblings?

Rabbi Feldman: She has one brother who lives in Los Angeles who's not a rabbi. Observant Jew, learned Jew, who works for the United States Navy Department. He's an engineer of sorts.

Nat: He does whatever non-rabbis do?

Rabbi Feldman: Whatever non-rabbis do. Non-holy work, some secular work.

Rabbi Feldman: You do an excellent interview. You draw me out.

Nat: Thank you. Let's stop now and we'll come back together again soon and continue. Thank you Rabbi.

<End of Tape 1, Side 2>  
<Begin Tape 2, Side 1, 01>

Nat: This is Nat Gozansky interviewing Rabbi Emanuel Feldman on July 3 for the Jewish Oral History Project of Atlanta co-sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, Atlanta Jewish Federation, and The National Council of Jewish Women. This is the second interview of Rabbi [Emanuel] Feldman. Rabbi, I noticed when I listened to the tape from our first interview that I neglected to get your grandparents’ names and your parents’ names. If I could just get you to give me those for the record I’d appreciate it.

Rabbi Feldman: My parents are Rabbi Joseph Feldman, who is now living in Jerusalem. He was a rabbi in Baltimore, [Maryland] for 40 years, I think I mentioned last time. My mother passed away about a year-and-a-half ago and her name was ‘Goldie’ Surah [sp] Felner.

Nat: Do you recall her maiden name?

Rabbi Feldman: Felner was her maiden name and her father was the city shochet\textsuperscript{28} of the city of Lomza, Poland, which was about 40 or 50 miles from Warsaw. A large Jewish community, which housed a major yeshiva, a rabbinical seminary where my father studied and where he married the shochet's daughter. To be a shochet in Europe . . . of the city . . . was second only to

\textsuperscript{28} A shochet is an adult male Jew who is trained and accredited by a rabbinic authority in the Jewish dietary laws. Specifically, a shochet slaughters animals in a way prescribed by Jewish dietary laws to avoid pain to the animal as much as possible, and to safeguard the health of the consumer.
being the rabbi of the city. A very, very responsible position. That was my mother's father was a *shochet* of the city. My father's father was living in Warsaw, also a very learned, scholarly, rabbinic Jew.

**Nat:** He was a rabbi also?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes.

**Nat:** His name?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Feldman.

**Nat:** His first?

**Rabbi Feldman:** His name was Menachem, which is my first name. I'm named after my father's father.

**Nat:** But he sent his son to study in Lomza [Poland].

**Rabbi Feldman:** In Lomza, which had the better *yeshiva* than the ones in Warsaw [Poland].

**Nat:** Did he know that he would find Mrs. Feldman?

**Rabbi Feldman:** No.

**Nat:** That was good luck.

**Rabbi Feldman:** That was the hand of G-d.

**Nat:** Today let's start looking at community issues. Where I'd like to start is with your reflections of the history of Beth Jacob. First, before you came here, the *shul* as best you understand it. Then we'll move forward.

**Rabbi Feldman:** The *shul* I think started in 1948, no one's quite sure. It basically started—down near the Georgia Baptist area which was the center of Jewish life then—as a *minyan* place. It wasn't really a *shul*. . . . active with sisterhood, brotherhood. It was a place where people would come in the mornings and have services, and in the evening. It really didn't have a rabbi. A lot of elderly gentlemen kind of ran the ship themselves. After a few years, they did get a part-time rabbi by the name of Josef Saffra, a very fine gentleman who was their rabbi for a couple of years. Then in 1952 he resigned to go to New York, and I became the rabbi in that year. We were still down on Boulevard but they decided that they wanted a rabbi.

**Nat:** You were the first full-time rabbi.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Right. I had met Rabbi Saffra. It was kind of awkward for a young rabbi to come in. He was older than I. I was 24 and he was already 50.

**Nat:** It seemed old then.
Rabbi Feldman: It seemed old then, right. It was hard on him to see a young rabbi come in and take his position. I was still wet behind the ears. At any rate, the shul had about 40 members at Beth Jacob. We were in a house down on Boulevard near where Georgia Baptist is today.

Nat: Mostly older?

Rabbi Feldman: Mostly older. Almost entirely older except some of the leadership. That is the political administrator leadership was younger . . . 35, 40 year-old type men. But they never dreamed of coming to synagogue to pray. They were just handling this old man shul like a favor to G-d or whatever. They were doing a nice job, but as far as religion affecting their lives, forget it. They'd come to the . . . the president didn't even come on Shabbos.

Nat: This was an Orthodox . . .

Rabbi Feldman: This was an Orthodox shul but nobody was observant. Nobody under the age of 70 was observant.

Nat: A handful above 70 made up the minyan.

Rabbi Feldman: The ones who were above 70 who were observant were not always observant, but became observant after they retired. Shabbos, a lot of ex-grocers, their stores were open, and [unintelligible mumbling: 4:55]. It was really a situation where a young rabbi comes in and this is crazy. This is not the Orthodox way.

Nat: Was there no other Orthodox community for them?

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, yes, yes, there was an Orthodox community called Shearith Israel.

Nat: Shearith Israel was Orthodox?

Rabbi Feldman: It was down on Washington Street, now where the stadium is, and also had a branch up on University Drive where they subsequently moved and where they are now, near Highland Avenue.

Nat: Shearith Israel is . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Was the Orthodox synagogue, and Rabbi [Tobias] Geffen is their rabbi?

Nat: Rabbi Geffen is there. Do you have a sense of why this small group . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Different neighborhood.

Nat: Just a matter of geographic convenience?

Rabbi Feldman: Also, you also need a shul that you don't go to. You know the old story, the Jews stranded on an island.

Nat: Do you recall who were the lay leadership at the time?
Rabbi Feldman: Of our synagogue? When I was engaged, the people who were involved were names like Jack Goldberg, since deceased, David Katz, deceased, Ben Tessler, deceased, Jesse Berk who retired and went to live in Miami now, an elderly gentleman. You know we're talking about almost forty years ago.

Nat: These were men who had emigrated from Europe to Atlanta?

Rabbi Feldman: No, these were American-born people. These were the administrative leadership of the *shul*.

Nat: Atlanta-born?

Rabbi Feldman: Not necessarily Atlanta-born. No. They were an amalgam of people.

Nat: When you come to Beth Jacob it's just a few years old. It is 40 families. It has 10, 12 regulars for Friday.

Rabbi Feldman: Right, we have 10, 12 people on Saturday morning too.

Nat: So that you virtually have a brand new congregation. Now let's talk about the next four decades. You find this group of folks who . . .

Rabbi Feldman: I find a great deal of satisfaction in this growing—what I didn't know then, but was in fact a burgeoning—Jewish community, and a general community. I like the city very much. I like the people. They really welcomed me with open arms. They didn't give me a hard time at all. The older folks took me under their wings. The younger folks were happy to have somebody in charge. I remember the president saying, "Whatever you want, do. Don't even bother calling." They were desperate. They had to be desperate to take a 24-year-old kid. What they didn't know is that I already had ten years’ experience as I mentioned last time. Being brought up in a rabbi's home, ain't nothing like it [is] to be a rabbi. But, at any rate, I had no long-term visions or plans or goals. That’s true. But I worked day by day. I remember the advice that my dad, may he be well, and my dean who ordained me told me (who is no longer living), “Don't try to do G-d's work. Don't try to turn the city upside down over night. Just do it day by day, what you have to do. An honest day's work for G-d in his vineyard and things will fall into place if you're patient.” Which I tried to keep, and first of all it fits my personality. I don't like . . . I'm not overly aggressive in my religious teaching. I'll give the message firmly but I'm not going to give the people a hard time if they don't follow it. I don't think you can teach religion that way.

Nat: So your perception of yourself is that this congregation led by folks who are
dedicated to having a congregation, but not dedicated to being active in it. That what they've got in a young rabbi is someone with much more experience than they bargained for, and a willingness to be clear on what he would like to see the congregation do. But also a patience to allow them to ignore your wise council and go about their daily routine.

**Rabbi Feldman:** That's well said. It took me five minutes and it took you one minute. Wonderful.

**Nat:** But . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** But what happened was gradually we were able to get into the congregation people who were beginning to take what I said seriously. I began forming classes within the congregation. I taught classes at the Jewish Community Center, which all rabbis did. I also did and I developed a little following that way.

**Nat:** All the rabbis taught classes at the Jewish Community Center in those days?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, because the synagogues didn't really have adult education programs. In those days, Rabbi [Jacob] Rothschild, may he rest in peace, he was the Reform rabbi with whom I was quite friendly, Jacob Rothschild. His widow [Janice Oettinger Rothschild Blumberg]29 might be worthy of an interview. I'm sure she's involved with it. Rabbi Harry Epstein, Rabbi [Arnold] Heisler—who was, for a couple of years, the rabbi at Shearith Israel—and I used to teach at the bureau. We were the only professional Jews in town.

**Nat:** I see. Did you have religious education for the children back in the synagogues?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, every synagogue had an afternoon Hebrew school. There was no day school. There was no Academy. The Academy, as I mentioned last time, started a year or two after we got here.

**Nat:** So unaffiliated Jews could access religious education through any rabbi that they wanted very conveniently.

**Rabbi Feldman:** If you were not affiliated and you wanted to send your child to our Hebrew school, we would ask you to join the synagogue. If you wanted to become *bar mitzvah*30 in the

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29 Janice Oettinger Rothschild Blumberg’s oral history is available online, OHC XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
30 Hebrew for ‘son of commandment.’ A rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on *tefillin*, and may be counted to the *minyan* quorum for public worship. He celebrates the *bar mitzvah* by being called up to the reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath
synagogue . . . the first few years, people would walk in off the street and become bar mitzvah. I thought that this was just chaotic. I insisted on setting a standard for bar mitzvah. The kid has to have a minimum amount of years of training under his belt [and] the family has got to be members of the synagogue, unless we’re talking about poverty situations. We kind of put a little structure into our synagogue, which was a totally unstructured mess. You couldn't just walk off the street. On the other hand, we were very careful to make sure that everybody got an opportunity to learn. After three or four years the synagogue in which we were in, Beth Jacob on Boulevard, which was a converted apartment house, two-story apartment building. Upstairs was a social hall. Downstairs we took out all the walls and we had the shul and a couple of little offices. We bought a church across the street, on the same street. A large, what we thought then, was a large church. I passed it a couple of months ago and I said, "It's not so large." I even went into it.

**Nat:** Where is that?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Five sixty-two Boulevard.

**Nat:** It’s at Boulevard and . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** Rankin Street, I think. It's a block north of Georgia Baptist Hospital. It's still there. It was a tremendous move for us. It cost $70,000 to build, which was a tremendous amount of money in those days . . . 1955.

**Nat:** How many families were members?

**Rabbi Feldman:** By the time we bought this I think we had probably 100 families.

**Nat:** So there’d been substantial growth.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Substantial growth, gradual growth.

**Nat:** What do you attribute that to?

**Rabbi Feldman:** People were searching for something a little different. I think people were yearning for something, inchoate yearnings but yearnings.

**Nat:** There was this young rabbi . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, that played tennis and smiled a lot. Didn't seem too harmful.

**Nat:** Those who were looking for an alternative to Shearith Israel, I guess . . . ?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Or to AA, Ahavath Achim, or newcomers to the city who wanted an

after his Hebrew birthday.
Orthodox synagogue.

Nat: Were being drawn towards . . .

Rabbi Feldman: . . . towards us.

Nat: Who were the lay leaders during that period?

Rabbi Feldman: Actually, the same group of names that I mentioned. They stayed on. Those names that I mentioned earlier. A lot of women were quite good. There was a fellow named Mr. Cyrus Polan, who is no longer living, his wife [Sylvia Sete Polan], all these people were involved heavily with their wives. Bess Taffel and her husband, Louis Taffel. We had a tremendous group of young women who were not personally observant in the slightest, whose homes were not even kosher . . .

Nat: Oh my!

Rabbi Feldman: . . . who took it upon themselves to support this orthodox synagogue and this [unintelligible: 13:43] rabbi. They were just passionate about this thing. My wife and I often discussed, late into the night, “What is motivating these people?” They don't keep anything. Secondly, where am I failing that I can't get them to keep anything. It was just a strange thing. There were people who . . . one of the most humorous things that happened was one of our chief supporters, financially and morally and every way, a layman, who was sitting at a treif
dinner eating shrimp arguing with another guy for not joining the Orthodox synagogue. <phone rings, interview stops, then resumes>

Nat: What percentage, do you think, of the congregation at that early period was attempting to be observant, keep kosher, observe the Sabbath?

Rabbi Feldman: Tiny, tiny percentage, I could identify a young man who is my age. His name is George Kaplan—his wife is Betsy Kaplan—who probably exemplifies the trek or the journey that many of the people made in this synagogue. This is what’s called in Hebrew a ‘baal teshuvah’ synagogue. Are you familiar with the word ‘baal teshuvah’?32 Baal teshuvah is a major concept in Orthodoxy today. It is a returnee. One who returns to the fold after having gone far away is called a ‘baal teshuvah.’ ‘Teshuvah’ means ‘return’ or ‘repentance’ literally.

Nat: So any born Jew, who at some point would come to a Beth Jacob and seek a more traditional . . .

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31 Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law such as pork or foods that are not prepared according to kosher.

32 A Hebrew term that refers to a Jew who turns to embrace Orthodox Judaism or “one who has returned to G-d.”
Rabbi Feldman: Seek a more, and put it into his personal life. Start wearing the tefillin in the morning, start studying Judaism more seriously, observe the Sabbath, do a lot of things gradually little by little. There was George Kaplan and his wife. Betsy was a concert pianist. He was [unintelligible: 15:38] Imagine this is a girl about 24. He's about 28. He's my age. He's a good athlete. I meet him at the Community Center at the tennis courts. He's not a member of the shul, he doesn't know me from Adam and I don't know him, but I'm a good tennis player. Remember I used to teach it at summer camp. Can't find good players in this city then at my age. So I meet this guy. He's my match. I play with him often. He's very intellectual, very smart, very bright. New York boy—not that all New York boys are bright—but he's a bright New York boy living in the South. He's a graduate lawyer and he marries this concert pianist, Betsy; a local girl, Julliard School of Music, studied in Paris conservatory, high class pianist. Really avant garde [French: experimental or unusual] couple. They go to all of the theaters. My wife and I are attracted to them. They are attracted to us. We're totally from different worlds, except not totally from different worlds, because I also went to university. I have a master’s degree by then. I can converse with him. We're also athletic. We also like intellectual things. We became personally friendly. He decides. I don't make any overt overtures to him to become more observant but I see how he's moving and I'm very careful about these things. I don't want to be a missionary. I don't want to be known as a missionary. It will ruin me if they take me as being friendly because he's trying to bring . . .

Nat: Sure.

Rabbi Feldman: I'm very careful with this, although I'm not unhappy when a guy moves towards Torah life. He begins moving very seriously. In a period of years he starts donning his tefillin on Shabbos, I mean daily. Starts keeping the Shabbos. His wife starts keeping the mikveh, the works, everything. He becomes the first breakthrough returnee. He is a model for others because when George and Betsy, who are looked up to by everyone as being avant garde, my G-d, they don't answer the phone on Shabbos any more. They lose a lot of their friends who

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33 Tefillin, also called ‘phylacteries’ are a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, which are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers. They are worn around the arm, hand and fingers and on the forehead. The Torah commands that they should be worn as a “sign” and “remembrance” that God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt.

34 A mikveh is a pool of water, gathered from rain or from a spring, which is used for ritual purification and ablutions.
are not following them. They say, “They're one of ‘Manny's Moonies.’” They used to call them that in those days, ‘Manny's Moonies.’ They were trying to get in good with the rabbi. They suffer a lot. They're isolated by their friends, but they pick up new friends. Gradually, he is a militant missionary, unlike the rabbi. He brings other people in. George and Betsy, I still know them to this day. We're still very friendly. They made *aliyah* to Israel. They now live in Jerusalem as of two years ago. He's done very well. He’s retired now, quite comfortable personal situation. They, to this day, are very observant, very serious. They've grown intellectually, Jewishly intellectually over all these years. He was very careful to study, to read, and to attend classes, to probe. He's a lawyer. He's questioning. He got a lot of good answers that satisfied him. He became the first breakthrough guy. Through that hole a lot of horses and chariots came through following him.

**Nat:** This is . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** This is in the 1950's.

**Nat:** This is . . . by this time . . . I just want to keep this in historical perspective. The Hebrew Academy would have already been started because this is four or five years into your stewardship.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Right.

**Nat:** As he opens up that opportunity and others follow suit, I assume that the 100 or, by then even more, families who are members of Beth Jacob, who aren't observant, at the same time are very comfortable with those who choose to be observant. So what people like George find, is not necessarily everybody wants to live that same lifestyle. But while the friends over there—the old friends are now not sure they can handle the friendship—there are people who are comfortable.

**Rabbi Feldman:** There are new people coming along. There are contemporaries whom they bring along. Every year two, or three, or four new couples begin adding traditional Judaism to their lives. It becomes like almost a network of people who bring other people into the network and over again, and gradually, over a period of many years, 80 percent of our congregants today are people who have this history. They're not born Orthodox. You come into this synagogue on *Shabbos*, which is my pride and joy, to come into an Orthodox *shul* on *Shabbos*, which has separate seating between men and women, which has no phoniness about it, which is an
authentic, classical, traditional, Jewish davening without gimmicks. No Boy Scout Sabbath, no Sisterhood Sabbath, no birthday Sabbath, no cheap, phony schtik [Yiddish: gimmick], but genuine, authentic, Yiddishkeit [Yiddish: Jewish character or quality]. We have 400 people every Saturday morning at various levels of observance. Most of them, at least 50 percent, are fully observant. Most of the congregation was not raised Orthodox. All of them are moving, some very slowly, some very rapidly, some too rapidly.

Nat: At the time you came here there were few, if any, that had any strong Orthodox lifestyle. There obviously was a preference.

Rabbi Feldman: Some old men, that's it.

Nat: Your perception is that over the years the membership has continually attracted people who, by and large I assume, grew up in some kind of reasonably, home where they were familiar with Jewish traditions.

Rabbi Feldman: It has attracted people who had no background. No, no, it's not true. The people who have been attracted have been, by and large, people who had no background in their homes. Nothing. The couple that I just described had no background except, you know, three days a year, Rosh Ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, that's it. Most of the people were that way, no background, no training.

Nat: When they come here, they have to learn a tremendous amount of procedure about life.

Rabbi Feldman: Right, they have to learn from scratch.

Nat: How did you structure that? Obviously, you couldn't be staying at the Jewish Community Center doing adult education.

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35 The act of reciting Jewish liturgical prayers during which the prayer sways or rocks lightly.
36 Hebrew for ‘head of the year’, i.e. New Year festival. The cycle of High Holidays begins with Rosh Ha-Shanah. It introduces the Ten Days of Penitence, when Jews examine their souls and take stock of their actions. On the tenth day is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The tradition is that on Rosh Ha-Shanah, God sits in judgment on humanity. Then the fate of every living creature is inscribed in the Book of Life or Death. These decisions may be revoked by prayer and repentance before the sealing of the books on Yom Kippur.
37 Hebrew for ‘Day of Atonement.’ The most sacred day of the Jewish year. Yom Kippur is a 25 hour fast day. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting yizkor for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine forgiveness, and listening to Torah readings and sermons. People greet each other with the wish that they may be sealed in the heavenly book for a good year ahead. The day ends with the blowing of the shofar (a ram’s horn).
Rabbi Feldman: No, I run a bunch of classes here including reading Hebrew starting from scratch. Every sermon I give is a teaching sermon even to this day. I run classes in reading Hebrew, in *Bible*, and understanding *Bible*. I have other people come in by then and help me teach. I do a lot of personal one-on-one contact with people. I get them to like me which I find is probably a key in anyone returning to anything. If you like the person, you like the one who's teaching it, you respect him. You feel he's at least sincere and perhaps even genuine. Maybe there's something to this, give it a shot. I know that the congregation liked me very much in the early years. In later years they really found out who I really was. I really was an Orthodox Jew but in the early years they thought I was a playboy, playing Orthodox.

Nat: You couldn't play tennis and be a true Orthodox Jew.

Rabbi Feldman: Right. Now they . . . look what we've got ourselves into. But at any rate, I retired before they really caught on to me.

Nat: But they got your first born.

Rabbi Feldman: They got my first born. Him, they know already who he is, no question. So it gradually, over the years, the real story or the history of Beth Jacob is this. Not that we grew from 40 families to 500 families, that's not a big deal in a burgeoning city in 40 years. That's not a phenomenal growth, that's just a nice steady growth.

Nat: Your sense is it was steady?

Rabbi Feldman: Steady. Not sensational. People say he built the congregation from 40 families to 500. That's fine if you do it in one year or two years, but 40 years? Big deal. That's not such a big, big percentage. That's a few families a year. I'm not impressed with that. If I were to be impressed with anything it would be the qualitative growth. The fact that we have 400 people in *shul* on *Shabbos*, as I said before. The fact that Saturday afternoon, where no one ever comes back to *shul*, we have 200 people coming. The fact that the people are very serious about their *Yiddishkeit* . . . and the fact that they are *menschen*. Do you know what I mean by *menschen*? They're nice people, they're decent people. They take the message of Judaism very seriously. We've had some cases of revolving doors. Some people have come in and they find that these guys are too serious they leave in a year. People who have remained have been quality people. There's been a great growth of Jewishness, authentic Jewishness on the part of the congregation as a whole over the years, that's what's important.

Nat: When does the congregation move from . . .
Rabbi Feldman: We bought this building . . .

Nat: You bought this church. I must interrupt to ask—showing my naiveté—if an Orthodox Jewish congregation is going to turn a church into a sanctuary, is there anything special you've got to do?

Rabbi Feldman: You've got to get all the symbols out of there, that's for sure. No crucifixes allowed. No crosses, no symbols. No, there's nothing special you've got to do. You consecrate it by building an ark for the Torah scroll and by your first service. That's it. Any place in Judaism can be a house in worship, even this room, just by putting a Torah in it and davening and praying. The question is the reverse, a good legal question is: “Can a shul be sold for a church?” That's a raging question in Halakhah\(^38\) . . . Jewish legal literature. Are you allowed to take a synagogue and turn it willfully, willingly, into a place whose mode of worship is antithetical to Judaism, such as putting a Mother Mary in there.

Nat: Much more trouble.

Rabbi Feldman: That's the serious question. We won't get into that. At any rate, we moved over here in 1960. We were there about three, four years. We built this building with a miraculous campaign.

Nat: You were only in the $70,000 building for three, four years?

Rabbi Feldman: The church? Yes, three or four years.

Nat: You had outgrown it? Or had the neighborhood demographics . . .

Rabbi Feldman: The neighborhood was beginning to deteriorate. The demographics changed.

Nat: Was that short sightedness three, four years before or . . .

Rabbi Feldman: It probably wasn't short . . . we didn't know what we were doing. We just bought the building without thinking. But it was good because we couldn't have afforded without that building, to have built this one. That building helped us solidify ourselves. It gave us an address. It gave us a building. We were able to do a lot more things there. We had classrooms. We had . . . it was a more attractive place in which to develop. I think it was very good that we did that. Then we were able to sell the building at a huge profit that helped us buy this.

Nat: It was a good investment.

\(^38\) Hebrew for ‘way’ or ‘path.’ The legal tradition of Judaism.
Rabbi Feldman: It was a good investment and it was spiritually a good investment. It was all accidental. We didn't know what we were doing. The hand of G-d was in this. I mean I don't want to sound like a fundamentalist preacher. We didn't know what we were doing. We just bought the building.

Nat: You had businessmen in the congregation.
Rabbi Feldman: But businessmen, they didn't know what they were doing. I can tell you. But we did it. We had to do it. We did it and we certainly had outgrown the little house.

Nat: Did you outgrow the church, the second building?
Rabbi Feldman: We didn't really outgrow that second. That was just demographics.

Nat: That was just an opportunity, we can make some money and the demographics . . .

Rabbi Feldman: We had to move even if we didn't make money because demographics. People were then moving to the north side of town, to Johnson Road, to this side of town.

Nat: Right, of course, you're trying to get people to be observant.

Rabbi Feldman: I was, for a while, walking an hour-and-a-half one way to shul in those days.

Nat: I hadn't even thought . . . where were you living?

Rabbi Feldman: I was living too far from the shul. Much too far. For a while we lived close to the shul, but then we moved away thinking that the shul was going to be built. We were delayed a couple of years, so I had moved too early. I walked 90 minutes each way including some weather like this on every Shabbos. Also, my congregants—who didn't know that you don't ride on Shabbos—would stop and offer me rides on Shabbos afternoon, at which time I had to graciously decline their offers of the vehicle or whatever.39

Nat: In 1960 you come over here?

Rabbi Feldman: After a nice campaign, we raised $250,000 which was tremendous in those days for us.

Nat: How many families at this point?

Rabbi Feldman: By then we have a couple of hundred . . . 200.

39 The rules surrounding the Sabbath identify 39 categories of activity prohibited on Shabbat including driving (which falls under the rule that fires cannot be started or extinguished on the Sabbath. In this case, the fact that the rabbi didn’t start the car and is not operating it, is not relevant as rabbis are held to a very high standard, which includes “teaching by example” that is, if he was seen in the car, others might think it was okay to drive on the Sabbath.
Nat: This is a big growth period in the late 1950's.
Rabbi Feldman: Yes, big growth period. But it's a big growth period all over the city.
Nat: This explains how the Hebrew Academy finally gets going.
Rabbi Feldman: AA builds their new structure around that time. Shearith Israel . . . everybody grows.
Nat: This is an explosive period in terms of Jewish community.
Rabbi Feldman: All over the country Jews’ synagogues are exploding.
Nat: What is built here in 1960 on this property?
Rabbi Feldman: Seventy percent of what you see now. The main sanctuary was built. This whole office wing was there. We added to it later, 10, 12 years later, but the basic structure is here. The sanctuary, and the social hall, and the classrooms.
Nat: This was all built from scratch?
Rabbi Feldman: From scratch from the ground up.
Nat: You've got the profit from the sale on the . . .
Rabbi Feldman: We raised $250,000 over a five-year period.
Nat: What did it cost in 1960?
Rabbi Feldman: It cost us $250,000 to build this.
Nat: Just $250,000.
Rabbi Feldman: Imagine today, it would be $2,500,000.
Nat: At least, at this point, this is still an adequate facility.
Rabbi Feldman: Yes, this was virgin territory. Nobody was living out here then. I mean, La Vista Road was a narrow little road, very few houses, it was like a subdivision . . .
Nat: You have Christmas Lane up here.
Rabbi Feldman: Christmas Lane and Merry Lane. We'd be changing it to ‘Challah Lane,’ ‘Hanukkah Avenue.’ At any rate it was virgin area, and a lot of people of our leadership thought we were going out too far, but it was good. Also a naïve, innocent move. We didn't know what to do. This piece of land was available. It looked like it would be good. We bought it and we built. That was it.
Nat: Was Shearith Israel by 1960 still an Orthodox congregation?
Rabbi Feldman: No. By 1960 they moved into a non-Orthodox orbit, not Conservative but not Orthodox. They'd taken on some rabbis. Shearith Israel feels then, as did AA earlier, that the
future of Judaism lies in a non-Orthodox orbit. So AA goes all the way. They become Conservative, officially, all the way.

Nat: AA had been Orthodox?

Rabbi Feldman: AA had been Orthodox until 1947 or 1948. When Rabbi Epstein came to Atlanta, he came to an Orthodox synagogue. He moved it into the Conservative movement officially.

Nat: Is he ordained as a Conservative rabbi?

Rabbi Feldman: Orthodox rabbi.

Nat: But he opted to . . .

Rabbi Feldman: He opted to the Conservative movement.

Nat: So at the time this congregation . . .

Rabbi Feldman: He should be interviewed. Of course, I’m sure he will be.

Nat: . . . at the time this congregation is founded AA has just shifted to Conservative.

Rabbi Feldman: I think so. Around that time.

Nat: Shearith Israel . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Is Orthodox.

Nat: Still Orthodox.

Rabbi Feldman: But they shift in the mid-1950’s. About 1955, 1956 they shift. There’s a big battle there. Maybe around 1960, I’m sorry. Around 1960 there’s a big battle and the battle focuses on the traditional separating of men and women during prayer, where they want to do away with that separation. There’s a battle royal [fight with three or more combatants that is fought until only one remains standing] within their congregation. They finally bring in a rabbi who is dedicated in advance to not worrying about the separation.

Nat: This is Rabbi who?

Rabbi Feldman: I think it’s Rabbi [Sydney K.] Mossman. I’m not sure, but I think it’s Rabbi Mossman. He’s the first one. He’s an Orthodox rabbi, but who goes along with that. So they really move gradually out of the Orthodox orbit, and they’ve really been a congregation in search of an identity since then, until today, in my view. They still don’t know who they are.

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40 Rabbi Sydney K. Mossman was born in Windsor, Canada in 1913. He served in Germany during and after WWII. He served for many years at Shearith Israel Congregation in Atlanta, Georgia.
They never joined the Conservative movement officially. They’re not part of the Orthodox movement. They’re kind of in-between.

**Nat:** By 1960 when you come over, when Beth Jacob breaks ground over here, it is about to become the only Orthodox synagogue in the city.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Right.

**Nat:** And Anshi S'fard?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Anshi S'fard is kind of just a minyan. It's what we were in 1948.

**Nat:** If I went in Anshi S'fard today, I would see Beth Jacob circa 1948?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, except they don't have the daily minyan that Beth Jacob had circa 1948. But they have a Shabbos minyan.

**Nat:** They don't have a daily minyan?

**Rabbi Feldman:** No, just Shabbos morning. Friday night and Shabbos morning. But you'd see Beth Jacob there basically.

**Nat:** For whatever reason, Anshi S'fard has just simply never changed.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Never changed. It’s a nice little [unintelligible: 13:18].

**Nat:** It's a little place. I’m just trying to get the community defined at that time.

The Sephardic congregation . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** Or VeShalom. They’re basically an Orthodox synagogue but they don't really . . . they are not strictly Orthodox. By that I mean their services are Orthodox, their prayers are Orthodox, they follow all Orthodox rituals except they have men and women sitting together, which is not Sephardic. It's really a break with Sephardic tradition. Sephardim are all Orthodox. They can't manage it here in Atlanta, they feel. They have the old rabbi, Rabbi Joseph Cohen, no longer living, unbelievably fine human being. I think he's originally from Turkey, from Constantinople, later known as Istanbul.

**Nat:** Are you going to break into song now?

**Rabbi Feldman:** . . . is the rabbi. He's a scribe, an artist in Hebrew lettering, calligraphy, and so forth. He's an unbelievably fine person. He's the one who’s their rabbi and for whatever reasons they can't make it as an Orthodox . . . with a mehitza. But they're nominally Orthodox.

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41 In Orthodox synagogues men and women do not sit together and are separated by a mehitzat (Hebrew: partition or division). Men and women are generally not separated in most Conservative synagogues, although it is a permissible option within Conservative Judaism. Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, consistent with their view that traditional religious law is not mandatory in modern times, do not use mehitzot in their synagogues.
Nat: Does Or VeShalom have a mikveh?
Rabbi Feldman: No.

Nat: Beth Jacob wouldn't have had one until you came here, I assume?
Rabbi Feldman: There was a city-wide mikveh that every traditional synagogue helped support. It was housed in a separate place.

Nat: Where was that?
Rabbi Feldman: First it was downtown where the Atlanta stadium is. To this day when a guy slides into third base I'm sure there's a fountain of water. But then they moved up to a house across the street from Shearith Israel. Now we have the mikveh in our building here. There are several mikvehs now in Atlanta. There's one here and there's one out in Rabbi [Yossi] New's congregation [Congregation Beth Tefillah] and also Rabbi [Judah] Mintz [Congregation B'nai Torah] has one.

Nat: Are those Orthodox congregations out there?
Rabbi Feldman: Only Rabbi New which is Lubavitch Hasidic is Orthodox. The others are kind of half-and-half.

Nat: So from an Orthodox standpoint, there's two mikvehs?
Rabbi Feldman: No, the mikvehs are Orthodox. Mikvehs are kosher, but the congregations are not, from my standpoint.

Nat: I think I understand that.

Rabbi Feldman: When we're through with all this, I'm going to start interviewing you and find out your background and where you came from too.

Nat: Fair enough, but not on tape. But now, over this period of time as this congregation comes here and experiences this consistent, stable growth—and of course in some sense becomes limited by geography. That is—at some point if I want to be an observant Jew.

Rabbi Feldman: You'll have to move near the neighborhood.

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42 Congregation Beth Tefillah is an Orthodox congregation started in 1984. Services originally took place in the Rabbi Yossi New's home until a sanctuary was built in 1989.
43 A Traditional synagogue on the north side of Atlanta. It was founded in 1981 by young unaffiliated Jews who met in the Hillel facilities of Emory University on the High Holy Days. In 2004 they became affiliated with the Conservative movement. Membership today (2015) is about 750 families and the rabbi is Joseph Heller.

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**Nat:** I either have to move into this neighborhood, or what is my option in Atlanta come to think of it?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Well, if you want to be observant you've got to move into the neighborhood. No other options. Now you have another option . . . if you join the Lubavitch Hassidic,\(^{44}\) which is another neighborhood.

**Nat:** But is the Lubavitch Hassidic philosophically in line with this congregation?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Yes, basically.

**Nat:** So as an observant Jew I have two choices?

**Rabbi Feldman:** You have two choices.

**Nat:** But I certainly couldn't live out in East Cobb [County].

**Rabbi Feldman:** No, right. We had the phenomena—we still have it—of people who are living in magnificent homes far, far, far away from us become observant who move back into this neighborhood with great sacrifice to be within walking distance.

**Nat:** I know some families that walk great distances because they don't give up their homes. Some friends of mine live way up by Northlake [Mall] and walk down. Not on a day like today. Let's shift then and talk about the evolution of the Jewish community as this Beth Jacob evolution relates to it, because obviously in the 1960's there was substantial growth in the Jewish community so that your sister congregations also experienced growth and what have you. Let me start by offering the suggestion that I think is implicit in what you've said. This wasn't a competitive growth. That is, each congregation found that there were families that wanted to affiliate there.

**Rabbi Feldman:** There never was a sense of competition in Atlanta, which is unique probably in America. The rabbis were not competing with each other. I never felt a sense of competition from them and they never from me. We all have lived well and in a friendly manner together, though we are at ideological opposite poles very often and many, some, of the rabbis do things that upset me. But, we are on a personal level, very, very friendly to one another and the

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\(^{44}\) Lubavitch Hasidism is generally presented through its organization arm called 'Chabad. Named for the town that served as its headquarters for over 100 years, it was formed from the writings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman in the eighteenth century. Rabbi Zalman was succeeded by seven other Lubavitcher rebbes, the seventh being Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who became rebbe in 1950 and died in 1970, without another being designated. The rebbes served as spiritual, intellectual and organizational leaders. The movement delved into Jewish mysticism, encouraged Jewish learning and practice, and worked for the better of Jewish life everywhere. Their outreach arm, Chabad, has become worldwide, seeking to encourage Jews to return to traditional practices. xxXx
congregants, the congregation never had a sense of competition.

Nat: That's been true as you see it . . .

Rabbi Feldman: True all the way through. I never felt anything different.

Nat: There was a time, and it may predate your coming to Atlanta . . . I think one can really sense it when one walks through the Oakland . . . Cemetery and listens to a historian talk about the Jewish sections where one gets the sense that there was a real separation between the predominantly German-Jewish community which was affiliated with the Temple and the Eastern European Jewish community which was thought of as more being at AA . . .

Rabbi Feldman: . . . and Shearith Israel.

Nat: Somewhere historically, and I guess it might be around the time you were coming to Atlanta that starts to dissipate, and the Jewish community starts to come together.

Rabbi Feldman: I think that's probably accurate. There were at one time three social clubs; Standard Club, Mayfair Club and the [Jewish] Progressive Club. It almost felt that the Standard Club was really the wealthy, wealthy far-out one with a golf course. We talked about it last time, I think. I'm a member of the Standard Club.

Nat: No, we didn't talk about it.

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45 Oakland Cemetery is the oldest cemetery and one of the largest green spaces, in Atlanta. Many notable Georgians are buried at Oakland including Margaret Mitchell, author of Gone with the Wind, Dr. Joseph Jacobs, owner of the pharmacy where John Pemberton first sold Coca-Cola as a soft drink, Bobby Jones, the only golfer to win the Grand Slam, the U.S. Amateur, U.S. Open, British Amateur and The Open Championship in the same year, as well as former Georgia governors and Atlanta mayors. Oakland is an excellent example of a Victorian-style cemetery and contains numerous monuments and mausoleums that are of great beauty and historical significance.

46 The Standard Club is a private, country club, with a Jewish heritage dating back to 1867. The club originated as Concordia Association in Downtown Atlanta. In 1905 it was reorganized as the Standard Club and moved into the former mansion of William C. Sanders near where Turner Field is now located. In the late 1920's the club moved to Ponce de Leon Avenue in Midtown Atlanta. The club later moved to the Brookhaven area and opened in what is now the Lenox Park business park. It was located there until 1983 when the club moved to its present location in Johns Creek in Atlanta's northern suburbs.

47 The Mayfair Club opened in 1938 at 1456 Spring Street in Midtown Atlanta. The two-story club was a focal point of Jewish life in the city for more than 25 years. The club was founded in 1930 and first met at the Biltmore Hotel. The club was visited by Eleanor Roosevelt, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, mayors Ivan Allen and William Berry Hartsfield, senators Herman Talmadge and Richard Russell, and Governor Carl Sanders. Fire destroyed the Mayfair Club on December 4, 1964.

48 The Jewish Progressive Club was a Jewish social organization that was established in 1913 by Russian Jews who felt unwelcome at the Standard Club, where German Jews were predominant. At first the club was located in a rented house until a new club was built on Pryor Street including a swimming pool and a gym. In 1940 the club opened a larger facility at 1050 Techwood Drive in Midtown with three swimming pools, tennis and softball. In 1976 the club moved north to 1160 Moore's Mill Road near Interstate 75. The property was eventually sold as the club faced financial challenges and the Carl E. Sanders Family YMCA at Buckhead opened in 1996.
Rabbi Feldman: I remember the Standard Club because the rabbis got free membership. I used to play golf there when I had more time on my hands.

Nat: So the Standard Club was . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Reform.

Nat: . . . was basically dominated by Reform but invited all of the rabbis?

Rabbi Feldman: All of the rabbis. None of the rabbis did it, but I was young and crazy and I love to play golf. I used to play once a week in those days. I used to play with a Reform rabbi. But then there was a Mayfair Club which tried to be like the Standard Club. There was the Progressive Club. None of them was kosher. They all violated every law in the book—Jewish law—but you found more Orthodox Jews going to the Progressive Club or at least traditional Jews, than the Reform. But gradually those things began to change. First of all, two of the clubs went into demise, totally collapsed.

Nat: Progressive sold their property.

Rabbi Feldman: Progressive sold their property and Mayfair Club just disintegrated, and Standard Club is now the only Jewish club left.

Nat: Was your membership affiliated in any measurable way with any of those?

Rabbi Feldman: Much of my leadership in the early 1950's was part of the Progressive Club.

Nat: I assume AA leadership was probably . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Progressive and Mayfair Club. The Temple's were the Standard Club. The initiation fees and the dues went up in accordance with the distance from Judaism that you were.

Nat: How about Or VeShalom?

Rabbi Feldman: Or VeShalom was mixed, more traditional than anybody. The Or VeShalom were really Orthodox, nominally different. But there was a great chasm early in the mid 1940's. I guess it stopped after World War II. Before World War II, the deutsche Juden . . . the German Jews, would not at all mix with the non-German, the Russian, East European Jews. Even marriages between the two groups were not that often, not that frequent. But barriers began to break down. There, nevertheless, remains a barrier, ideological barriers, between the Reform community and the Orthodox community and the Conservative community, but we bridge those barriers. The joke in the rabbinical organization is the rabbis get along because we never discuss religion.

Nat: Let's talk about the organization of the rabbis. At the time you come here
Rabbi Feldman: There's only three or four rabbis.

Nat: You play golf with [Rabbi] Rothschild and while the two of you are philosophically apart . . .

Rabbi Feldman: We're personally friendly. I even went horseback riding with him a few times. We were just friendly. Rabbis.

Nat: [Rabbi] Epstein, on the other hand, becomes your cohort, helping you get the Hebrew Academy started.

Rabbi Feldman: Correct.

Nat: You're intellectually . . . the two of you are more in tune?

Rabbi Feldman: Yes.

Nat: He's at that time, a little older than you?

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, he's considerably older than I. He's maybe 25 years older than I. So when I come here, he's already close to 50. I'm 24 . . . 25.

Nat: [Rabbi] Rothschild . . .

Rabbi Feldman: [Rabbi] Rothschild is in between, he's about ten years older than I.

Nat: But obviously you and [Rabbi] Rothschild are leading two different kinds of congregations.

Rabbi Feldman: Yes, absolutely.

Nat: You, because of your own background, are not a young man in need of a mentor?

Rabbi Feldman: Not really. Correct. There's no mentor here for me anyway because none of them is Orthodox. I can't take mentoring from Harry Epstein because he became a Conservative artificially.

Nat: But Or VeShalom.

Rabbi Feldman: Or VeShalom's congregation is not an Orthodox congregation. They are breaking the rules of separating. It's not consistent for me to have a mentor who's someone who's not consistent.

Nat: Today in Atlanta there's how many rabbis?

Rabbi Feldman: Fifteen, 20, I don't know. I lost track. There's even a gay and lesbian
congregation [Congregation Bet Haverim] looking for a gay and lesbian rabbi.

Nat: So the community was . . . do you have any idea what the number of Jewish families were that were here in 1955?

Rabbi Feldman: The number of Jewish families?

Nat: Yes.

Rabbi Feldman: No. In 1952 they used to say that there were 15,000 to 25,000 Jews in the city then, total.

Nat: Total, that's children, parents.

Rabbi Feldman: Now they're saying 60,000 to 70,000, total. They're also saying there's a huge number of people in the city now who are not affiliated . . .

Nat: Let's just backtrack a little bit. We were talking about how the older congregations in this city, with the exception of Shearith Israel, have found, or maintained their definition for the long haul. Beth Jacob is Orthodox. Or VeShalom is Sephardic.

Rabbi Feldman: Ahavath Achim is Conservative.

Nat: The Temple is Reform. Shearith Israel which has had, by comparison, a lot of turnover with rabbinical leadership. You were talking about how that is a reflection of . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Reflection of the indefiniteness, the lack of clear identity of who we are on the part of the congregation over there. So the rabbi finds it difficult to be a rabbi [unintelligible: 00:48] because everybody is pulling in different ideological directions.

Nat: How about the new congregations? Are they starting with definition?

Rabbi Feldman: Most of them are starting with definition. There are a number of Reform new congregations and one or two Conservative ones. They're all clearly defined. They're basically not appealing to ideological needs, but to demographic needs. There are people living all over their area so the congregations have begun. Most of them are not . . . none of them is Orthodox except for one. The Hasidic Lubavitch is one.

Nat: The Hasidic Lubavitch one is up in Buckhead, right?

Rabbi Feldman: I don't know how to describe the neighborhood. It's near the Hebrew

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49 Congregation Bet Haverim is a Reconstructionist Jewish community. Their rabbi is Rabbi Joshua Lesser and they anticipate moving into their own building in late 2015.
Academy.

Nat: Sandy Springs.

Rabbi Feldman: Sandy Springs, yes.

Nat: Did they pick their location for any . . .

Rabbi Feldman: They knew that they wanted to be a different location from here and they also knew they wanted a location where they had good hopes of Jewish people living, which I think is materializing slowly.

Nat: So that's the next growth place for the observant Jew from a housing selection?

Rabbi Feldman: Nobody knows. Maybe. No one knows. The real estate agent today told me that this neighborhood here around the *shul* is the hottest real estate market in Atlanta for Jews because of its proximity of the synagogue, and people just like to live in this neighborhood because it’s close to Emory [University]. It's not far from downtown. It's a very good neighborhood even though the house values are not as good as they are farther out. You never know.

Nat: On the other hand, a relatively young family that wants to be observant, because of real estate prices . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Probably get better value over there.

Nat: But they can buy a house here.

Rabbi Feldman: They can buy a house here, a smaller house.

Nat: It may not be two stories and six bedrooms but they can live . . . you can live and walk here. A true middle class income family can live near Beth Jacob. In that sense that may prove to be a long term value for this sight. The university and the downtown location are all pluses. One only wonders when the congregation will try to get the city to give them some different names on the street signs.

Rabbi Feldman: Right.

Nat: Let's talk a little bit about the rabbinical relationships over the time. You came here . . . there were just a few. You obviously all got on well personally. At that period of time the issues tend to be congregational issues, your problems with your congregation, they with theirs. [Rabbi] Epstein and you come together particularly for the Hebrew Academy, but otherwise there's not much interface. Now there's . . .
Rabbi Feldman: He's 25 years older than I am.

Nat: Isn't there some kind of Atlanta Rabbinical Council?

Rabbi Feldman: Now, yes. For the last 10 or 15 years there's been an Atlanta Rabbinical Association, kind of an informal body. Rabbis meet monthly and discuss various issues of mutual concern.

Nat: What are the kinds of issues that come to the common table?

Rabbi Feldman: Maybe antisemitism manifestations. Or we all unite on the fact that the Sabbath should be scrupulously observed at least in public by public Jewish organizations. We all united, even the Reform, on having a city-wide kashrut (kosher)\(^{50}\) authority which is really basically manned by us here but it is supported by all the rabbis. There's a uniform standard for kosher in the city, there's a uniform standard for Sabbath observance. We would be very unhappy if Israel Bonds ran a dinner on Friday night . . . which could happen. It happens in other cities. We encourage the hotels to have kosher facilities—which eight or nine major hotels in Atlanta currently have because the business is around for them to do. Maintaining general ethical, moral standards of the community.

Nat: But that means that from your vantage point, the coalition of rabbis has been sensitive to your needs, if you will.

Rabbi Feldman: Clearly it has.

Nat: I don’t mean your needs in the selfish sense.

Rabbi Feldman: To the traditional needs.

Nat: It would have been . . . Reform rabbis didn't have to . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Didn't have to. We all have gained from it. We've all given up a little. Nobody has given up on principle. I might be said to have given up . . . the fact that by my sitting with Reform rabbis, I'm giving acknowledgment to a group with whose ideology I am totally in disagreement. Nevertheless, I sit with them in the same body. I'm giving them a certain credibility. There are, in the last 10 or 15 years with the rise of tremendous sectarianism

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\(^{50}\) Kosher/Kashrut is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food that may be consumed according to halakhah (Jewish law) is termed ‘kosher’ in English. Kosher refers to Jewish laws that dictate how food is prepared or served and which kinds of foods or animals can be eaten. Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law is called treif. The word ‘kosher’ has become English vernacular, a colloquialism meaning proper, legitimate, genuine, fair, or acceptable. Kosher can also be used to describe ritual objects that are made in accordance with Jewish law and are fit for ritual use.

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within the Jewish community, major Jewish communities in America where an Orthodox rabbi will not sit on the same board with a Reform rabbi . . . rabbinic board. I don't recognize you. I don't know how I would be if I were living in Baltimore, or New York, or Detroit [Michigan], or Chicago [Illinois], about those things. But in Atlanta, I do not want to be that way. So I sit with the other rabbis.

Nat: But you sit with the Reform rabbi who . . .

Rabbi Feldman: I happen to like the guys anyway.

Nat: . . . who moves his congregation, slowly, incrementally, but moves his congregation more and more towards some level of tradition.

Rabbi Feldman: There’s no question. They all are today. They’re all moving them in a traditional manner.

Nat: One could argue that the Reform movement, at least in Atlanta, is all the more comfortable in becoming more traditional because it has the respect or support of the . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Yes. Basically all of the rabbis . . . we trust each other. We get along well. We even get social evenings together where rabbis can invite all the other rabbis to come to their houses for the evening.

Nat: Do Reform rabbis have kosher homes?

Rabbi Feldman: No. It's interesting. We had a gathering some years ago at a Reform rabbi’s home and he had it all catered kosher by a kosher caterer, on paper plates, to make everyone comfortable. They don't have kosher. They don't keep the Sabbath.

Nat: But the Conservative rabbis would keep kosher?

Rabbi Feldman: By and large they keep kosher. Probably not to standards that an Orthodox rabbi might want, but they certainly do that. Yes, we do get along. It’s one of the, I think, good things about the city of Atlanta is that we are living with each other. We're still not that big a city where we can afford internecine.

Nat: What are the divisive issues? Where do you find you simply can't go along with . . .

Rabbi Feldman: With the Reform rabbis?

Nat: With the other rabbis?

Rabbi Feldman: There's a number of them. First of all, I don't think a rabbi should be officiating at a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew. I don't think a rabbi should be officiating

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with a minister at such a marriage. In Glenn Memorial [United Methodist] Church . . .

<Rabbi Feldman: Anyway, where I differ with the Reform is that they are doing maybe 50, 100 conversions a year each. All for purpose of the marriage. I say this is un- genuine. It is phony. It is dishonest. They ought to stop doing it. But I don't get anywhere, so we don't fight about it anymore.

Nat: But you don't do conversions at all?

Rabbi Feldman: At all.

Nat: At all?

Rabbi Feldman: At all.

Nat: Although you'll work with somebody . . .

Rabbi Feldman: I will work with someone I'm convinced is genuine. Maybe, very rarely, it happens someone really wants to be Jewish. I'll work with them, and guide them, and ultimately lead them to a place where they can convert. I have done it with four or five people over the years.

Nat: But you send them off to Baltimore or somewhere for the final act?

Rabbi Feldman: For the consummation.

Nat: For some reason that doesn't make sense to me. If you've spent two, three, four years working with somebody . . .

Rabbi Feldman: There are several reasons I do this. I want to maintain a consistent policy of just not doing converts so that if someone comes in and says, "You did them, why don't you do me?" I'm not forced to say, "They're genuine and you're not." So I just don't do it. People know when they come here they're not going to get that easy. I'll be very nice and polite to them, but they're not going to get a 'quicko' conversion. They're not going to get any. I tell them on the phone that I don't do converts but if you want to talk to me I'll be happy to talk to you.

Nat: I seem to recall talking to somebody who's a member of the Temple who adopted a child . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Which temple? The Reform temple?

Nat: 'The’ Temple, Reform temple . . . adopted a child, an infant.

Rabbi Feldman: A child is another story. I will convert a child whose mother and father are both Jewish.
Nat: I think this was . . . these were both . . .

Rabbi Feldman: If they've adopted a child and they will raise the child as a Jew, I'll bring the child formally into the Jewish fold according to Orthodox practice. [unintelligible: 11:12].

Nat: The fact that they will raise that child then in a different . . .

Rabbi Feldman: If they have a certain modicum of traditional practice, I will do it. If a Jewish man marries a non-Jewish woman, and has a baby, and the baby is technically not Jewish because the mother isn’t, I'm not going to convert that child because the baby has no chance at being brought up as a Jew with a non-Jewish mother, by and large.

Nat: So you differ from your colleagues, all of your colleagues in the city, except the other Orthodox, on issues of interfaith marriage, converts . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Basically that's probably it.

Nat: And on dietary issues?

Rabbi Feldman: We don't differ. They basically let me handle it. They don't fight with it. They support me handsomely. They support me 100 percent. All these issues that I've had with the community—some of the yellow journalism that they had about me, with the bagels, and the this, and the that—I was supported by the Reform and Conservative rabbis to the hilt. There was a classic letter that appeared about eight, ten years ago in the [Atlanta] Jewish Times when we withdrew our support from this place down here in Toco Hills that we caught underhandedly doing things. We actually had detective work.

Nat: The story is that you climbed into the dumpster . . . somebody did.

Rabbi Feldman: Somebody did, and we had all the evidence, and we could have put the guy in jail.

Nat: For the record, you're going to say you didn't personally climb in.

Rabbi Feldman: I didn't personally climb in for the records . . . but we had all the evidence we needed. The guy threatened to take me to court and all kinds of innuendos in the community which were picked up by the newspaper, Jewish paper. All the rabbis in the city—Reform, Conservative, Orthodox—wrote a letter supporting my position which was a [unintelligible: 13:09, stark?] thing. Conservative, Reform rabbis backing Manny Feldman for kashrus . . .

Nat: But that was different because there they were . . .

Rabbi Feldman: I was representing them.

Nat: That business was affirmatively doing something wrong. They were taking
and substituting non-kosher chicken.

**Rabbi Feldman:** They backed me on the bagels too, even though they weren't [unintelligible: 13:30].

**Nat:** The bagels, it seems to me, raises a more intriguing . . . because Royal Bagel, as I understand it—correct me if I'm wrong—is going about business as usual.

**Rabbi Feldman:** But they're open on **Shabbos**.

**Nat:** But they've always been open on **Shabbos**. Now you walk in one day, not on **Shabbos**, and you say, new rule time.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Not true. I walk in one day and tell them two years from now we're going to withdraw our support, our endorsement. Give them two years notice. Because we're tightening up. But we give them notice.

**Nat:** That's a situation where the decision by you, and those who share this responsibility have decided we can demand . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** On a new level. The city's ready for higher standards. We don't want a baker baking on **Shabbos** and to be called kosher by the rabbis.

**Nat:** So this is a reflection of your sense of maturity of the city?

**Rabbi Feldman:** And the ability to handle it. Which I think I was right on.

**Nat:** Ability to handle it in the context of the consumer or the businesses?

**Rabbi Feldman:** No. The city could digest—if I could use a pun—or stop digesting food that was being baked in violation of Jewish tradition. We would wait around for a kosher baker who would keep the **Shabbos** because the city was big enough to support a kosher baker. We now have a kosher baker in Toco [Hills, Atlanta]. Keeps the **Shabbos**. Very good. You should go buy your stuff from him.

**Nat:** And I do.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Bernie’s.¹⁵¹

**Nat:** And I do.

<Break in tape then interview resumes>

**Nat:** My eating habits aside, we'll stop now and we'll have one more brief session

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¹⁵¹ Bernard ‘Bernie’ Idov ran Bernie’s Bakery for nearly 20 years. It began in the shul kitchen of Beth Jacob, then moved to his home and finally to the Toco Hills shopping center in Druid Hills. It closed in 2000 due to family concerns.

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if we can next week. Thank you Rabbi.

<Nat>: I am interviewing Rabbi Emanuel Feldman on July 11, the third and final interview for the Jewish Oral History Project of Atlanta co-sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, the Atlanta Jewish Federation and National Council of Jewish Women. When we met last time, we started discussing your views, or you were about to comment on the—and I'm quoting you now—"huge number of unaffiliated Jews in Atlanta.” Then I didn't handle the tape right. I want to come back to that, because I have no record of what you were thinking about as you introduced this concern or this observation. Maybe you should start by simply indicating whether that's a concern or an observation.

<Rabbi Feldman>: What was the specific issue?

<Nat>: We were talking about the Jewish community in Atlanta and how it had grown over the years, and it was in a context that we were talking a lot about relationships, between Beth Jacob and the other synagogues and so forth. So it was in that sort of community context.

<Rabbi Feldman>: It's a different Beth Jacob that I'm leaving obviously, than when I came in. It's a different Atlanta. There were three synagogues, or four, when I first came in 1952. As I mentioned I think maybe on the previous . . .

<Nat>: That we have.

<Rabbi Feldman>: Then when someone came into the city there were very few, precious few choices for someone who wanted to go to a synagogue. He went to either Reform, or Conservative, or Sephardic, or to Shearith Israel which was Orthodox, and ourselves which was Orthodox. [Unintelligible: 1:50] began breaking away. Now you have 15 or 16, including a gay and lesbian congregation. People have all kinds of choices today. But there are many, many more Jews today. There are about 60,000 . . . 70,000 Jews in Atlanta.

<Nat>: Of which the majority are quote unaffiliated?

<Rabbi Feldman>: I understand that a large percentage . . . I don't know if it's a majority—I saw a statistic, but it was shockingly high—who are not members of anything. We're becoming like the big cities like New York, people can hide in the woodwork when you have a large city. In a town you can't hide.

TRANSCRIPT ID: OHC10192
**Nat:** Is that a concern of you, or the Beth Jacob community, or is the issue of the unaffiliated their issue as you see it?

**Rabbi Feldman:** It's definitely a concern of every Jew. An unaffiliated Jew is a step closer towards being an assimilated Jew. There's a greater chance of a Jew remaining Jewish, and his kids and grandchildren remaining Jewish, if he's affiliated with some sort of Jewish organization. We think that the greatest chance is to affiliate with an Orthodox synagogue. I say that with a smile but I really do mean that. The records do show that Orthodox adherents have a much, much lower rate of assimilation, which is defined by things like intermarriage, Jewish practice, lack of the same than others do. So it's a great concern that we have people sliding off the cliff. If enough people slide off the cliff we will not have a Jewish community. So you follow that to its logical . . . what happens if you don't have a Jewish community?

**Nat:** What does Beth Jacob institutionally, or you individually, do to try to encourage the unaffiliated Jew to come here?

**Rabbi Feldman:** We don't do very, very much. We certainly don't do enough. At one time we used to have much more of an outreach program. We used to follow up the Welcome Wagon lists by religion [unintelligible: 4:04 sounds like of use]. We used to subscribe. If a Jewish person moved into the city, pronto, we would have people out there with a package from us. We had our own religious welcome wagon. We'd give them a pair of candles, little cheap candlesticks and stuff like that, a little prayer book, a brochure about the synagogue. We don't do that anymore for several reasons. One is lack of energy. We're so involved in a thousand other things. Two is because nowadays in Atlanta, those who join an Orthodox synagogue are going to join an Orthodox synagogue. We don't have to go after them. People coming into the city are looking for an Orthodox synagogue. If they're not looking for an Orthodox synagogue, we're not going to get them by knocking on their door. We're going to get them by being an intelligent place, an authentic place, an honest place. That's where we do get people coming in from other places. But we don’t missionarize basically. Probably not enough. In answer to your question, “what are we doing to bring the unaffiliated in?” Not enough.

**Nat:** But you don't have any clear strategy what enough would be, given the nature of the Atlanta community.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Enough would be if we had better adult education programs all over the city. Just lectures without giving it titles of Orthodox, but just talks, and lectures, and classes in
various corners of the city. That would be very important to bring people back to some semblance of *yiddishkeit* [Yiddish: Jewishness] of Judaism. Right now we're basically letting them slide.

**Nat:** Let's move to another place where we didn't get on tape all of your feelings, because it relates to this. We started talking about interfaith marriages and then somehow we lost that. I want to come back and ask you to comment on interfaith marriages. Let me say that I'm going to then move from that, to talk a little bit about conversion by non-Orthodox rabbis, because I suspect it will all tie in together. What you had said last week was something to the effect of you certainly wouldn't, and it troubled you to see a rabbi going over to Glenn Memorial and sharing with a minister the performing of an interfaith marriage. Then we didn't get the rest of it.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Right. I can be very fond of the rabbi personally who does it, and I am, of the rabbis who do it. I am fond of them, but I'm very, very much against, philosophically their practice of doing quickie conversions which means you convert somebody to paper over a problem in the family, in a month or two or less. Some of my colleagues will officiate at a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew on the promise of the non-Jew that they will, after the marriage, come to classes. The classes are once a month for ten months. How much can you learn in ten one-sessions? How much could you teach in law school? Whatever. *Gornisht!* [Yiddish: nothing] But I'm obviously concerned. I think it's a travesty when a rabbi officiates with a minister in a church. A marriage travesty. So yes, I'm against that. Many of my colleagues do that. I do find almost all the rabbis in Atlanta outside the Orthodox—which means myself, Rabbi New and Rabbi [S. Robert] Ichay—do perform conversions that I could not recognize, that I could not accept. In other words, if a convert from Rabbi Alvin Sugarman, whom I personally like, whom he has converted comes over here and wants to join the synagogue, I can't accept that person as a Jew or Jewess because; they haven't accepted Judaism,

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52 Rabbi Robert Ichay (1929 – 2012) led Congregation Or VeShalom for 33 years. Upon retirement he was named Rabbi Emeritus. While leading Or VeShalom, Rabbi Ichay helped grow the congregation to more than 500 families, up from less than 200. He also helped lead the congregation into a new building in 1971, less than two years after he arrived in 1969. He was born in Tunisia and educated in England and Zimbabwe.

53 Rabbi Alvin M. Sugarman is the Rabbi Emeritus of The Temple in Atlanta and currently serves with life tenure. He began his rabbinate at The Temple in 1971 and in 1974 was named senior rabbi. A native of Atlanta, Rabbi Sugarman received his BBA from Emory University and was ordained by Hebrew Union College. In 1988 he received his Ph.D. in Theological Studies from Emory University.
they're not practicing Judaism, they're not serious. I'm not interested in that kind of a convert. It
pains me to say it, but I have to say it.

**Nat:** So because of your philosophical notion of the kind of commitment a
convert has to put forward, it follows logically that you can't recognize your non-Orthodox
colleagues’ conversions, number one, and therefore, to ordain a marriage between a Jew and a
non-Jew is simply not part of your perception of professional responsible behavior.

**Rabbi Feldman:** To officiate at a marriage . . .

**Nat:** . . . of a Jew and a non-Jew.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Right. Definitely. I certainly would not do it.

**Nat:** Have I misunderstood? If I were a member of your congregation . . . let me
give you a hypothetical and make sure I understand. I am a member of your congregation. I am
born Jewish. I have elected to be observant. You know me well. To your surprise and chagrin, I
bring forward to be my bride [a woman] who is not a born Jew. You would not marry us.

**Rabbi Feldman:** Correct.

**Nat:** You would marry us if she went through the two to five year process of
conversion.

**Rabbi Feldman:** If she went through a proper conversion. I wouldn't put any time limit on it.

**Nat:** You earlier said . . .

**Rabbi Feldman:** A decent one could take a year, minimum of intensive study. Primarily it
takes commitment too, besides the study and knowledge. Yes, if the prospective convert were
serious and went through a serious conversion, then fine.

**Nat:** Suppose she said to you, “Look. I'm not going to convert, but I am willing
to commit to you that I will raise the children as my husband wishes.” Let's make it an easier
hypothetical. It is a woman, a Jewish woman, who is a member of the congregation, so there's no
question that the children born of her are Jewish from a halakhah standpoint, am I right on that?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Right.

**Nat:** She wants to marry a gentile man. He says, "I'm not going to interfere. We
can have a kosher home. It's okay with me. The children can be raised at the synagogue.
Obviously I'm not going to convert and embrace Judaism, but I'm certainly going to do nothing
to interfere.” What would you do in that?

**Rabbi Feldman:** You can't. Those are words. You can't raise a child . . . it's not fair to a child
to raise a child in a vacuum of “my mother is Jewish, therefore, technically I'm Jewish. But my father's not Jewish, but my father is not going to interfere.” The father is not Jewish. The father has nothing to contribute to this home. On the contrary, what he is contributing is non-Jewish elements to the upbringing of the child, which is very subtle matter. So it's a very, very . . . the fact that he's not going to interfere means it's okay, but it means nothing. It's a serious problem. Obviously I could not officiate at that marriage no matter what the promises are. Obviously I would fight the marriage if I had it in my power because ultimately it's a disaster for the marriage, a disaster for the kid, and it's a disaster for Judaism when it's multiplied 10,000 times.

**Nat:** Let's shift to a totally different subject as we draw this close to conclusion. Aside from all of your rabbinical works over the last 40 or so years, you've also found time to teach at Emory University at the Law School and I think also in the Department of Religion.

**Rabbi Feldman:** I've also taught at Agnes Scott [College: Decatur, Georgia] and at Bar-Ilan [University] in [Ramat Gan] Israel. I like teaching.

**Nat:** Let's talk a little bit about the professor as opposed to the rabbi. What sort of things do you teach? Do you hope to do more of that when you actively retire?

**Rabbi Feldman:** I enjoy teaching, and as a matter of fact, my rabbinate is basically a teaching rabbinate. When I give a sermon, it's teaching. There are educators who come here and listen to me week in and week out. Realize that I'm basically teaching whenever I give a sermon. I have been teaching basically things that I know best—which is Judaism in various shapes and forms—whenever I've been asked to do it. Yes, I do hope to teach after my retirement. There are two major loves that I have other than my being a rabbi, and that is I love to teach, and I also love to write. I do edit the journal as you know and I'll be doing some more editing after I retire.

**Nat:** You've authored numerous articles, three books.

**Rabbi Feldman:** You read the bios [biographies].

**Nat:** All focused on Judaism?

**Rabbi Feldman:** Judaic things. One was a memoir of the Six Day War which we had lived through, my wife, and children, and I. It was a diary of the Six Day War.\(^\text{54}\)

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\(^{54}\) Also called the June War or Third Arab-Israeli War, this conflict was fought between June 5 and 10, 1967 and involved Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Israel launched surprise air strikes against gathering Arab forces. The outcome was swift and decisive. Israel took effective control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The status of these territories continues to be a point of contention in the Arab-Israeli relationship.
You were in Israel at the time?
Rabbi Feldman: I was in Israel at the time.

Serendipitously.
Rabbi Feldman: Just happened to be there on sabbatical. We chose not to leave, fortunately.

We chose to stay and we were there during the war. It was a very moving time.
Nat: So that was not a scholarly effort.
Rabbi Feldman: No. There were two subsequent scholarly . . .

More biographical.
Rabbi Feldman: It was just a journal.

Do you enjoy that sort of non-scholarly writing as much as the scholarship?
Rabbi Feldman: Yes, very much.

You might find yourself doing a project or two that's more biographical?
Rabbi Feldman: Yes. I might find myself doing all kinds of things. I like writing little columns, little essays. Anything that allows me to take a pen in hand, I'll do.

You're supposed to take a computer on your lap.
Rabbi Feldman: I know that. I can't work with a computer.

You've produced over 100 articles and three books with pen in hand?
Rabbi Feldman: With pen in hand. Sometimes pencil.

So when you go over to the university and you see these young scholars with their computers you wonder why they haven't written six books and two hundred articles?
Rabbi Feldman: Exactly. Well said.

I hope my colleagues don't listen to this tape. Thank you rabbi.

We were almost done, and then as I'm leaving . . .

You had to open my big mouth about being out west, Grand Junction, Colorado and Santa Fe [New Mexico]. I was reading while I was waiting out here, an article about some Orthodox rabbi who came to Santa Fe in 1988 and [I] never got into the article. This was when you were a student?
Rabbi Feldman: No, no, no. For example, this past January, and a previous two years ago
January, for three weeks I was asked by the Orthodox rabbi in Denver [Colorado] who does a lot of outreach work in little towns in the west if I could take . . .

Nat: Sort of an itinerant rabbi?

Rabbi Feldman: Right . . . if I could spend three weeks in Grand Junction, Colorado which is on the other side of the Rockies on the border of Utah, a Jewish community of maybe 100 families, and has a college there. The cover was that I was going to be a lecturer at the college for three weeks. Every year they bring in a guest religious scholar, a scholar of religion of different denominations and faiths. They said they would be interested in having a rabbi. “Would I be the rabbi?” But my real purpose would be to be the rabbi to the Jewish community in Grand Junction, who has no rabbi, can't afford one. A weekend rabbi comes in once a month. Which I did. My wife and I went out there for three weeks this January and went out for three weeks three years ago. It was a very exciting time dealing with a community that doesn't know zilch [zero].

Nat: Now you're back to Atlanta 1954.


Nat: Bringing Orthodox rabbis out all the time?

Rabbi Feldman: No. They'll take anybody who'll show up. They're not at the point where they're Orthodox or Reform. They're at the point where they're falling off the brink. They're holding on for dear life. Their teenage kids are gone. Forget about when they grow up and marry out. They're already gone when they're in high school. Grammar school. Very sad situation. So I spent a very good time there. I did classes with them. I did their Friday night services with them. I did everything with them. I talked with them. They even call me now with their personal problems. I'm their rabbi. I did the same thing in Santa Fe, New Mexico two years ago with my wife for ten days. Santa Fe subsequently ended up getting a rabbi of their own.

Nat: Which must be that article I was . . .

Rabbi Feldman: That's it. I like to do that kind of sort of pioneering stuff. I enjoyed it.

Nat: There's a twinkle in your eye. I sit here wondering in your retirement would you go for a year to a Grand Junction if you were invited?

Rabbi Feldman: They asked me actually. “GJ” as they call themselves. I don't know if I would do it for a year because in my retirement I want to be a little bit selfish. I'm sick of being
unselfish. What I want to do in my selfish years is to do the things I enjoy doing, which is not swimming, fishing, hunting, golfing, but to study God's Torah. I haven't had a chance to do it. That's what I want to do. Here and there I would do it, but I don't think I'm ready to commit a year or even six months.

Nat: Has your son done that sort of thing?
Rabbi Feldman: Not yet, he probably will. He's meshuga [Yiddish: crazy] just like I am, worse. That in itself is a nice story for your archives some other time, a father-son relationship at the same synagogue is a real study. Ten years together. Rare in American synagogue history. A rabbi father and son work together in the same operation successfully for ten years.

Nat: Why have you been so successful?
Rabbi Feldman: I don't know, but that doesn't usually work. There have been such attempts. One was in Denver [Colorado]. One was in New York. [unintelligible: 19:06] I've known the sons and the fathers. They have not worked out. They haven't gotten along. Or the congregation hasn't gotten along with either of them.

Nat: But everybody has gotten along?
Rabbi Feldman: Here's been fine. It's been fine. The people here are very unique to start with. They're just good people, nice people.

Nat: He's a good man and you are a good man.
Rabbi Feldman: Yes, but so what? You've got to have the chemistry. You've got to have the personality. I happen to be a laid-back person and I don't . . . I'm controlling but not obviously controlling, and I let him do things on his own. I haven't bothered him. Don't you think? I happen to like him and respect him, in addition to the fact that he's my son. I just respect his judgement in many things. He also reciprocates. It's been a good relationship.

Nat: Could you have done this with your father?
Rabbi Feldman: I don't think so because my father is from another world. My son and I are from the same milieu [French: social environment]. We can go to a baseball game together. We can talk America together. My father is from Europe. It's a different world. So I may not have been able to do it with him. We may not have been able to see eye-to-eye together. I did it with my father here and there for a holiday, for a shabbos.

Nat: But your father was your teacher.
Rabbi Feldman: Yes, basically my teacher. I learned a great deal from him.
Nat: All of our fathers are our teachers on some level, but your father was literally your teacher. You were not your son's literal teacher.

Rabbi Feldman: Correct. My father is a great scholar. He's a greater scholar than I will ever be. He's one of those legendary figures that I think I may have told you. He knows the Talmud cold. Not only knows it, understands it.

Nat: It's the understanding that's really . . .

Rabbi Feldman: Anybody can know. An elephant can learn a dance. You've got to know.

Nat: Somebody needs to talk to the rabbi's son and find out why.

Rabbi Feldman: Yes. In 30 years talk to the rabbi's son.

Nat: We'll see why it works so well. Let's see, he's how old now?

Rabbi Feldman: Thirty-six.

Nat: He's been here ten years.

Rabbi Feldman: Ten years as assistant now he becomes the rabbi.

Nat: So he's 36 so if he stays in place, he could have a full 40 years and retire at 66.

Rabbi Feldman: No. Forty years he'd be 76.

Nat: No. Ten years as assistant. That's 30 years counting his assistantship. You're retiring at 63.

Rabbi Feldman: Sixty-four this August.

Nat: With 39 years. Did you think about a fortieth year?

Rabbi Feldman: I didn’t. I couldn't take all the comments they would have had about the desert and the wilderness. We could make it 39.

Nat: Thirty-nine and then you'll go to the Promised Land.

Rabbi Feldman: In the Bible there are 39 lashes that are given to a guy who breaks Torah law, 39 lashes. Plus there are 39 categories, legal categories of labor that define the Sabbath laws. What is labor on the Sabbath. “I shalt not do any manner of labor on the Sabbath.” What is labor? The legal codes define labor. They have 39 magnificent [unintelligible: 22:30, something about he was a lawyer in a previous] categories of labor. What constitutes work on Shabbos? It's also 39 categories of labor and I quit.

Nat: It makes sense, but I'm sure it's going to be with mixed emotions.

Rabbi Feldman: Listen I'm scared as I can be. July 31 is my last full day. I'm as scared as I
can be because it's going to be a trauma. There's no question. I'm going to get up the next morning and run into my office and wait. Where am I running? No one's looking for me.

Nat: You'll run into your office and your son will say, "What are you doing in my office?"

Rabbi Feldman: I'm concerned about how am I going to handle the phone calls when people call me on August the first or August the second. I can't talk to you? I'm retired? What am I supposed to do? Am I going to sit here and be on the phone all day as I am now? Then what's the point of retiring? I haven't worked out how I'm going to handle all this but I'll work it out.

Nat: You'll go to Israel for a little while.

Rabbi Feldman: I'll escape for a little while. That'll do it.

Nat: You'll visit with your father.

Rabbi Feldman: Once you're out of town it will be easier. G-d will help me. He usually does.

Nat: Wonderful, thank you.

<End Tape 2 . . . >

INTERVIEW ENDS