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INTERVIEWEE: MIRIAM BELGER
INTERVIEWER: MARGERY DIAMOND
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DIAMOND: This is Margery Diamond with the American Jewish Committee and the Atlanta Council of Jewish Women¹ and the Atlanta Jewish Federation doing an interview for the Oral History Project May 1989.

BELGER: I am Miriam S. Belger, 1388 Stevens Drive, Northeast, Atlanta, Georgia, 30329.

DIAMOND: In other words there's a pattern in this, isn't there. There's some –

BELGER: Some sort of structure.

DIAMOND: - structure.

DIAMOND: Hi, this is Margery Diamond, and I'm speaking with Miriam Belger at her home on May 30th, 1989. This is for the American Jewish Committee, the Council of Jewish Women, and now the Atlanta Jewish Federation Oral History Project, Jewish Women of Achievement. I can't remember if I said it or not, I'm Margery Diamond, interviewer. We are very informal, feel comfortable. It is just a conversation.

BELGER: Okay.

DIAMOND: You said something on the telephone, when I asked could I interview you, that I'd like to start from. That was, when I said I'd love your story, you said, "Nobody really knows my story. Nobody really knows the true me." -

BELGER: It's interesting.

¹The National Council of Jewish Women is an organization of volunteers and advocates, founded in the 1890's, who turn progressive ideals in advocacy and philanthropy inspired by Jewish values. They strive to improve the quality of life for women, children and families.

DIAMOND: I wondered what you were referring to, and let's start with the present. Who is the true Miriam Belger?

BELGER: I think I have two sides. I really do. I have the professional side, working with the children, which has been my life work; and being a mother at home. I really think that's my two sides. I find that now that I'm going through this change of a life type, change, I see myself in a different way than I am in a classroom. I find in the classroom I'm very forward, very aggressive, one step ahead of the children, able to stimulate, able to motivate them, able to get the best out of them. I think I'm very successful in that. But now that my life has changed, since the death of my husband, I find that I'm more of an introvert, within my own self, finding it difficult to get on to the other type of world that I have to go into, to make friends, and to keep myself busy. I have a struggle within me. Finding out who really am I, what am I like. Many people have a dual personality, and I think I have that now.

DIAMOND: Do you consider your new role that of a widow?

BELGER: Yes, that is the life of a widow, that I think that changes - such a sudden change is a change that you don't prepare yourself for. Therefore when you're thrown into it, you - of course during the shiva period, you don't realize what's going on, but once the door closes a whole new life pattern changes. It just changes. All your wonderful friends that you have - I still have wonderful friends, they retain it - but I am different. I feel different. I feel different, to the point that even though they are wonderful and include me in everything, I could feel there's a wall. It's a change of conversation. It's a change of how people look upon you. I don't think anybody could realize it unless you go through it. It's an interesting phenomena, but it happens. It just happens. That as people keep telling me, "Miriam, you just have to keep going on," and I am keep going on. I'm not accustomed to making decisions by myself, and that's what I find hard. I'm not accustomed to - I was a very content person at home with my husband, because we were - we weren't always goes, we were just always together, and he was always reading.

BELGER: always working for the next day plans, as you would know. If you teach kindergarteners, you're always working for the next day. But now that he's not here, there's a loss. And it is a complete change. Things are thrown at you. I always look upon myself as a - I must have been just a doll in my husband's hands, in the respect I never had to make decisions. Although he would confide in me, he did everything. He really did. My role was the life of a mother, a wife, and then the teacher. Now it's just - the wife is gone. The mother is still here, but the children are gone, and I'm alone. It it's not pleasant. I think that I have come through it nicely. The children say I got an A.

DIAMOND: They do?

BELGER: It's because the children at the school, the obligation that I have towards the school and towards my profession is to keep going. I think that that has helped me, that was my support. Absolutely, that was my complete support, because I could not fall under. I had to keep going for the sake of the children. The children who I had last year - that was the time of the death of my husband - were wonderful. They seemed to comprehend my sorrow. They felt it, although I never mentioned it in the classroom. It was one morning, I think, about three or four weeks after the death of my husband, that the children's parents came in. These children were only four and a half. The parents gave each one of the children a book to present in his memory. The children are four and a half years old. They said something. Now they might have been prompted as such by their parents. Somehow they were able to convey in their own little young manner how they felt, or how I felt. It was really a very touching ceremony. It's almost as if it should have been taped for the time (inaudible). The school has been my support. I really - I don't know what I would do without them. It's quite interesting right now, because I really do think that the time will be coming soon when I have to retire. Not that I have to retire, I should retire. Not that I have to, but because I feel as if I'm (inaudible) still able to hop, skip, and jump as you would say. I do feel that I keep putting that thought off because I'm afraid to face it. Because what will I do with my time? Each one says to me, Dr. Grablowski(sp.) in fact said that to me the other day, "You must plan now, Miriam, for the time that you won't have much time." that seems to be very very in front of me at all times, what will I do with my time. Volunteer work? I don't think - I think I might go into volunteer work, but I really think that I would go into the public school system and give -volunteer my time to the children who need help. I have been doing that. I have been going to the - since I felt as if I have a lot of time, I don't have to run home any longer. Last year, at the beginning of the school year and all last year, I went to the Briar Vista School right here in the area. I went into the first grade and gave my time to the teacher in the afternoon. I came in at the time when the teacher really didn't need any help. It was one o'clock, half past one is not really the time that the teacher needs much help. But this year, I went into the behavior class. Briar Vista School has many classes. I was more or less a branch of the Carlwood School. I found it very rewarding. I can't spend much time there, but the time that I spent there, I left with a very nice feeling that I did a mitzvah. I did a mitzvah. Each time I left, I said to that young teacher, her first year of teaching special education, I said, "Terri, you're doing a great job." she did. She was trained for that role. It wasn't easy on her. I just forewarned her, "Don't take these worries home with you. You're too young to worry about that. I'll take it home." Which is not easy. What else can I tell you?

DIAMOND: I have a question about your teaching. You are Atlanta's teacher, you have taught

BELGER: Oh, I don't know –

DIAMOND: - many, many, many children. Tell us a little about that?

BELGER: The Lord has given me a good memory. I seem to remember each one of them. I seem to - if you give me the first name, I'll come back with the second name. The children are all grown. I always felt that the children have a lot to give. I always felt that the Jewish children are successful in life. I really feel that way. They might have some that might have a hard beginning only because the parents are impatient. They find a niche in life. Most of our children, the Jewish children, have been very successful. They're doctors or lawyers and the Indian chiefs. I'm now in my second generation. I'm the second generation now. I have given all of myself to them. Teaching is not easy. It's getting harder. A teacher and I have always done that. Go into the classroom prepared, but at the same time prepared to change. If the time comes that you might have a wonderful program, wonderful schedule, and all of a sudden something happens. You'll throw it away and do what the child wants you to do, to go along with the crowd. I find that you're successful that way. I am very free-flowing. I don't run - I have some sort of a structure within my own mind, but it's no longer nine to nine fifteen, and nine fifteen to nine thirty. I don't work that way. I cannot work like that. If I find that the children are enjoying what they're doing, just extend the time, and I'll leave the rest for the next day or whenever the time is convenient. My goal in teaching these children: to make each child feel good about himself, (inaudible). We do a lot of things in the classroom. I never say to the child, "That's wrong." I never do. I think it is this way, don't you? They go along with you. I feel that the child has to learn to be happy with his own self, to laugh, feel good. Why don't you feel good? We question him. We talk about ourselves. My goal is to see to it that coming to school is having and learning makes him feel good. Why am I known in the city? I think there's many reasons why I'm known. When I started, there were only two schools. There was the Community Center and the Ahavath Achim.²

DIAMOND: When was that? When did you –

BELGER: 1949. There were only two schools, and they were - I don't know whether they were competitive, but we knew they were there. There were many Jewish children in the city. The synagogue opened up to take care of their own. We've had –

DIAMOND: Let me ask you a little bit about that. In 1949 –

²Ahavath Achim was founded in 1887 in a small room on Gilmer Street. In 1901 they moved to a permanent building at the corner of Piedmont and Gilmer Street. In 1921, the congregation constructed a synagogue at Washington Street and Woodward Avenue. 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. 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 when he was succeeded by Rabbi Neil Sandler. Rabbi Laurence Rosenthal is the current senior rabbi (2020).

BELGER: At the Tenth Street School, there was.

DIAMOND: What were the circumstances like that made a Jewish school necessary? Did the school open, did you open the school, or had it been in existence –

BELGER: No, no, no. The school was - I don't remember when the school was opened. It was opened by Mary Dwoskin. When Mary Dwoskin, who was well known in the city, when her daughter Diane was becoming of school age, she realized the way the children - she lived in an area where there were not many other children. She realized - because Mary was a teacher by profession - she realized that Diane needed something a little bit more than hanging around the house with the maid. I think she came to speak to the synagogue board that a nursery school to take care of the children, the Jewish children in the area, was necessary. From what I gather from Rabbi Epstein's³ sermon that he gave one time, the board did not go along with him. Two or three years later, they did. I think it started in 1942. I think that the time that the school opened up on Tenth Street. It was a school that was really - its goal was to teach the Jewish children, take care of the Jewish children of young ages. It was threes and fours. We did not have kindergarten at the very beginning. That came later. But it was two classes of three years old and four years old. When I came in 1949, Elaine Cummins came along with me. We were the two of us. We both - she did an excellent job because she was an artist by profession. She (inaudible) now. The two of us worked together, and it became a good school. It was a good school. It was geared for the children and recognizing the abilities of each child. It was not a pressure type school. It was a school where the children could feel very comfortable and grow and socialize. Getting to the school was well known to Leo. If you could recall him. Leo was a Black man who drove the bus. The school was on Tenth Street and most of the Jewish children lived in the Johnson Road area, by the time he picked - he started at eight o'clock in the morning, and we sometimes got there by nine-thirty. The children drove - rode a long time. They loved it, because Leo was just well-loved, and he loved every one of those children he teachers were on the bus. One teacher going home - one teacher going to school; one teacher going home. Then of course, the school expanded when we moved to the new quarters.

DIAMOND: Let me hold up just a minute. How did you choose to go teach nursery school at the AA in 1949? What were your circumstances in your life at that time?

BELGER: I was married ten years at the time. I realized that I liked homemaking. I was really a nice home wife. I felt as if I could do a little bit more with my life. I've always been geared towards education because of my education that I had previously at the time I came to

³Rabbi Harry Epstein (1903-2003) served as the rabbi of Ahavath Achim Synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia from 1928 to 1982. Under his leadership the congregation began to shift to Conservatism, which they adopted in 1952. Rabbi Epstein retired in 1982, becoming Rabbi Emeritus and Rabbi Arnold Goodman assumed the rabbinic post.

Atlanta. I felt that I had to do something more. There was a drive within me. The drive must have started years and years - the time I was growing up in the Bronx, New York. I recall, and my little essay says that too, that during the time I was growing up in New York, I lived in the Bronx at the time. Mother and daddy moved up to the Bronx when the Bronx was just developing. My father was quite comfortable and he took the family from the lower East Side, and we migrated to the rich Bronx. I was about six months old, I was told, when I went up there. As time developed and I grew, I always found people didn't send their children to camps during the summer months. The children were street children. They lived in the streets. I always had the pattern during the summer months of gathering the kids in the neighborhood, of kids in the apartment house. It was this whole apartment house. I used to get one of these nice orange crates that were available at that time, and I used to play school. I remember that very vividly, very vividly. I don't know what I taught them, but I always held class, not knowing that someday I would become a teacher. After I - both daughters were born at the time. Susan, which was the younger one, was about a year and a half old. Saying to my husband, "I must do something." he encouraged me to go ahead. I remember going to the synagogue, and I met with Rabbi Epstein, and I told him that I'd like to teach Sunday School. He was very gracious and wonderful. He says, "We need you." I started teaching Sunday School two years before I actually went into the early childhood program. Then started the career of being in the early childhood program. It has flourished. These children were well taken care of. You know that being the pupils' first teacher in a formal/informal pattern, the children remember that well. It seems to have made a - something that the child receives from the first teacher. I think maybe that is why it evolved that I became the "Teacher of the Year"; I don't know. I know that I gave all myself to it, and to this day I do. I do that every night, cutting and pasting, plus getting ready for the next day. But always with the idea that there's something else behind me. If I can't use this, let's change. I feel very gratified. I really feel as if I did a good job. It makes me feel very good when somebody comes along and says, "That's my old teacher, my nursery school teacher." It wasn't too long ago when I was at the wedding - now this is true (laugh) - that I was on the receiving line, and there came a girl, Srochi girl, Darrel, she said to her new husband, "I want you to meet my old teacher." (laugh) I said, "Darrel, I think it's teacher of old." Somehow a teacher who teaches young children is well remembered by the children. If they enjoy the experience by having a good time, and they developed - unconsciously to themselves, that they developed, you are well remembered. Some teachers - Jews somehow impress some children. That child does retain it. It does feel good when somebody comes along and says, "This is Velga." I say, "You'll have to help me out." (laugh) Just happened to me the other day.

DIAMOND: Let me ask you this. You said you just went to the rabbi and asked could you teach Sunday School. Did you have any college training –

BELGER: Yes.

DIAMOND: - teacher degree or –

BELGER: Yes, yes. I graduated from Wadley (sp-) High School, which today is called the School of Music and Art. I went on to Hunter and did receive a scholarship. There's quite a little story I'll tell you. I received a scholarship to go to Cornell, but in those days being of a Jewish Orthodox family, that was really a no-no. That was honorary, but my mother says, "Absolutely not. You're not going away from home." Children didn't go away from home in those days. I was pleased when I went to Hunter. Before I knew it, the time came that in 1938 I got married, during that time. Then 1942, my husband was transferred to Atlanta. That was the beginning of a new life down here. We moved down here when the war was just started. He was associated with Lerner Shops at the time, until the very end, until his time of death. It was the best thing that ever happened to us by being transferred down here. It was. My husband never could have lived in New York. He never could have lived as long with his ailment in New York as he was able to live in Atlanta, because of the difference of the pace of life. In 1942 I just adjusted very easily. I enjoyed living down here. It was a time that very few migrations were being held. I think I was among the very first of the Orthodox to come down to Atlanta. Atlanta was a small little town on Boulevard and Parkway Drive at the time. Could you recall that?

DIAMOND: I know of it.

BELGER: It was - everybody knew each other. It was a small little city, and the first question they would ask is, "Who are you, who is your family?" then I had to explain that I'm a newcomer. I adjusted very nicely to the point that when I was transferred down here, my mother was quite upset at the time. I was one of four children, and I was not the oldest, I was not the youngest, I was in between. I was the first one to be married and to leave home, which was really quite radical in that time. People just didn't do it. They could go from Europe to the United States, but to go to another part of the States is something a little different. At the end of three weeks, my mother came down to visit. She looked around and she said, "This is a paradise for the woman. That was the time when everybody had maids and all the nice things.

BELGER: Okay. You were talking about your mother and what she said about being a paradise.

BELGER: She thought it was a woman's paradise because as she looked around everybody had maids at the time. The maids were not paid, but they had to help. The women had a lot of leisure time. They seemed to be enjoying their afternoon mahjong. I don't think they played canasta at that time, I think they played mahjong. It was a nice life. It was quiet. I had a nice apartment. The apartment was very very nice. My mother was glad to see that there was food down here. Somehow she was always afraid there wouldn't be enough to eat in this area. At that time we lived close, we lived on Parkway Drive right across the street from Grady High School

at the time. It wasn't too far from obtaining Jewish food, she wasn't - she didn't feel obligated that she had to send me much from New York. Time went on. As time went on, we moved on to a - we bought our own home, and I continued to teach. From Sunday School I went into the early childhood program. It was my life, absolutely my life. Now in between these times, I did attend classes at Emory University at night. It was the adult classes, all the psychology, childhood improvement, all those kinds of psychology, the growth patterns of a child's life. I went every quarter during the evening hours. It was somehow - when the children were growing up, my husband said to me one day, "Miriam, you're talking down to me," which I might have done unconsciously because I was just accustomed to speaking down to the kids. He says, "It's beginning to hurt your adult language." My husband was quite - he was a bright man. He was a very learned man. He was the quiet, retiring type man. I didn't enjoy what he said, that I was losing my adult language. I did ask him what I should do. He says, "Maybe you ought to just find something else to do to get out into the adult world." That was on a Sunday, 1966, I think, or '67, as far as - I don't recall when it was. The next afternoon after school was over at twelve, twelve-thirty, I marched myself into Famous Eldon's, and I spoke to a wonderful Mr. Ross, whose children I had the pleasure of teaching, and I says, "Harley, you know Mo?" He says, "Yes." I says, "Well, he's" - I told him what he said to me. He says, "Well what shall I do?" I said, "What do you think you ought to do?" He says, "You want a job?" I says, "Yes." he gave me a job right then and there. He says, "Would you like to sell?" I said, "Yes, I must be in contact with people." In 1967, I stayed there I think seventeen years, coming in in the afternoon hours, I worked about twelve hours a week in the afternoons, if you can recall the time I was there. It opened up a whole new world. It was my avocation. I learned about jewelry. I kept my eyes and ears open. I learned about diamonds, and I enjoyed the experience. Then I had a nice trade. I gained a lot of call customers, who called for me. I thoroughly enjoyed it until one day, just about four years ago, I says, one Monday afternoon I came in, I says, "Why in the world am I here? I think it's enough." I retired from it. I didn't retire from teaching. I had enough of the other because there were too many changes going on in Eldon's and I didn't prefer the feeling of it any longer. I didn't feel the pleasures of selling any longer. I continued with the early childhood program. At that time - of course, we already had moved over to the new building and the school was becoming very very successful. The Epstein School was started. We grew into big business. Today we outgrew the Epstein School.⁴ The early childhood program has moved over to Sandy Springs and has combined with the Epstein School now. We were no longer known as the Ahavath Achim Preschool Program. We're known as the Epstein School early childhood program. It has become most successful, very successful in fact, to the point that I really think that we ought to open up another school. Standing room only, we have - we have been very well - Mrs. Fegrumes(sp.) at the head of it, has done a marvelous job. She surrounded herself with

⁴The Epstein School (also known as the Solomon Shechter School of Atlanta) is a private Jewish day school in the Atlanta area located in 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.

very excellent administrators. She has put the obligation upon teachers, seen to it that they perform. The school is a thriving school. It is a very very progressive early childhood program. Where the main interest is the development of the child. Where the child is the important one. We're well equipped. Nothing is denied to us. We have many wonderful donors who helped us along the road. We are in the right area. That's what counts for the school. To the point that we have wonderful happy parents. If the child is happy, I say the parents are happy. A good student shines wherever he goes. That has Jewish parents with bright children. If the child is bright, the school is great.

DIAMOND: Now you've spoken a lot about children and childhood and how important it is to you. Can we talk about your own personal childhood? You mentioned growing up in (inaudible)

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BELGER: I don't remember, I guess. I don't seem to recall too much about my family, growing up. It's interesting, I remember playing school. I remember going to high school.

DIAMOND: Can you go back further than that? Your very earliest memories before high school. What was - did you have —

BELGER: Yes, I remember going - I remember going into kindergarten. Gee, that goes a long time.

DIAMOND: Let's try it.

BELCHER: I remember going into kindergarten. I was living in the Bronx at the time, and my mother had to take me. I was registered to go to kindergarten. I remember the teacher's name, Mrs. Coffee. If she would come in right now, I'd remember her, I think. I remember the first thing that was on that kindergarten table, which we still use after many years, is the square pegboard with the different color pegs. That seems to be very very vivid. Then I think my next memory is when the school district was cut in half, I recall, and a new school opened up in a brand-new area. That was P.S. 64, the Bronx. At that time there were no carpools. There wasn't even a train in the area. There were no busses where we lived. We lived in suburbia. I had to walk, it must have been about two miles if not more, to the school. That was the time that you walked to school, you walked home for lunch, you walked back to school, and then you walked back to the day. There was no - that was the way of life and you accepted it. New York was a cold - the weather was a little bit different than it is today. It was colder and hotter. We walked in the snow. I remember that very very vividly. I remember - then the years passed by until I got to about the seventh or eighth grade. That was the end of elementary school. I do remember doing very well. I remember in one grade, the teacher - at that time of the year in those days, they skipped you from one grade to the next if you were proficient in something. I remember studying

very hard. It was astronomy, but it wasn't called astronomy. It was called something else with an easier name. I remember studying about the stars and the moon. I remember memorizing and not knowing what I was memorizing. I remember that. Then I graduated. That was the end of the eighth grade, and I did get many awards if I can recall. I was a pretty good student. It still was with my teacher there. I remember another teacher who taught in a different pattern. It was the type that was just being instituted at the time. It was the time that you did project work. You learned - it was history class, and it was the beginning that you had to do your own teaching. You had to find out the information by yourself. It was very radical. I remember the teacher saying, "All right, go find more information; go find more information. Use the library." That was in the seventh or eighth grade if I can recall. I remember my art teacher, and I think she's the one that set me in the art that I enjoy. See, I admire freeform art. She was a freeform teacher, the art teacher, art enrichment. I loved her class. It was all lines and circle arts. I can remember her too today. She was great. Then I went on to high school.

DIAMOND: Let's go back and talk about what - you talked about what school was. What was your home life like, an Orthodox family in the Bronx? What was that life like?

BELGER: Well –

DIAMOND: Jewish holidays, or –

BELGER: Yes, yes. My mother and father were very Orthodox. My father and mother were a very modern Orthodox to the point they never - we felt very very comfortable being Orthodox. At that time there was no such thing as Conservatism in the Bronx. I remember papa going to the synagogue and he had to walk a long distance. We lived on the West side of town. Papa had to walk to the East side of town, down a long hill to go to the small synagogue. He never pressured us. It was a way of life. We knew no other way. We knew that we observed the Shabbos.⁵ We knew that mama was very busy starting on Thursday getting ready for Shabbos on Friday night. We knew that we did not light - use the electricity or put the lights on or off beginning of Friday night until Saturday night. We never questioned it. This was our life. We did it. We didn't - no money was handled on Friday night or Saturday. My mother did not attend services because it was too far away for her to walk, but papa did. Yes, my father was Orthodox but by the time - My father was a businessman, and a very successful businessman. I remember that did he observe the Shabbos during his work on Friday and Saturday, yes he did. But however he became really Orthodox, really religious, in customs, of ceremonies, was at the death of his father. That was in 1929 when his father died. Now I remember that well. That seems to have

⁵Shabbat [Hebrew] or Shabbos [Yiddish] is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays. Shabbat observance entails refraining from work activities, often with great rigor, and engaging in restful activities to honor the day. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday night and is ushered in by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. It is closed the following evening with the recitation of the havdalah blessing.

changed his whole lifestyle, where he really became more sensitive to Orthodoxy and really within his own self, he put a lot of disciplines upon himself. He never put the disciplines upon the children. He never did say to us that you must do this or you must do this. He never said you must do that, or you don't do this and you don't do that. He felt as if he and my mother observed it, but he never pressured the children, and there were four of us, to the point that I always look upon him as a free-thinking Orthodox person. We respected him. When we were in his home, we respected his lifestyle. When the time for us to go out on our, I no longer was Orthodox.

I more or less changed Conservative, made life a little - I don't think I put those disciplines upon myself, or my husband didn't either. He came from an Orthodox family too. But we were on our own. Then when we came to Atlanta and joined the Conservative movement.⁶ We were completely Conservative but had more understanding of Orthodoxy. During our growing years, holidays, customs, ceremonies, and kashrut to the dying day of my mother plus father always observed. I do keep a kosher home, but I cannot say it's the way my mother and father's used to be. I feel very comfortable with Orthodoxy. I respect them. I live in a neighborhood that is all Orthodox. I think it's great how they handle it. I'm very comfortable in the City of Atlanta being a Conservative pattern. I think it's easier to go along with and to live in a modern society. I think being an Orthodox pattern, I think they more or less put themselves in a little niche of a ghetto. That is in this particular area which I live, I feel that's what's being done here. Sometime there's a tendency of the Orthodox people not to accept anybody unless they observe the way they do. That doesn't bother me because I'm very secure within my own self. My papa and mother never pressured us that this is what you have to do on your own. My father was a great organizer in the synagogue. He was a great speaker, great. He really was. He was well informed. He was very very bright. My father in the old country that he came from - I don't know how they say, Cleskabarone(sp.), I think they call it, born in the small little city of Clesmus in Poland, or wherever it is. He was a very fine student. He had an excellent mind, my father. He went to school with Rabbi Cutler. Now I don't know whether you know about him or not. We tried, Rabbi Cutler migrated to the States too at about the same time as my father, and of course they lost communication with each other. Rabbi Cutler went ahead and opened up the - in Lakewood, New Jersey - the school, a very special school for very Orthodox students. I forgot what you call that school. It's where the young folks are married and the husband continues to learn. I can't recall the name of the school. When my mother and father died, the family donated - my sister is - that my sister really instigated - a social hall in that school there in Lakewood, New Jersey, in memory of my mother and father. Rabbi Cutler always kept in touch with my father. Although my father wasn't a rabbi, he had the rabbinic feeling in him, although he never practiced like a rabbi. My father was very bright, very intense, very learned, and a great speaker. He used to be called by the UJH and do the speaking for the pledges, and he felt very very comfortable with it. My mother was a real housewife, took care of the family.

⁶The Conservative Movement 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. Conservative Judaism observes gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and bat mitzvahs).

She took care of the family. She did a pretty good job of it, now that I recall. I keep evaluating her because now as time goes on, you begin to realize and you begin to recall all that mama did. In fact, this past week as I told you, we had a bar mitzvah⁷ of my youngest grandson. I made my brother from New York come with his wife and my sister from Florida areas attend. I made old-fashioned challah for them. I served it, and my kid brother told me, he says, "Just like mama." Somehow, the memories of a departed one becomes more intense at the moment of death. You just don't appreciate it as time goes on. As I go on, maybe my young folks will start thinking about me as time goes on a little bit more. (laugh)

DIAMOND: We try –

BELGER: I really enjoy teaching. I really - I could think of no other way. The children have been great. They really have. Some of them, what they say, how they perform, There are some tough days. Some of the children have been very very tough. We've had - I've met a lot of problems. Many of the parents were very upset with me along the road. To this day, some parents don't speak to me. I had to do it for the good of the child. The parent realizes later on, when they were able to accept that the child had to be helped. That is the hardest part of teaching, as you would know, is when you have to confront a parent and say we have to do something for the little one, the little child, to help them. That becomes very difficult for a teacher, especially if you know her well too. Working in this community, you get to know the parents. You are no longer standing on the outside, you're stepping into their world which they don't know. You try to be objective, but subjectiveness comes right on out. I felt that I have been truthful to the parents. I really do. I really find that the parents have not been my friends. I am the teacher. I felt that it is my duty to do the best I can for each child, cause each child is special and each child is individual. There is no set way of teaching children. You have to just find the best way for them.

DIAMOND: Now, I'm going to say let's stop right here and take a breather, because you've done a fantastic job –

BELGER: How about a drink.

DIAMOND: - let me push stop

⁷Bar mitzvah [Hebrew: son of commandment] is 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 after his Hebrew birthday.

< End of Tape 1 side 1 >

< End of Tape 1 side 2 >

BELGER: I don't think you know about my grandchildren, do you?

DIAMOND: Let's see. I really don't know about your children. I don't know you as mother. I don't know your children or –

BELGER: I have two different roles.

DIAMOND: Okay.

BELGER: At the beginning of the school year, I tell - we ask -we have a little unit on who am I, my family. I tell them about my family. It's very hard for the children to see that I'm other than a teacher. I get my little hand down, and I say “I'm a girl, I'm a daughter, I'm a sister, I'm a wife and I'm a mother.” Somehow it becomes very overwhelming to them. Of course, they're young. It's very hard for them to conceive relationships. I'm a grandma too. That seemed to hit home, because grandmas are very dear to the young folks. Yes, I am the mother of two daughters. The older daughter today is - she was born in 1941, she's forty-eight years old. She has a son twenty-five. Then I have Susan, born in 1948, she's forty-one. I raised two only children, being six and a half years apart, I raised two only children. The children were good students. Susan, the younger one, has a Master's in education; the older one didn't want to go to college. She just started college, went for a few years and she decided she wanted to get married, because during those times girls got married early, right after high school. Usually they went out to get married, if you can recall those days.

DIAMOND: That's what I did.

BELGER: They both - yeah, that's what you did. That's - Joan and Susan live in the city. They both live in the Dunwoody area. Joan is the mother now of three children, one twenty-five, one twenty-three, and one twenty. Her oldest son is quite famous. If you are a big football fan, you would know about Harris Baron. He's one of the three Jewish football, professional football players in this country. He was drafted, graduated from the University of North Carolina, and was drafted on the first draft to the San Francisco Forty-niners.

DIAMOND: A celebrity, wow.

BELGER: He was in the Super Bowl on the first run. I'll show you a picture of him in a few minutes. He's very very successful, but this is what he wanted. He's a big boy. He certainly is a big boy because the part that he plays for the team, the offensive tackle, demands a big boy, and he's a big boy. He realized that he is a big boy. He had the strength and he was determined to

become a football player. It was due to the efforts of my daughter and my son-in-law who never - who went along with his wishes encouraged him. If this is what you want, Harris, we will be behind you. He was an excellent student at the same time at the University of North Carolina. He graduated Dunwoody High School, and got a full scholarship to the University of North Carolina. He went through the University of North Carolina, came out with a degree in finance, and was drafted to the San Francisco Forty-niners. This year they were in the Super Bowl, and I was happy to announce that they won. I was (inaudible) to see him win. Although being a good football player, he has a nice avocation of course in the field of finance. But the nicest part of this nice Jewish football player is that he's a wonderful son. He really is. A great boy. He's in town right now. Then I have the grandson Todd who is two years younger, he's twenty-three, graduated at twenty-two at the University of Washington in Virginia. Now he is a brilliant boy. He really is brilliant. Graduated Lovett with the finest of honors, went on to Washington, graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and summa cum laude. That was last year. Had a hard time finding himself when he got out of school. He really didn't know what he wanted to do, because he came out with a liberal arts. He went to Europe for the last summer, traveled Europe last summer, and it took him a year to find himself - that's the new expression today - find myself. He has finally found himself a position. He was accepted to medical school. He didn't want to go to medical school. He didn't want to go to law school. He really didn't know what he wanted. But I think he found what he wanted to do. Now he's with public relations, advertising. I hope he will meet his success there. He's a fine young man, real lady's man, very very handsome, and very tall. He has all the qualities for success. Then Joan's younger daughter is twenty. She graduated Dunwoody and went on to Stephens College in St. Louis. She just stayed there a year because she didn't enjoy it. I don't know why she didn't like it. She did very well and made the Dean's List. Now she's transferring to Florida - is there such a thing as Florida Southern College, University of Florida? That's where she's going. That's where she's going now. Hopefully she'll do that. I think her - she has a little problem I think, a slight learning problem, learning disability, and she seems to have conquered it to the point that she knows what she's able to do. She knows her limitations. She studies very very hard. The reason she left Stephens is because she wanted to go into the land of boys, which is very fine. We go along with that, because up to this time she was quite retiring. That's Joan's family. Joan has always worked during. Joan has an obsession for working, and she likes working. She likes being with people. I think when she was first married she worked for the government for a while. When she got married she continued for a while, stayed home for a while, and then went back. When she went back, she opened up her own business. She opened up a business - she always enjoys the arts - a gift store in the Stone Mountain area, Memorial Drive, and stayed there for about nine successful years. All of a sudden Memorial Drive - the area changed. She had to give it up. Now, right now she is part of the group of the Paper Parlour people, and that's where she's working with people, and she enjoys it. Her husband is a salesman. Her husband has met many misfortunes along the road. He's been ill. He's been quite ill. But he seems to be overcoming that too. But he's finding it very hard. Very interesting story about Poland, interesting story that relates to Todd, that's the

middle son. Todd was, as I said, was a very good student. He was attending Dunwoody High School because they live in that area. Joan realized that Todd was having a wonderful time bringing home wonderful grades and never doing a moments work at home. They realized that maybe he was not getting - he wasn't motivated enough. At that time, Todd was a very fine basketball player, they said they were going to see what they could to get him to work harder, to use some of the abilities that he has. It was good that they realized this. Anyway, they made application to Lovett, and he was accepted to Lovett on a scholarship providing that he stays on the team, the basketball team. That was during the eighth grade. He went in the eighth grade. At the end of the eighth grade where he showed how great he was. The wonderful grades he made, and he was good for the basketball team. That was the time that Paul, his father, and he became very ill. They didn't know whether he was going to make it or not. He had a brain tumor. There was discussion that Joan told Todd that he might not be able to go back to Lovett because Lovett was very very high. However, the school took notice of that, what was going on. Calling out Todd they told Todd at the very end of the school year, "Todd, you have shown how great you are. You will not have to leave the school. Your tuition will be taken care of. You have done honor to the school."

DIAMOND: That's beautiful.

BELGER: I'll always remember Lovett for that. He went on, as I say, graduated with the greatest of honors. I've got this nice little letter here that I have saved done at graduation time. He was a great kid, great kid. He finds life - he has to look for excitement in life. It doesn't have to be an exciting party, because he's a party boy; excitement in thinking. He doesn't wish for dullness. He doesn't want dull people. He likes things - he has to be motivated all the time for something bigger and bigger and bigger. Now he's working, thank God, and he'll be settled. Then Susan. Susan's my younger one, very different from Joan. Susan's a little bit more relatable to my husband, sometimes emotional, very dictatorial, very structured in her lifestyle. I call her sometimes, my husband used to call her the sergeant of the family. She has two wonderful kids. She really has. Ryan, who is just thirteen, bar mitzvah, is a gifted child. He's an elocutionist, very fine speech writer; speaks beautifully. Both children speak beautifully. She insisted upon good language. They're at the Kingsley School in Dunwoody. The boy she married is a great guy, Morris Scheinfeld. He's a CPA, accounting. He has what you would call a nice European head, excellent father, sportsman, good sportsman, and he's great. They lead a nice life together. They've been wonderful to me. The girls really have been great to me. I ask nothing of them, thank God. I'm well secure. I don't need anything financially from them, but they are good children. I don't demand anything of them. They really are there when I need them. I try not to interfere in the goings-on in their lifestyle. That's my fifty years of marriage. Of course, it ended when (inaudible) died. We were going to be married fifty years. But life does go on in spite of it all, life goes on. My until your life becomes - you are known by your children, and your children give you your name. It's one that leans upon the other. I always used to say to the children, or the

children used to say to me, "Mama, you never praise me. You never do this." I said, "I know how great you are. It is for somebody else to say how great you are. I know it. You have to prove it to others." I think they have taken that with them and doing that with their own children. Because we as mothers sometimes have a tendency to over praise our children and therefore the striving pattern is not there. It is for somebody else to judge. Somebody else will judge them. I think that how great they are is somebody must realize it. They have to go forward with their own life. I was - something I was just going to say. Something just hit me. Turn it off for a minute.

DIAMOND: I'll give you a minute to think about it. We don't have to turn it off.

BELGER: It's interesting with the children that you become very important when the children have children of their own. Now maybe that is why a teacher is a much better teacher when she especially teaching young children, not much the older teenagers, but teaching young children - for her to have the sensitivity and the understanding of being a mother. Although it's two different roles, being a mother and a teacher, but being a mother makes a better teacher of the young. You're more tolerant. You're more patient. You could comprehend a little bit more the feelings of the children. You could accept their idiosyncrasies, of the sometimes, and the way they behave. The nicest part is that you forget about it the next day. You start a new day all over again. That's the nice part of the children, when they come in with a smile and don't even remember what happened the day before. (laugh) That he had to sit in the listening chair, or the time-out chair. I feel fortunate that I had a nice family. I am fortunate that they live here.

DIAMOND: How is their practice of Judaism different than say yours was different from your mothers? How is theirs different from yours?

BELGER: That's very interesting that you ask that. Although I keep a kosher home, they do not. Customs and ceremonies are very important to them. They both have joined the Reform synagogues, and not the same one. Joan belongs to Temple Sinai and Susan belongs to Temple Immanuel. The reasoning, I think, that they did not join up with the AA is that they did not want to be known, and this I know. "I am Susan Scheinfeld. Yes, I am Mrs. Belger's daughter, but I am Susan Scheinfeld." I really think that was the reason that they went on - they wanted to be known for themselves and not from whence they came. Both daughters, I think, sometimes - not resent it, although they enjoy the idea that mother has done a good work in the city. "I am Joan Baron." They wanted their own identity, and to create their own identity. I think I - it doesn't bother me, because they are the important one. They are not - they're not going to live on past laurels. They have to create their own. I know that - Susan is a little bit more - she feels it more than Joan. I think because Susan is teaching at the Community Center now, as they have an early childhood program. I really think she says, "No." Or who is your mother? "I am Susan Scheinfeld." (laugh) Sometimes she says, "Although my mother is Miriam Belger I am Susan Scheinfeld" because she is the important one. But I think the pattern in the City of Atlanta is

changing. They no longer say where or who are you, because the city has grown much, and there are more newcomers here than oldsters. There are very few Southerners left of the old group as you would say in comparison because there's many new ones that are coming into the city now. She's been quite successful teaching up at the Community Center. Susan is an excellent sales person. Joan is too. Excellent. They do very very well in the outside world selling. They both admit they're good kids. I think that I've done, and I feel as if I've been successful with them. As for observing the Jewish - they are very conscious of the Jewish faith. They do not practice it as I do. They do not keep a kosher home. I know when I go out with them to dinner that they respect me by not eating the foods that they sometimes eat. Of course, I don't eat that kind of food. They have the feeling of respect towards me, the idea of covet. What they do besides that, I don't ask. It's not my business. This is their life and this is the way they want to do it. The interesting part is that - before it comes back to me. Susan married Morray Scheinfeld, a great guy. He is part of the Holocaust. His parents were in the Holocaust. He has spoken to his son about it, and his little daughter is ten years old. I find that he doesn't want to talk about it. He was - I think he was born right after his mother and father were in there. I don't know whether mother or father were in it, but they were not married at the time. Sometimes I think he has the tendency of trying to put it aside and to go forward- There were some people who held on to it. He doesn't want to belong to any organizations to keep that feeling alive. He has told his son about it. His son is very conscious of it, Ryan, 'cause he speaks of it sometimes. But to keep holding onto it, he doesn't. That is the reason, I think, that he belonged to the Reform synagogue. I sometimes feel that is why they belong there. You see, his parents were from the Shearith Israel,⁸ and he went to the Reform. Although the Reform synagogue to which they belong, to me, is not Reform. It's more Conservative than Reform, because a lot of Hebrew is being used in their services. I sometimes feel more than in our synagogue. Because Reformism is changing. It's coming back to more customs, ceremonies, and more Hebrew. Bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah has been introduced. At one time, it never was there, during the times of Rabbi Rothchild anyway. It will come back. However both of them have the feeling and sensitivity. Now Harris, the football player, he (inaudible) at Hebrew Academy. It made me feel great the other day at the grandson's bar mitzvah, where he went up for aleah(sp.) and he was able in all these years. He remembered how to say the opening and closing prayers. He's quite active in San Francisco. He's always being called to the synagogues to speak to the young folks. He speaks to them, I think, of the feeling that stay in school as long as you can. He keeps telling them, study hard, you can do whatever you want if you aim for it. But you must be willing to work for it. Because he had to work very very hard. Being a football player is very glamorous on television, when you sit there and watch the game. Lord, you don't know what goes on behind those closed doors, what goes on from

⁸Shearith Israel Atlanta, Georgia. 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 and women's sections in the sanctuary, and officially became affiliated with the Conservative movement in 2002.

Monday to Saturday. Very interesting. It's an eight to five job every day. But you don't see it as a plain person, as a common person. I don't mean a common, one of the people not on the field.

DIAMOND: Average.

BELGER: The average person. He works very very hard, and he has attained a great height.

DIAMOND: What is his involvement with, say, a congregation or Judaism? Is that –

BELGER: He observes the holidays. It's interesting. A few weeks ago he calls me, he says "You know, grandma, shalashudis is coming." It comes as part of him. Although he's really not in a Jewish world, or working with any Jewish boys at all. Now there was another Jewish boy on the team. If you're familiar with the football field. There were only four Jewish boys in the country in professional football. Two of them were on the San Francisco team. One was John Frank and the other boy was Harris Farten (sp.). John Frank has just retired, a young fellow, a great good looking guy. He's a medical student, plays football in the season and the next part he goes back to school, medical school. He was on the football team for five years, and he said it was enough. He went back to medical school. Even though you play football, there's some very intelligent boys on that team. There are accountants, one is a dentist but he's still able to play football 'cause they only play six months of the year, and the other six months they can do what they want to do. He is our - he has brought fame to the family and to himself. But the most important part is that he is a great boy, to his mother plus daddy, and to the family. He is.

DIAMOND: I think I want to back up a little bit and ask you about how you met your husband. What was that courtship about, and those years –

BELGER: In those years, courtship was different. He came –

DIAMOND: Let's ask the first one: how you met first.

BELGER: It's very hard for me to recall all that. I met him when I was fourteen years old. Those were the days of non-dating, if I could recall. Those were the days where the young boys of the environment, the area, used to gather together at the corner candy store, it was called, in the Bronx, New York. It was a group of boys, young boys. One was four years older than I was. He used to hang out in the corner store. All the girls used to gather walking up the street and down the street. That's the way they used to do things in those days. He was one of the group. I think, if I could recall, the group - one of the boys was dating my older sister. He - I don't know how it happened. It just happened that we started going with each other. I was going to school and he was going to college. We had no telephone in those days, every Friday night he used to come visit me. We used to walk up the great big hill, if I can recall. It used to be Friday night,

and I used to see him at meetings Saturday night, after the Sabbath was over. That's all when I saw him on Friday, and Saturday. Sunday I studied all day and he did to. We kept going on for seven years. For seven years I never dated anybody else. He did. He dated Fannie, (laugh) I remember the name. Then he graduated. He graduated in 1935 or '36, I don't recall. He was drafted as you would call into Lerner's. Lerner's came into the school and drafted him. They said come if they would want to join Lerner's shop. It was just developing at that particular time. He graduated with a B.A., a B.S. in education to become a teacher. But that was the time it was very very difficult for Jewish boys and girls to get a teaching job. To fill in the gap before he would become a teacher more or less, he went in to join Lerner's Shops as a merchandiser. They sent him back to school. We got married in '38. I finished school at the time, and it was very difficult to get a position. Although I think I recall I got a job for six months and then I don't know whatever happened. I don't know whether I enjoyed it or whatever it was, and I wasn't making enough money. I was a substitute or something. I never got real employment.

DIAMOND: Why was it hard for Jewish people to get –

BELGER: There was a quota I think at that time. New York City was very - that was in the Bronx. I was living in the Bronx at that time, and that was really not Jewish area when I moved up to the Bronx at that time. He never went back to teaching. He stayed with merchandising all those years. I took a job, if I can recall, in one of the department stores. That was the beginning of my salesmanship, of dealing with people rather than with children. But the children were still in me. We were transferred right after that. In '42 I was transferred down here. That was in me all the time to teach or to do something because I - and then in * 49 is when I went to Rabbi Epstein. However, during the time that I was teaching everything seems to be coming back to me now - during the time that I was teaching at the early childhood program, I went into Briarcliff High School - I remember that. Miss Davis, she was teaching French. She was one of the French teachers at Briarcliff High. I asked if she needed it - anybody needed any help. She says yeah. I says, " I think I could coach." I was a student of French. I was a student of languages. She used to send me pupils. We used to sit in my little room there, my little den, and I used to help children in their French. I never charged them anything. I did it because I loved it. That was the beginning of my feeling of going back really to the adult world, and to use some of the other abilities that I had. But I don't do that anymore. Although I kind of - we were just talking about that same fact at school, that I did that at one time. Miss Davis was her name. Then of course I continued early - with all the courses that the City is giving right now, although I've been dormant right now, I haven't gone back to it - of the Jewish Institute. I seem to enjoy that. I enjoy going for the pleasure of listening and the pleasure of learning without the obligation. I don't want the obligation of grades and studying for tests anymore. I think I've outgrown that. I should have. The listening, I'm a good listener, and I still have the presence of mind, thank God, to use my brains a little bit. As I look back at it, I did have too great a life.

DIAMOND: I know just from my own personal experience that I have to keep going back to school to keep up my certification.

BELGER: Yes.

DIAMOND: Do you have current certification -

BELGER: Yes and no. You see, the early childhood program doesn't need that. It's when you go into the regular school system that's needed. Now with the early childhood program, that's not needed. It's when you start kindergarten. If you teach kindergarten per se. See, I'm in the early childhood program. That's prior to kindergarten. That's a different pattern. The city has no part of it. That's completely private. But once you go into the kindergarten area, in our school you must be certified. I didn't want that. I wasn't ready to go back for my certificate - for any pressures. I didn't need it. I really was teaching not for the money. I was teaching for my own self-satisfaction and thank God, my husband has always provided well for us. I did it because I liked it. It was always my aim, Margery, during the time that I worked, if the children were at home, then I was always home when they came home from school. The kids had no latch to door keys. I was always home, unless something unusual arises, my Sisterhood or something that might have taken my time. They knew where I always was. It wasn't obligatory. I really think that - I look upon the children I have this year in school. It's a very interesting group of children. I have eight great kids this year, only eight, because most of the children are in the Sandy Springs schools. We're trying to build up the school now at the AA to be able to get more of a grouping there. So no matter how many children we have, we're keeping it going. It's growing. Next year I might have maybe twelve. But the group of children I have, of the eight children, all the fathers are professionals. Interesting. One parent, father, mother are professionals. Both working. It takes time, patience, endurance, love, and sincerity to raise a child. It is not easy to raise children today. You must show them that you love them. This particular couple I don't think know how to love a child. The child feels it and behaves from it. She is an excellent attorney. She's an excellent attorney in the City of Atlanta. When it comes to the mundane life of raising a child, she finds it very difficult. Because children are not easy. You cannot learn how to be a mother from a book. You have to learn how to be a mother by being a mother. The children - it's interesting this year, of the eight children in a society in which we live today, all but one are non-working mothers. But they're all professionals. I have one mother - the mothers have been wonderful to me this year. They've been great mothers, very cooperative. I have one mother who is an attorney, a CPA, and holds a professorship in the Law School at Emory. She takes time out to raise those kids. It's - but of course, the society of today, I can understand why the mothers are working. It takes two to make a living. The children really, are they suffering? The child knows no other way. They really don't.

DIAMOND: Do you think parents are working today because it takes two, or are there other societal reasons?

BELGER: I think it's a combination of two. I think our parents are getting married later in life. They are getting married later in life because we women want to attain and to be self-sufficient. Once they get the feel of the outside world plus attain their degree, they're using their degree, it is very hard to come down to earth to really give up all. They have attained, and go into a - sometimes an uninteresting pattern of everyday life. If you look back at it, yet there's a lot of growth, there's a lot of goodies to enjoy with the child. It's really an everyday affair. The glamour is not there. Therefore they don't want to give that up. At the same time, it takes a - when they got married, they had a lot. It's hard to give up what they had and to start from the very bottom. Therefore it takes two of them to buy all those nice things that they want. It is a combination of both. It takes two to make a living today, and at the same time parents are impatient. They want to do everything and raise their children at the same time. They cannot do two jobs and do it well. But does the child suffer? The child knows no other way. This is the way he's accepting. Now as he gets older, he might come back, (inaudible) at you, you weren't home. You never came to my PTA meetings. You never came to my Purim⁹ party, such as that, if a child is very receptive and sensitive at the same time. I think that parents as a whole try very hard. It's hard to be a mother. There are a lot of obligations put upon them, especially in the working world. But I think if they're working for an employer, I think the employer today understands that, that there are certain times that a parent has to take care of that child, has to attend certain functions. The child gets sick, has to be home with the child. You see the mother who does work is really pulled in many areas. She has a hard job.

DIAMOND: Were a working mother?

BELGER: Yes, but I was home, see. I was a working mother, but I was finished at twelve, twelve-thirty. I didn't come home at six, seven o'clock, at the worst hours of those children. When a parent works she comes and picks. Today we offer the child to get to school early. This is a two-year-old, starts at two. We bring in the two-year-olds, and we keep them to five, six o'clock in the evening. She goes from one area to another area to another area, and the parent picks up that child at five, six o'clock. The parent is exhausted from the day. Might have had a bad day at the office, has no time to really give that child love, to prepare food for them. She gets that child at the worst time of the day. She can't get that child to bed quick enough. Does the child suffer? He knows no other way. It is to be that. I had a nice little session the other day in

⁹Purim is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people in the ancient Persian Empire from destruction in the wake of a plot by Haman, a story recorded in the Biblical book of Esther. According to the Book of Esther, Haman planned to kill all the Jews, but Mordecai and his adopted daughter Queen Esther foiled his plans. The day of deliverance became a day of feasting and rejoicing. Some of the customs of *Purim* include drinking wine, wearing masks and costumes, and public celebration.

the classroom. As I said, they're - all parents are professionals. I handed out some cards, some picture cards of the fairy tales: Snow White, the Seven Dwarfs and all that, just plain little cards. I asked the children if they could tell me the story. They all did that except one little boy. I said, "Joshua, does your mommy read to you before you go to bed?" She had no time. She doesn't have time. Now I didn't ask them directly. You could see that that mother is busy, that she doesn't have the time. She's delighted that he goes to bed quietly. I think it hurt Josh. It really did, because he felt bad that he was not able to recognize the seven little dwarfs. Now we can't teach the child everything. Something must be done at home. There is no way that a teacher could do everything for that child. But he'll be fine, Joshua. He'll grow up and be great because he has the ability to do.

DIAMOND: I wonder if he'll teach his children Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

BELGER: I don't think he has to teach them. He could enjoy the story. It's a nice, creative story.

DIAMOND: I wonder if he'll think that that's important to do with his children?

BELGER: Only time will tell.

DIAMOND: Right.

BELGER: Only time will tell.

DIAMOND: You have been marvelous to give me all this time, and I haven't had to do any work at all. I feel like a little clock here. I'm going to cut the tape off –

BELGER: I went through this last year, just at this time, this week last year.

DIAMOND: Oh wow.

BELGER: Last May 25th. I had a hard time getting myself together. I had a hard time. Mozi (sp.) died in September, and I went back to the classroom immediately because I knew that was the only place I would feel better. During the month of October, I was sitting in the classroom on the floor, as I usually am, and Rabbi Epstein came into the room. Now Rabbi Epstein never comes into the classroom.

He has never come into the classroom. He walks up and down the hall. He might hear what goes on. He never really makes himself known to come into the classroom. He came into the

classroom, and he said to me, "Mrs. Belger, see if you can get somebody to stay in the classroom with the children. I want to see you immediately." (Yiddish spoken)¹⁰

I didn't know what I had done. Of course, I could do something that really - he's a sensitive man. I might have stepped on his toes somehow. I said, "Oh, Rabbi." He says, "Just come in as quickly as you can." I got Shirley Diamond. It must be some part of your family.

DIAMOND: Cousin.

BELGER: Cousins. Shirley came in and I said, "Shirley, sit down for a while." I said, "Rabbi Epstein wants to see me." "What did you do Miriam?" I said, "I have no idea." Walking into his office, was a very formal office. Getting called into his office, he asked me to sit down in a chair. He sat down right opposite me. My heart was beating. I just felt terrible. I was just about ready to cry if I could recall. He says to me, "Miriam, I have something to tell you. You have been chosen to be the Honoree of the Epstein School for this coming year." This is October. I remember saying to him, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I said, "Rabbi, I'm quite reluctant to take such an honor. I am pleased and wonderful that you have thought about me." then I stopped for a while. I said, "I thank them for the honor." I said, I worded it to the point, I says, "Thank you for the honor. It is late, but it's never too late." I have to clear myself from that. He knew what I meant. I says, "It would have been nice if Mo was here to enjoy it with me, because he was the one behind me all the time, who went to all this business of sitting up nights, and sometimes even helping me to get ready for the next day." I accepted it. I told him, "I will only accept it if there are no obligations on my part." He says, "There will be no obligations on your part, Miriam." from October until the beginning of May, it was in the back of my mind. The publicity was over the city, and everybody congratulated me. But I always felt when I accepted this honor, that I didn't accept it on my very own. I accepted it to the point that they were finally getting to the point of honoring me and honoring all teachers. That's what made me go on and do it. Otherwise, I don't think I would have accepted it. Because it was about time that the city does stop to honor teachers. We have been playing football. When the state legislature convenes in January, the first thing on their items is how little shall we pay the teachers. All the children are entrusted to the teachers to make a better life for them. I personally think that we're downtrodden in the amount of money that we get. An attorney does not put in as many years as a teacher. There is no profession that puts in a continuous education as a teacher has to meet at all years. From October through May, it was in the back of mind, thinking about myself. I used introspection. Of course, I knew I had to make a presentation. How to put it together, I found it very very difficult. Speaking to you now is like a –

¹⁰Yiddish is the common historical language of Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. It is heavily Germanic based but uses the Hebrew alphabet. The language was spoken or understood as a common tongue for many European Jews up until the middle of the twentieth century. Although the terms "Yiddish" and "Yid" are sometimes used to refer to Jews, Yiddish is a reference to a person's language and not necessarily their ethnicity, religion, or culture.

DIAMOND: This is a piece of cake.

BELGER: Yeah. Everything, all my thoughts that I have given you, is right on my little resume of my life that I presented that night. I came into the rabbi at the beginning of May, if I could recall, Rabbi Richardson. I'm very fond of him. I said to the rabbi, "I just don't know what to say. What do I say?" I says, "I'm not going to stand there and laud myself for any reason." I says, "There is no reason for that." He says he was jolly. I think he's great. Do you know Rabbi Richardson well enough?

DIAMOND: Yes.

BELGER: He's one of the boys. He says, "Say what you want to say in your own way, Miriam. Be yourself when you say it." Somehow he made me feel very very comfortable. I sat up nights here at this table, and I put that thing together. Everything I have told you tonight is written down.

DIAMOND: We will include that. We're about to run out of tape here, we will definitely include that as part of your file –

BELGER: It has been a wonderful year. Now, what shall we do next time when I meet with you. What are we going to go into now if this takes eight hours?

DIAMOND: We're going to stop.

< End of Tape 1 - Side 2 >

Addendum

May 25, 1988

Shalom,

Rabbi Epstein - My mentor,
 Rabbi Goodman,
 Rabbi Richardson,
 Cantor Goodfriend,

Mrs. Finkel - All my family, friends and a special Shalom to all my wonderful parents of all my "pupils" during the years. Who would have dreamt that this honor would be bestowed upon me - for one who comes in at the back door - and leaves at the same door? Sometimes wondering if anyone knew I was there! It is now a time of recollections... I well remember the day I called Mary Owoskin informing her of my desire to teach at the Ahavath Achim Nursery School, as it was then called. I¹¹ remember being interviewed and hired by Rabbi Epstein and I well remember the monthly salary. It was very small but the desire to teach at this Synagogue was overwhelming. I will never forget the many administrators during these 39-40 years - and some do stand out. Firstly - Mary Dwoskin - founder of the Ahavath Achim Nursery School. A "teacher's teacher" very capable - directed - staunch - a leader with principles - and one who believed in the integrity and respect for teachers. I do remember her many addresses to the new parents at the beginning of the school year - stressing - teachers are to be respected -they too are parents - they too have names - calls to the teachers are to be made at respectable times and hours and the parents listened! I also remember Mr. Jacobson, who was at the helm when the Epstein School came into being. He stressed pupil-teacher ratio, and it was during his realm that assistant teachers came into focus. Now Mrs. Finkel, who is bringing growth and esteem to our now called "The Epstein School" Pre-School. Here I am. Why did I stay long? I did because the synagogue and its leaders encouraged me to be creative, innovative and to be exciting in the classroom. I think I have met these challenges. Good role models as Rabbi Epstein, my mentor, and now Mrs. Finkel, they have showed me that teaching in a Day School is indeed a very holy thing. Something to be taken seriously. Teaching takes time and much patience, which I have had and still have. Looking back at my developing years as I grew up in the Bronx, N.Y. area, if I had the insight then as I think I now have, I would have known then that someday I would

¹¹Cantor Isaac Goodfriend (1924-2009) served at Ahavath Achim in Atlanta from 1966 until his retirement in 1995 as Cantor Emeritus. Cantor Goodfriend was born into a Hassidic family in Poland. At the age of 16, he was interned in a German labor camp in Piotrkow, Poland. Escaping in 1944, he was hidden by a Polish farmer and was the only member of his family to survive the war. After the war, he attended the Berlin Conservatory of Music, McGill Conservatory of Music in Montreal, Conservatoire Provincial de Quebec, and later in Ohio at the Music School Settlement and Baldwin Wallace College. Before coming to Atlanta he served as cantor at Shaare Zion in Montreal, Canada in 1952, and later at Cleveland, Ohio's Community Temple.

become a teacher. Growing up at that time children spent their summer months in the streets playing stick ball, jumping rope, playing jackstones and I played "school". I used to gather the young children of the apartment house...used an orange crate as a desk...and I played the role of the teacher. Then, my high school years at the Music and Art High School. How vivid is my recollection of being installed as President of the Arista - now called the National Honor Society - by the honorable Eleanor Roosevelt. This is the hand that shook her hand. She took me aside after the formal ceremony and encouraged me to make use of my abilities and to always try to forge ahead! Then, upon graduation, receiving a small scholarship to Cornell University, but my parents said, "No, you are too young to go away." off to Hunter College I went. The years went by. I married by childhood sweetheart, and then in 1942 my husband was transferred to Atlanta, and I adjusted very easily to "southern living". My mother - at her first visit to Atlanta, called the lifestyle a "Veibeshe Garneden" - a Woman's Paradise.

My older daughter Joan was born in New York and Susan is a southern gal. They now have families of their own, living in Atlanta, and I am a proud grandmother of 5 great grandchildren...all strivers and accomplisners. Memories...memories. My most recent memory is the "honor" Phillip and Marion Perling bestowed upon me at our Simchat Torah get together with the children at our school, and then my family honoring me at my Synagogue on my special birthday!¹²

The years have flown by, now going into the 40th year of teaching. I have raised a nice family and I have shared myself with the community... 2 big roles. When the children were growing up, I have always tried to always be home before the children arrived from school, to welcome them and discuss their happenings!

Teaching at the Ahavath Achim has been good for me.

Teaching children has made me stay alive. I can still jump, run and skip, and the children...it was great, original,

bright, full of excitement and joys. Teaching at a Day School is a unique experience. I feel that secular education is important for one's livelihood; a Jewish education is important to life.

Bothe critically important to one's total development as a human being.

Teaching 4 year olds is fascinating and exciting and sometimes

frustrating. Every day is different and every day presents unanticipated challenges and

opportunities. Ever mindful of my F's and C's, I try to be fair, fun and friendly, and caring,

communicative and consistent. As the children are developing, I always try to encourage them

to become original, independent, and confident. Each child is unique and has much to give. My

¹²Simchat Torah (Hebrew: "Rejoicing of Torah") is a Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings, and the beginning of a new cycle. The main celebration of Simchat Torah takes place in the synagogue during evening and morning services. In Orthodox as well as many Conservative congregations, this is the only time of year when the Torah scrolls are taken out of the ark and read at night.

aim has always been to "open up the world to the child", tell me what you see and hear, going to school is great, learning about yourself is greater - gaining a very positive attitude toward his heritage...are some of my goals.

Growing up is a journey, a journey in learning. It begins with a delight and ends in awareness and an eagerness to learn more. Many memories, bright sayings, and expressions. I would love to show some recent ones with you. From the mouths of the little ones:

Now you are honoring me. I thank you for your kind wishes, your kind thoughts, your coming together this evening, to honor me and this great school, but really — a very special thank you for all the pleasures - memories that you and your wonderful children have given me.