

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH RABBI STEVEN J. LEBOW

CONDUCTED AND EDITED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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TS: Why don't we begin with your background? My understanding is that you were born March 18, 1955, in Ft. Lauderdale. Could you talk about influences such as mentors, temples or synagogues, and those kinds of things.

SL: Absolutely. I was born in 1955 in Florida. There's not a single rabbi in my family. Sometimes, you'll see children or grandchildren of rabbis become rabbis. I don't have that in my background. But my father was a very successful businessman in Ft. Lauderdale; he owned the first Toyota dealership in South Florida. Because of his acumen of being such a wonderful businessman, he got elected to be the president of the synagogue. He did such a good job, apparently, they made him the president of all the synagogues in the southern United States. So, that was the kind of family I grew up in.

I wouldn't say that they were orthodox. They didn't keep every law; they didn't keep all the laws of kosher and the laws of the Sabbath. But I would say my family was what I would call religious Reform Jews. They lit candles every Friday night. They lit their candles on Hanukkah. They always had the Passover Seder. All of the major Jewish holy days were kept by my family. I'm the baby of four children, and my father was the president of the synagogue [Temple Emanu-El] when I must have been about six or seven years old. And I would go every Friday night. They would dress up little Stevie Lebow in his bowtie and pants and whatnot, and my parents [Irving and Rita Lebow] would take me.

I think that what happened, as I recall, I'm there in a row, I look up, and there's a guy on the stage, and the guy tells a story. Then, at the end of telling the story, the guy sings a song. Then, everything's over, and we go in the next room to eat some cookies. So, in my feeble mind and my juvenile thoughts, I thought to myself, "Well, I could tell a story. I could sing a song. I could sure as heck eat some cookies. So, maybe that should be my life and career." It's a true story. I remember, actually, some of it as if it were yesterday. One Sunday morning, my parents are lying there and reading the *Miami Herald* newspaper. I sort of pad in—I must have been about seven at that point—and I say to my mom and dad, "How do you spell ambition?" They told me; I pad out. I come back a few minutes later and say, "How do you spell congregation?" They told me, and I left. Now, I'm not in the room at this point, but I presume my father looks at my mother. My mother looks at my father, and they say something like, "What is he up to?"

So, they, in fact, now come to my room; and with a crayon, I am writing to the Hebrew Union College that I would like to be a rabbi. I was seven years old. I don't have the letter that I sent them, but I do in fact have the letter that they sent me. And the letter's

pretty amusing. It says, “You are the youngest person to ever apply to be a rabbi. And, oh, by the way, first you have to go to college, then to graduate school for five or six years after college.” I remember the punch line was, “We’re sending you a course catalog. Your parents will explain what the course catalog is.”

Hence, the Sixties and the Seventies ensue. It was time for everybody to be rebellious and throw off the chains in the yoke of organized religion. It didn’t travel with me, you know, through my teens. But I entered Kenyon College, which is a very small school in Gambier, Ohio. It’s very similar to Oberlin or Antioch.

TS: It’s an elite school it sounds like.

SL: It’s an elite school. It really is. There are only twelve hundred people in the entire college. I had more people in my high school than were in my college. I was curious. I wanted to learn more about what it meant to be Jewish, but there was a handout. It says there are Jewish services on the day of freshman orientation, and it’s held in the Episcopal church.

TS: I was going to say Kenyon is an Episcopal school.

SL: It’s an Episcopal school, and they had the Church of the Holy Spirit which they loaned to the Jewish students and the chaplain for every Friday night. So, I went in, and the service was very short. And afterwards, everybody sort of piles out of the church, and I was kind of standing by myself. I didn’t know anybody. As I said, it was first day of my freshman year. And this young gentleman sort of sidles over. He says, “Do you know Dr. [Eugen] Kullmann?”¹ And I said, “No, I just got here.” He says, “Well, you need to meet Dr. Kullmann.” So, he takes me over. And this bent over [person] looks like a character out of *The Hobbit*. But they introduced me to him, and he’s very pleasant. I tell him I want to learn more about being Jewish, and I begin to take classes with him. It is impossible for me to describe. the influence that he had on me as well as dozens of dozens of people. The man spoke or read twenty languages. He had the entire Bible, New and Old Testament, memorized. He was a prodigy.

¹ According to the Center for Jewish History in New York City, Dr. Kullmann (1915-2002) was born in Erlenbach, Germany and was awarded a doctorate in 1941 from the University of Basel in Switzerland. In 1946 he moved to the United States and taught philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1947 to 1968. He was also a visiting professor at the Academy of Higher Jewish Learning (later the Academy for Jewish Religion), an independent rabbinical and graduate school training rabbis, cantors, and MA students in Yonkers, NY; at Bard College; at the Jewish Theological Seminary, a Conservative Jewish institution in New York; and at Smith College in Massachusetts. In 1968 he moved to Kenyon College as professor of religion and remained there until his retirement from teaching in 1984.

To sit in his classroom was a wonder. He would start talking about William Blake. Then it would go to Emily Dickinson. Then we go to the Bhagavat Gita of the Indian scriptures, then it would be something that would be in the Bible. And then he'd end with some conversation he wants to have with Jack Kerouac, the beatnik author. It was like watching performance art. You just sat there, and sometimes you didn't take notes. You just sat there and watched it. And that brought me back to wanting to be a Jewish scholar. In turn, that reconnected me back to that little seven-year-old boy, and I decided then, now at the age of about eighteen, that I was going to go ahead and do it. And that's when I began my rabbinic studies.

In fact, if you like, I just wrote a memoir about them. I knew that he had had that kind of influence on me. And I wondered, well, did he have that kind of influence on other people? Because he was there from 1968 to 2002. Well, through the magic of the Internet and LinkedIn and Google and Facebook, I found thirty-nine other men and women that he had changed their lives. So, I collected from them. Everybody wrote a memoir of their time at Kenyon seen through the lens of having worked with Dr. Kullmann, and I published it recently just for us in our class and that sort of thing.

TS: Can we find a copy of the memoir?

SL: I'll be happy to get it for you if you want one.

TS: Wonderful. To return to your childhood, what is the first name of your father?

SL: My father's first name is Irving. But everybody called him Doc. That was his nickname, because he would sell cars, and somebody would come up at the car lot. My father would say, this car here, "You don't want this car because it's not a healthy car." He would say, "You want this car. This is a healthy car." And the customers would leave, and the salesman would tease him and say, "What do you mean it's a healthy car? What are you, a doctor? The doctor of ophthalmology?" In fact, there's a building at the synagogue where I work over here in Cobb County, and the name of the building is the Doc Lebow Center. It was named in memory of him.

TS: Is that right? Well, you use the term synagogue rather than temple. We think of temple with Reform Judaism. But they're all synagogues, I guess.

SL: Yes. In fact, there's three words that you can use for basically what a Jewish house of worship is—one is temple, one is synagogue, and one is shul. And although they denoted, as you said, originally, the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, they're now interchangeable. At this point in 2023 anybody would pretty much understand what you were saying.

TS: So, when you call it a synagogue, it's still Reform?

SL: That is correct. It's a Greek root, whereas temple is a Latin root, and shul, which means school, is obviously a German root [Yiddish].

TS: You talked about being rebellious. Were you out protesting the Vietnam War?

SL: Yes. I was lucky enough to be in high school when the war was raging.

TS: You would have been eighteen at about the time that it ended.

SL: Yes. I knew I was going to be in that draft. In fact, my thought was I wasn't going to register at all, which makes you a draft dodger. My sister [Judge Susan Lebow], who's a very famous and accomplished judge and lawyer, came to me and said, "Steve, you can say you're not going to fight. You can say that you're going to be a conscientious objector. But you cannot avoid registering for the draft." So, she convinced me that was the better choice. Obviously, I was against the war and marched in some small marches and that sort of thing. I guess my social consciousness was raised in about 1971 or 1972. I was part of a group that followed Cesar Chavez, the head of the United Farm Workers, and I marched with Cesar Chavez. I belonged to a Jewish youth movement called NFTY, National Federation Temple Youth, and I organized for them a boycott of grapes and lettuce because that was our way of trying to convince the American public that the companies needed to negotiate with the farm workers.

TS: Now when you marched, was this in Florida?

SL: It was in Florida. He had come to Florida.

TS: To work with the migrant laborers?

SL: Yes. I believe, if I remember correctly, it was a sugar factory. In fact, a young woman was killed, not during my march, but she'd been killed, I think, the week before. A woman by the name of Nan Freeman. She was a student at the New College of Florida, and she was killed during the march.² I'm pretty sure if my parents had known that, they never would have let me go. But that was my getting my toe in the water in terms of social justice, being with Cesar Chavez.

TS: You say you kind of had a conversion around 1972, but it sounds like your family was pretty liberal already.

² Nan Freeman was crushed to death by a strikebreaking double-trailer truck in the predawn hours of January 25, 1972. Just 18-years-old, she was attempting to pass out leaflets to truck drivers entering and exiting the Talisman Sugar Corporation in central Florida. New College honors her memory with two outdoor murals placed in 2022 near the Jane Bancroft Cook Library. Cesar Chavez said of this young Jewish woman, "To us, she is a sister who picketed with farm workers in the middle of the night because of her love for justice. She is a young woman who fulfilled the commandments by loving her neighbors, even to the point of sacrificing her own life." Abby Weingarten, "Nan Freeman Memorial Dedication to Pay Tribute to Late New College Alumna and Activist," *New College News*, March 20, 2022.

SL: Yes, I think liberal in a sense that my parents were the founders of the ecumenical movement in Broward County in South Florida. They brought together, pardon the cliché, the rabbis, the priests, and the ministers. This was not uncommon at my dinner table to have someone who was an Episcopal priest or a Presbyterian preacher, because my parents were that bridge between the Jewish and the Christian community. And so that was really where their liberalism was evoked, working with other churches and other religious institutions to bring people together during what was actually a tumultuous time.

TS: Right. One of the questions I meant to ask, and you've probably answered it already—I was wondering when you were writing that letter as a seven-year-old, how much you knew about Rabbi Isaac Wise and the Reform movement in Cincinnati?

SL: That's a very good question. I did not know who Isaac Mayer Wise was because, once again, I was only about seven years. I think I lied in the letter. I think I told them I was eight, because eight seemed older than seven. I think I was on the cusp of eight. But, no, I didn't know who Isaac Mayer Wise was. What I knew was the main seminary then and up till recently to train American Reform rabbis was in the Midwest. It's in Cincinnati. It sounds random, but it's not, because the early Reform Jews were all German speakers, and Cincinnati had a very large ethnic German population to it. So that's where it started.

TS: I remember going to the Plum Street Temple [erected in 1866] when I was at a convention up in Cincinnati years and years ago [December 1988]. I guess, it was the American Society of Church History that met in conjunction with the American Historical Association. If you got there a day early, they'd do a tour of historic religious structures in that town.

SL: I was ordained in the Plum Street Temple.

TS: It was beautiful.

SL: In fact, I'll tell you another story. As I told you, I got a [reply] letter when I was, I think by that time, eight years old. When I marched across the stage, in 1983 to receive my rabbinical diploma, the woman that had written me the letter from the registrar was the woman who handed me my rabbinic degree twenty years later.

TS: Great story.

SL: It's true. Miriam [Okrent] Weiss was her name.

TS: Did you remind her?

SL: She knew. She remembered. How many eight-year-olds send a letter saying, "I want to apply?"

TS: I guess we could've done more with your family background, but I think you've hit the highlights. I did want to ask you about the ecumenical activities. How did you feel that you were treated growing up being Jewish and being in the South, not that Ft. Lauderdale necessarily reflects southern culture? But how were you treated—just like everybody else, or were there ever any incidents that reminded you that you were Jewish?

SL: I wasn't treated badly in the best of my memory. I was often the only Jewish kid in my class, and in a few occasions, I was the only Jewish kid in the school—different times of life and that sort of thing, but I don't remember any terrible anti-Semitism at that point. What you had is that you'd be singled out in the class because the teacher was trying to create a bridge. While children were had a coloring exercise, and they would be coloring in a Christmas tree, they would give me a picture of a Hanukkah Menorah to color in. You know...

TS: That was good.

SL: It was good. You know, I wasn't self-conscious at all. I was very proud of who I was. But, no, I didn't feel tremendous anti-Semitism. It's interesting; I just mentioned this the other day to somebody. The only prejudice I remember was not against Jews. It was against African Americans. I remember we took a road trip—my parents and I. And I must have been fairly young, younger than seven. We stopped in North Florida and got out for me to go use the restroom. I go to use the restroom, and my mother grabs me like that and pulls me back. I didn't realize it said for "Colored only." I didn't know that as a little kid. I had never seen Jim Crow laws before where I grew up. Now, I will say, "yes" to the question about anti-Semitism. I didn't see it, but I heard from my parents and people in my parents' generation that it would say that [a certain place] was restricted or you'd see a sign that said "No Jews allowed."

TS: In Florida?

SL: In Florida, yes; there were always Jews in Miami Beach—it's sort of a stereotype, but it's true—but there were places in Ft. Lauderdale and in Miami that were restricted to Gentiles.

TS: What kind of places?

SL: Hotels...

TS: Oh, really?

SL: Yes, hotels; in some cases, just housing regulations. If they figured out you were Jewish. In fact, that's why my parents changed our last name from Lebowitz because of prejudice that they encountered, which must have been going on in, certainly, the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1950s, when I was born, my father had shortened the name to Lebow.

- TS: I'm about twelve years older than you are, but I know all the way through school, we had the Lord's Prayer and Bible readings in school. Did you still have that when you were coming along?
- SL: We did. We did. It's funny that you asked that. I remember that, but I remember the teacher being very sensitive. I don't think there were any readings from the New Testament. What I remember was the 23rd Psalm, which is ecumenical, shared by Jews and Christians alike. So, I didn't feel really put on the spot in any way.
- TS: Good. Okay, so you go to college, and I had some questions about that. In terms of something we're going to be talking about later on—I saw that Kenyon College is noted now as one of the best colleges in the country for LGBT students.
- SL: I did not know, but that's worthwhile to know. I'm glad to hear that, actually.
- TS: But what I want to ask you—your undergraduate paper on "*Hesed* in the Psalms"—you won the Simpson Prize in Religion. I know *hesed* has different meanings, but love, kindness, whatever.
- SL: That's right.
- TS: I wonder if you remember what you said in that paper.
- SL: Well, it's interesting. There are two terms that you can counterpoise in Hebrew for that sort of concept. One is the term *tzedakah*, and Jews still use that. *Tzedakah* is what a Jew would say for charity. "I'm going to do *tzedakah*. I'm going to write a check; I'm going to do something for charity." And that's counterpoised with *hesed*, which is loving-kindness, as you said. What is the difference? One of the differences is you can only do *tzedakah* to someone who's alive. If they're living, you could help them out. But once someone is deceased, you can't make a monetary donation to someone who's gone. But you can honor their memory and their wishes. And that's what the Bible says is *hesed*. For example, when Jacob is dying, he says, "Do me this one last *hesed*. Just make sure that I'm not buried in Egypt. I want to be buried back with my ancestors." So, *hesed* is differentiated that way. It's not charity. It's almost covenantal kindness. It's a relationship that you and I enter into that is not upper and lower but is absolutely one with the other.
- TS: Wow. And your Simpson Prize in Religion was the first time that anybody who was Jewish had won the prize.
- SL: That's right.
- TS: And so, it sounds like you were pretty well accepted at that school.
- SL: Yes, I would say I was well accepted. I studied a lot. That was my dedication to my mentor, Dr. Kullmann. I never attended a single fraternity party. That had never

occurred to me. I never attended a single athletic event. I didn't mean to look down my nose at anybody, but I knew I was going to be unable because Dr. Kullmann, when I went to him and said, "I want to revisit my childhood ambition, my dream to become a rabbi," said, "That's great. Now you have to take three years of Hebrew." Well, I was terrible at language. He says, "You've got to take three years of Hebrew." I'm like, "Really?" How naive I was. "You've got to take Hebrew." I said, "Okay." And then he says, "When you're done with that, you're going to study Aramaic." "All right." "When you're done with that, you're going to take Greek or Latin." That's how things steamrolled. But I did feel accepted. Most kids were not outwardly Jewish. Sometimes, you could tell by the name and where they were from. But I founded the Union of Jewish Students at Kenyon College, and that gave me an opportunity to reach out to other Jewish kids. I would bring in lecturers and make sure the Jewish holidays were observed and that sort of thing when I was in Kenyon in the 1970s.

TS: Wow, you sound more like a first child than a last child.

SL: Well, it's an interesting question. There is a first child, my brother, and he was twelve years older than I am. My brother was severely mentally ill. He was a very, very smart person. In fact, he ended up being my teacher in middle school. But he ultimately develops schizophrenia, and all the family ambitions that would have gone to him as the oldest child kind of dribbled back down. And I think my parents were actually sexist. They never for a moment thought that my sisters would uphold the family banner, which they ended up doing, but all the expectations of the first born came down to the last born. So, I guess I'm a little bit of both.

TS: Talk about your sisters a little bit. You said that one was very accomplished?

SL: Yes. I have two sisters. One is eight years older than me, Susan Lebow, the Honorable Susan Lebow, Judge Susan Lebow. My other sister's name is Sally Shiff. It's funny. I left home and became a rabbi, and I thought that was a big deal. I came home. My sister was one of the chief judges of Broward County, and my other sister was married to a city councilman [Commissioner Michael Shiff] in Parkland. I thought, I guess, I'm not a big deal anymore because everybody has an elected office in my family. But my family was very involved in the community. I tell people that may be one of the reasons that I left South Florida and came to Atlanta to Marietta. My father cast a very long shadow, and I did not want to be in his shadow. I wanted to make something of myself, not because of my family connections, but because of who I was and what I did.

TS: Sure. You graduated in 1977 from Kenyon, and then you went to Hebrew Union College.

SL: Yes, finally.

TS: I was impressed. You became a Ziskind fellow for research in Semitic languages. It sounds like you were a language scholar.

SL: Well, I don't know how great I was, but that was the expectation. I had to learn those ancient languages. I thought coming out of undergraduate that maybe I would be a college professor—maybe a rabbi too, but a college professor. So, I entered into not rabbinical school in the late 1970s, but actually to get a PhD. I was studying languages that no one cared about. I was studying languages that maybe three other people were studying in the United States, Ugarit, for example. It turns out though I didn't care a bit for what I was studying. It was completely irrelevant to who I was and what I was. It turns out I was living in a graduate school dormitory, and all of my friends were rabbinic students. They saw that I was struggling with this that I was really not interested where my life was going. And they turned my head around again. They said, "You ought to be a rabbi. You're good with people. You're interest in the liturgy. You're interested in teaching. You're not going to like being a professor. You're going to enjoy being a rabbi." And that put the cap on it. That's why I decided to turn myself back around to where I was and enter into a rabbinical school the following year.

TS: I'm amazed it takes five years to get through.

SL: Yes, and I added that six years while I was working on a doctorate. So, I tell people I didn't actually get a paycheck until I was twenty-eight years old. I was in school all the time. My family was supporting me; and then I like other students, had to take out loans.

TS: I confirmed today that at Columbia Theological Seminary, which is Presbyterian, you can get a Master of Divinity degree in three years.

SL: Yes. Well, I tell people, there are some salient differences between Judaism and Christianity. One of them is we're twice as old as Christianity. We're four thousand years old instead of two thousand years old. So, we've had all these centuries to acquire history and customs and holidays. So, there's a lot to learn to become a rabbi.

TS: So, five years. You've got to want to do it to go through five years.

SL: Yes, that's exactly correct. I tell my students: "Do you know what's similar about beating your head against the wall and being in graduate school? It only feels good when you stop."

TS: Yes.

SL: So, by the age of twenty-eight, I was ready. I was glad to be out of graduate school and take a real job.

TS: I don't know how many graduate students I've run into that had that same feeling.

SL: Yes, I tell people being in graduate schools is one long hazing ritual. You try to belong to a fraternity, and the guys out there and the women out there that are supervising, say, "I had to go through a tough time to get my degree, and I want to make sure you have a tough time."

TS: Yes. And your experience was no different.

SL: Yes. Where did you get your PhD?

TS: The University of Tennessee.

SL: You're a Volunteer.

TS: Well, it's perpetual adolescence going through graduate school, but at any rate, people stick it out. Okay, you graduated in 1983, and you were president of the senior class?

SL: I was.

TS: So, it sounds like you were active in a lot more than classroom work.

SL: Yes, I was, although I got drafted. It's a funny story. I was drafted to be the president of the senior class because I was the only person that everybody talked too. Rabbis usually have very strong personalities. They have big egos. I tell people, rabbis, have egos the size of Montana. And these rabbinic students were all knocking heads. They were all not getting along with each other. Somehow, the theory came up, "Let's let Lebow be the president. He's the only one that everybody likes." So, it wasn't any great accomplishment on my part. It was the fact that I had lots of friends, and that's how I got elected.

TS: Well, I mean, that's something to celebrate.

SL: Yes.

TS: Okay. So, in 1983 you go to New Orleans as assistant rabbi at Temple Sinai. Would you talk about that experience? What was it like to be an assistant rabbi right out of the school?

SL: Sure. It's a daunting task to go from rabbinic school to getting a job. It's like being a new PhD too, but you go through about twenty different interviews. They winnow it down and winnow it down, and I hadn't been selected for any of the jobs. I was a little panicky when I got a phone call from Rabbi Murray Blackman in New Orleans. He said, "We would like to hire you." And I'm eternally grateful. He's passed on now [in 2001]. I'm eternally grateful that basically he gave me my shot. He gave me the opportunity to be a rabbi. So, I moved to New Orleans, Temple Sinai. My work was mainly working with teenagers and kids. I did come into contact with adults and older adults and that sort of thing, but my main stress, because I was young—twenty-eight years old—was taking care of the teens and the kids and the preschool and that sort of thing.

TS: And somewhere along the line, Madeline Sable comes into the picture. I'm assuming it was in New Orleans.

SL: Yes, it was in New Orleans. There are several stories of how we met. We had a friend in common. It was a Sunday afternoon. I remember it to this day. This friend of mine, Lisa Kirschstein, calls me up and says, "There's a Jewish singles event at thus and such bar, and I want you to take me." And I said, "Lisa, it's a singles event. You don't need an escort to go." She said, "Well, I don't want to go by myself." I say, "Fine." So, I'm driving over to this singles event, and I said to her, "Who's going to be there?" And she says, "Maddie Sable." And I said, "Maddie? That doesn't even sound Jewish." So, I go into the bar, and I'm sitting there in a booth. And sure enough, this woman comes into the bar. And this is like a bad romantic comedy, but it's true. The girl crosses the dance floor. It's as if there were a spotlight on her. And I'm looking at that one girl going, "Oh, my gosh. I want that one." And that turned out to be Madeline Sable. I asked her out on a date a couple of nights later, and we've been together for thirty-eight years. So, it's a true love story.

TS: Was she already a psychotherapist?

SL: She was. She was already a therapist. She was a school counselor at the Metairie Park Country Day School in New Orleans, and she taught at Tulane University in education too.

TS: So, I assume you got married about 1985?

SL: We got married at the very end of 1984. We met in January 1984. We started really dating in March of 1984. By May, we were engaged, and by December, we were married. So, within one-twelve-month period, before a year was over, we were married.

TS: So, you would have been about twenty-nine at that time?

SL: Yes. That's right.

TS: Well, when you are in school, it slows all that down doesn't it?

SL: It does.

TS: All right, how did you hear about the opening at Temple Kol Emeth?

SL: One of the things that people do not know about rabbis is that we're required to belong to a union. We belong to a professional union. All rabbis belong. We are heavily unionized. It's a small boutique kind of union because there are only about three thousand to four thousand Reform rabbis tops. But you have to belong to the Central Conference of American Rabbis. They negotiate for us. It's felt below our stature—a rabbi does not circulate his or her resume. What you do is you sit back, and a congregation reaches out to this Central Conference, this union, and says, "We're starting a temple," or, "We have a temple here or a synagogue there, and we'd like to hire some people." I get a phone call. This is 1986 when I came to Atlanta. The person on the

other end of the line, the director of placement, says, “How would you like to go to Marietta, Georgia?” And I say to myself, “Sure. Where is Marietta, Georgia?” It did not register in me at all. But I took my wife, and we came to Marietta, Georgia.

TS: They could’ve said north of Atlanta.

SL: They could’ve said that. What happened was she fell in love with Marietta, Georgia. All the members of the congregation were young couples like ourselves—families with young children. She said to me, “This is where we can grow. We can stay here. It’ll be a good synagogue for you to want to stay there.” As usual, she was 1,000 percent right; that’s exactly what happened as we stayed here.

TS: Kol Emeth is “voice of truth” in Hebrew.

SL: Yes.

TS: Some neat neat names. Kol Emeth: “voice of truth” and Etz Chaim...”

SL: “Tree of life.”

TS: It was the first in Cobb (1975) and Kol Emeth was second (1982).

SL: That’s right.

TS: And so the congregation was brand new when you came there.

SL: Right.

TS: Were you the first permanent, full-time rabbi?

SL: I was. They had had a part-time rabbi come up from Atlanta and lead a couple services. But it didn’t work out, and they were struggling with membership and that sort of thing. He only stayed for a month or two months tops. That was when they began to advertise for a full-time person, and that was when I came in in the spring of 1986.

TS: How many members were there at that time? How many families?

SL: There were about forty families when I moved here. By the time I retired a couple years ago, there were four hundred families. The Reform Jews count their membership by families as opposed to individuals. So, it’s probably a thousand, if you count men, women, and children. It’s about a thousand people that the synagogue touches.

TS: So young couples, and that’s at a time when the Jewish population was beginning to grow in East Cobb County, especially.

- SL: It was, and it's an interesting thing that I'm sure we'll get to later on in the interview, but native Atlantans, many of them, were afraid to come to Cobb County. They had heard from their parents or grandparents, "This is not a good place to go," because of the [Leo] Frank case. They had a historic memory even into the 1960s and 1970s. So, Cobb County, at least in my congregation, grew by people that were transplants from the Northeast, from the Midwest, or from the West. We maybe had 10 percent that were native-born Atlantans or Georgians, and hence 90 percent were from some other place.
- TS: Well, you know, that's the history of [post-World War II] Cobb County. For the last several decades only about 37 percent of the population has been native Georgians, which means almost two-thirds of Cobb's population has come from somewhere else. That's the story of East Cobb, certainly. It wasn't so much they were coming out of Atlanta. They were coming from all over the country, skipping downtown Atlanta and moving from suburb to suburb.
- SL: That's what happened.
- TS: I found some figures on the growth of Judaism in the county from the Atlanta Jewish Federation. They did a study in 1947 when there were only ten thousand Jews in metro Atlanta, practically all of them downtown.
- SL: That's right.
- TS: But by 1984 the number had grown from ten thousand to fifty-nine thousand for the metro area—still pretty small, but two-thirds were in the suburbs by 1984. So, it's the history of Jewish Atlanta, I think, that everybody was leaving the city and moving to the suburbs.
- SL: That's absolutely true. In fact, my analysis showed that most of the Reform synagogues that flourished outside the perimeter were in a sense seeded by The Temple downtown. The Temple downtown had either Rabbi Jack [Jacob M.] Rothschild [1946-1973] or later on [Richard] Dick Lehrman came from there [where he was assistant rabbi]. Lehrman founded Temple Sinai [in 1968], which was the first suburban Reform Jewish congregation [in Sandy Springs]. They had another rabbi at The Temple, who was an assistant, and he came out and started Temple Emanu-El in Dunwoody [in 1978]. So, the Temple downtown kind of became the mother ship. There's one in Roswell called Kehillat Chaim [established in suburban Atlanta in 1982; moved to Roswell in 1987]. That was another fellow, Rabbi [Harvey J.] Winokur, who had been a rabbi at The Temple. Really, these Reform synagogues were spun off of the original, The Temple, down Peachtree Street [1589 Peachtree Street NE, Atlanta].
- TS: Wow. In terms of the numbers, by 1984, there were more than eight thousand Jewish residents in Cobb County, more than three thousand of whom were in zip code 30067 [Lower Roswell, Terrell Mill, Paper Mill Road area]. Kol Emeth is located in 30062, I think.

- SL: Yes. And my wife and I moved to the City of Marietta years ago. So, we're in 30060, and proud of it, by the way.
- TS: Good. Between 1984 and 1996, the number of Jewish residents in Cobb grew from 8,300 to 16,400 [according to the Atlanta Jewish Federation].
- SL: I wouldn't be surprised if it's bigger than that now.
- TS: Oh, it's got to be. And 11 percent of all Jews in metro Atlanta in 1996 lived in zip codes 30062, 30067, and 30068.
- SL: The stereotype among the Jews is that we value highly education. So, Jews like other ethnic groups were drawn to places that have better schools. Those zip codes that you mentioned have good schools. So, Jews naturally are drawn to that. It's interesting in terms of Atlanta, but certainly true also of Marietta, there's no one Jewish area. If you go to Chicago or Cleveland, there's a Jewish area, an Italian area, an Irish area. That's not true [here]. Jews are highly assimilated in Atlanta. We are in lots of different neighborhoods, but we're not centralized in one neighbor.
- TS: Okay. So, you didn't have a building when you got here.
- SL: That's correct.
- TS: And for a while, you were at Mount Zion United Methodist.
- SL: That's right, on Johnson Ferry. They were very kind. They really helped us come into existence by housing us.
- TS: Then for a while, the Jewish Community Center. I'd like to ask you about that, by the way. I remember it on the old Dodgen homeplace, the Dodgen family. [My colleague Christina Jeffrey and] I did an interview years ago [1998] with Carolyn Dodgen Meadows and her brother, Dorsey Dodgen, out there, and remember the Community Center there at that time. But it is not there anymore. Do you know why not?
- SL: Yes, I do. The old money in the Jewish community is centered either in town or to a certain degree in Dunwoody and Sandy Springs. The Jewish people who live in Cobb County are of more modest means. They're not poor. They're at the top of middle class or whatever it is, but there are no deep, deep pockets in Cobb County, the way you would find in the City of Atlanta or Sandy Springs. Unfortunately, the Jews in Cobb County did not support the JCC sufficiently, economically. So, eventually, other than their preschool, the rest was lost. Now, when the JCC closed, we absorbed their preschool. So, their preschool is now a part of Temple Kol Emeth.
- TS: So that's the Sunshine School?
- SL: That is correct. It's now housed at Temple Kol Emeth.

TS: So, you were there for a while. Then you were at Transfiguration Catholic Church.

SL: That's right.

TS: So almost the Protestant, the Catholic, and the Jew?

SL: We tried to hit every base.

TS: Well, they certainly had a lot of empty space on Friday nights and Saturday mornings.

SL: That's true too, yes.

TS: So how did that work out? Did they invite you? Did you ask them if you could use their facility?

SL: Yes. They wouldn't know to invite us because they didn't know we were looking for a place. Usually, myself or one of our emissaries went and knocked on doors and said, "We're a young Jewish congregation. We don't have a roof over our heads. Would you be willing to bring us in?" In terms of the Transfiguration Catholic Church, when I moved here, I lived at [zip code] 30066. It was 1515 Blackwell Road, which is right near, next to the Catholic Church of the Transfiguration [1815 Blackwell Rd., Marietta]. I had a dog, and the priest of the Church of the Transfiguration had dogs. So, we would be walking back and forth and taking care of our dogs, and I said to the priest one time—I said, "Father Pat, we have..."

TS: Pat Bishop?

SL: That's right.

TS: He grew up with my wife. They knew each other from school—St. Joseph Elementary.

SL: Really? That's neat. The circle comes around, I guess. And I said to him, "Would you mind us coming here?" And he said, "Absolutely not." And the huge cross which is over the altar in the Catholic church doesn't bother me a bit. I am grateful to be in a place that would allow our worship. But we had several members that were more of the conservative ilk, and it troubled them a little bit to have a huge cross in the midst of trying to lead a Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur service. So, they brought it up, and Pat Bishop said, "You know what? We cover the cross on Good Friday as part of our liturgy. Let me ask my people in the vestry." And they said, "Absolutely! If it makes you feel better, you can cover the cross." Well, this hits the newspaper as something positive. The headline was, "Catholic church welcomes Jews. They make everybody comfortable." Well, the next thing we know, the next day on talk radio, on AM talk radio, some right-wing religious fanatic was railing about how the Catholics had sold out to the Jews. And, you know, that it was terrible that they were allowing the Jews to meet in their place of worship. Well, the next thing I know, Father Pat gets on the phone, and he

gives them a piece of his mind. So, he was a defender of Jews in terms of my eyes. He's a great man, Father Pat.

TS: Yes. That's a Jewish guy on the cross up there.

SL: That's what I hear. In fact, according to Rabbi [Albert] Slomovitz in *A New Look at Rabbi Jesus*, it's a rabbi up there.

TS: Yes. And your office was somewhere near Merchant's Walk?

SL: My original office was in a decrepit part of Merchant's Walk that had sort of gone downhill. It was a little bitty almost cubicle. When we left there, that's when my office switched to the old Jewish Community Center on Post Oak Tritt Road. So, my office was an old crumbling house that stood on that site. And I was there until we began to build our own building in 1990, which was completed in 1991. I finally had a place where we had a roof over our heads, and I had an office.

TS: So, it takes five years.

SL: Took me a long time to whip them into shape because it was very expensive to buy land in Cobb at that point. And there is a zoning regulation in Cobb County that if you found a church, there is a minimum of five acres. You must have five acres and a setback from the road, which is understandable. But that's expensive. In 1990 it was \$20,000 to \$25,000 an acre. Well, that's big money to my people. Then, to build a building, the first phase was, I think, probably a million dollar. Well, that was huge money. So, it took me a while. I had to go from house to house to house, meeting in the evening, convincing people that it would be a good thing if we had a permanent presence here in Cobb County.

TS: How many families at that time?

SL: Probably about a hundred when we started to do that in 1991.

TS: So, you're growing from forty to hundred families in five years –

SL: Yes.

TS: Still, to take on a million-dollar mortgage...

SL: It was big money in those days. That's for sure. Of course, the second phase in 1997 ended up being five million dollars.

TS: Oh, my goodness.

SL: Well, we stole the architect from Home Depot, a guy by the name of [Martin] Marty Greenberg. I don't know if you know many architects, but they're frustrated artists.

They want to build something beautiful. So, this fellow Marty Greenberg had made his fortune building Home Depots. Well, you know, Home Depots are all boxes. A big box, and it's orange. So, he came to me and said, "I would love to design your next synagogue." And I said, "This is what we've got. This is our budget. Can you make something nice for five million dollars?" And he said, "Oh, I can make you something really nice for five million dollars." Have you ever been in our synagogue?

TS: I have not.

SL: It's the prettiest synagogue in Atlanta. All the money was worth it—stained glass windows all around, it's a beautiful, beautiful sanctuary.

TS: I'll have to come.

SL: Yes, we'd love to have you. I was always very proud that we had put together such a beautiful sanctuary.

TS: How many acres do you have?

SL: It is five acres, just the minimum.

TS: What's your address?

SL: Old Canton Road, 1415 Old Canton Road.

TS: So, it sounds like everything was going on swimmingly at that time. Then, all of a sudden, you were getting into all kinds of controversy. It might be interesting to talk about that. I saw somewhere about the year 2000 you had about nine hundred families.

SL: One time, we were close to nine hundred. Then you've got the recession, 9/11, and other issues that have happened. So, the synagogue shrunk down to about four hundred. I think the tippy top was between eight and nine hundred at some point.

TS: So, it didn't hurt your membership that you were getting involved in controversy?

SL: No, no. Yes, there were people who questioned it who were not of my political persuasion, but I tried to assure them that I didn't represent one political party over another. I simply represented the fact that certain policies might be wrong, and they needed to be addressed.

TS: Oh, before we get into those controversies, there are a couple of other things I wanted to ask you about. First of all, you call yourself a big-tent congregation. Could you talk about that? You're open to anybody, I guess, but talk about what your concept is of a big tent?

SL: Absolutely. By the 1980s, at least 50 percent of all Jewish people were married to not Jewish people, usually Christians. Almost every synagogue in the city was closed to those intermarried couples, or they would let you join, but your spouse didn't have any rights or privileges of being part of the congregation. When I came in 1986, I said, "That will stop; we will be a bigger tent. We will have people of all different backgrounds." I have people that grew up Orthodox Jewish, a lot of Conservative, a lot of Reform, interfaith. We've had a great success. Even though we don't go out and advertise, we've had tremendous success in people converting to Judaism. Sometime because they married a Jewish person, but also because I think the Jewish faith has a good message of being a good person in the community. We had people who were not married to Jewish people but wanted to join the Jewish faith. So, we had several dozen people who converted and became part of the synagogue.

TS: You don't ever think about Judaism as being evangelical.

SL: That's right. Well, there's a historical reason for that. Traditionally, Judaism was highly conversionary. Where else would all the Jews have come from? We were converting left and right in the Roman Empire and in the ancient Near East. But when Constantine becomes emperor of the [Roman] empire [306-337 CE], Constantine's mother [Helena] was a Christian. She converted, and she convinced him that he should adopt Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire. Well, at that point, it was against the law to convert to Judaism. He made it against the law by threat of death. And so, not only would the convert be killed, but so would the rabbi who was assisting that conversion.

So, at that point, I don't think conversion ground to a complete halt, but it went underground. There was still some going on but was never advertised. So, the Jews make a virtue out of necessity and say, "Oh, we don't convert people." Well, that's actually not true. And that's part of the concept of a big tent. Like you said, we don't go out, and we don't knock on the door and say, "Hey, have you come to terms with Moses? Have you met Moses?" Or wear a little bracelet that says, "What would Moses do?" We don't do that, but we make sure that people know that we're here.

People do come in the [synagogue] door, and sometimes they know more about Judaism than the average member because they've actually read the Torah. They've actually read the Old Testament. One of my complaints about the modern Jewish community is that I say, "The average ten-year-old Baptist schoolchild knows more about the Bible than the average [Jewish] twenty-five-year-old with a master's in engineering from Georgia Tech," because they've read the Bible, and it's been read to them since they were little. In many cases, modern Jews are culturally retarded. They are not advanced in terms of what the Bible is about.

TS: I don't know how they could go to the services every week and not know a lot about the Bible.

SL: Yes. You know, a rabbi's job is to try to communicate those values. The word "bible" means library; a lot is particularly applicable. The Old Testament, the Torah, is a pretty

heavy book. Jews, as I said, have a very high level of education, but not literacy when it comes to the Bible.

TS: Well, I think too that there are a lot of Jews in Cobb County who are not religious, I guess.

SL: Yes, it's an interesting quandary. I've been asked this all the time by people that are Christian because they'll know people who are Jewish, but they'll say to me, "That fellow is Jewish. He told me he's never been in a synagogue in his entire life. How could he be Jewish?" It's an interesting question. You're not a Christian just because you go to church, right? A Christian is someone who will talk about their salvation—tell that John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son. Whosoever believes in him will not perish but would live forever." That's what makes a Christian. But in Judaism, there are really two paths. It is a religion, but for other Jews, it's more of a cultural identity. It's almost like saying, "I'm French Canadian—that's my cultural identity." There are Jews that have never set foot or don't set foot in a synagogue. They're still Jewish. They're the same as any other Jew. We don't discriminate.

TS: Okay. We're going to be getting into LGBT in just a minute. But in terms of your congregation, was that [the acceptance of the LGBT community] part of the big tent ever?

SL: It became part. I didn't know that if we had any gay members at that point. Most of the people were straight as far as I knew. But, as I'm sure you know from your research, when the anti-gay resolution was passed, it took me about a year to get my toe in the water—not because there was so much opposition to it, but because I wasn't that politically organized. The resolution comes out, I think, in 1993, if I remember correctly [August 10, 1993]. Would you like to hear that story?

TS: Sure.

SL: One Saturday night, my wife says, "Let's go to a play at the Marietta Theatre in the Square." I personally don't like plays. I like movies. They're much more interesting. But my wife, bless her, Madeline Sable, was a theater major at Tulane. And so, she wants to see a play. Well, if she wants to see a play, I'm going to the play. That's how it works.

TS: We have a big Theatre in the Square collection here at the KSU Archives.

SL: Oh, neat. That's very cool. So, we go to a play, and the play [*Lips Together, Teeth Apart* written by Terrence McNally, premiering Off Broadway in 1991] is about two straight couples that take a summer vacation on Fire Island in New York. Now, it turns out Fire Island has a large gay population. But the play is about these two couples. They make a reference or two about gay neighbors. But the play doesn't have anything to do about homosexuality or a gay lifestyle, whatever you want to call it. So, we saw the play. The play was okay.

And about five days later, we see in the *Marietta Daily Journal* that the Cobb County Board of Commissioners has endorsed a resolution against the so-called gay lifestyle—that gays are, one degree or another, antithetical to the health, safety, and welfare of the Cobb County community. Well, what happens when they do that is they give permission to every nut job in Marietta and Cobb County. I don't know if you remember this. There were people marching in the streets on the Marietta Square that said, "Thank God for AIDS. AIDS is going to cure us of the sin." So, the resolution comes out, and I do absolutely nothing. What was I going to do? I wasn't involved politically, and nobody asks my opinion. So, I go about my daily routine. Finally, a year passes, and there's one or two small protests against the resolution. But when my wife turns to me, my wife who happens to be my conscience...

TS: She's all the time getting you into trouble.

SL: She's always getting me in trouble. My wife, Madeline, says, "You call yourself the Reform rabbi of Cobb County. When are you going to do something?" I'm like, "Fine." So, I thought, this was a time in the 1990s when it was still not popular to be pro-gay. I knew that I could not circulate a resolution or a statement that was in any way pro-gay. There were people in various denominations—they would lose their jobs if they signed on—if those ministers signed on to the statement that I wrote. So, I simply wrote, in retrospect, a mom and apple pie resolution, which says, "It's not the job of the county commission to take judgments on any one group. That's not how we should operate in a civil society."

There was no Internet at that point. I went through phone books I could find, and I sent the letter out to really hundreds and hundreds of churches. I got thirty-seven yeses and hundreds and hundreds of noes. Of those thirty-seven, some were Presbyterian, Lutheran, a couple of Methodists, and that sort of thing. They were very courageous because at that time, gay rights were not really recognized in those churches. I get a phone call one day just before our statement comes out, and it's from a Methodist minister. He says, "I want to know about your statement. I want to know who is going to sign that statement." I said, "Well, sir, it's not really..."

TS: This is not the Methodist minister that you had a...

SL: Same guy. Randy Mickler [Mount Bethel United Methodist Church]. He says, "I want to know who's going to be on that." I said, "Well, it's not really appropriate. We haven't released it yet." He says, "Well, I'm going to tell you something. I'm going to make sure those people won't have jobs by the end of tomorrow." So, I was going to say, "Well, whatever," and I hung up on him. Those thirty-seven ministers came forward and supported me and supported taking a stand against the [anti-gay] resolution. So, a year later, by that time, I thought my job was to get straight people involved, to get mainstream clergy involved, and the business community involved. And we put on a tremendous rally. It was in August of 1994, if I remember correctly. We had several thousand people there protesting the anti-gay resolution.

TS: What I've got for your statement was "Cobb County welcomes all of its residents irrespective of race color, religion, sexual orientation, and gender."

SL: Yes.

TS: That's pretty innocuous, you would think.

SL: I would think so. In 2023, those aren't fighting words, are they?

TS: If things have changed.

SL: Things have changed a lot. And I've changed. I've moderated. I remember people saying to me, "Do you believe in gay marriage?" And it sounded such an odd juxtaposition at that time that what we called it when we would do a gay marriage or gay wedding, was you call them commitment ceremonies. It was not until later that everybody became comfortable saying, "Yes, it's about marriage equality. It's about having the same rights that a straight couple has. A gay couple should have the same rights of marriage as well."

TS: Right. Well, was it even legal to get married?

SL: It was not legal.

TS: Okay, so, a commitment ceremony. I understand you may have been the first clergyman in Georgia to perform a same sex marriage.

SL: I was, I was. I was probably the first clergyman in the Deep South to do it because I was stationed in Louisiana, then of course, we had Mississippi, Alabama, and then Georgia. I would get people from all over because there was nobody in those states who would perform gay weddings or commitment ceremonies.

TS: Craig Aronoff told me you had a sermon comparing the penalty for eating shrimp to being gay and the penalty for that.

SL: Yes. When you try to look at what does the Bible say about gay sex or gay couples, the New Testament says virtually nothing about it. But it is true in a couple of places in the so-called Old Testament, in our Bible or Scripture or whatever you want to call it, it says that gay sex is a *toeva*. And when you look it up in English, it says "abomination." Sounds pretty bad. It sounds like that's not a good thing. Well, it turns out you have to look in every place in the Bible where it says *toeva*. A *toeva* is not keeping kosher, it's eating shrimp; a *toeva* is maybe breaking some other law. So, abomination is a bad [translation]. They simply were saying it's not something that should be done.

There are other quotations, which have been used by anti-gay [critics] that said that two gay men, if they performed homosexual acts, should be killed. Well, it turns out that the Hebrew Bible is pretty strict, and people get killed all the time. If you say that you're a

witch, you can be killed. If you're an immoral son, and you don't listen to your parents, you can be killed. So, nobody follows those rituals anymore. Why would you continue in the 1980s, 1990s, and later? Why would you continue to discriminate against people that were gay? Based on the Bible, it doesn't make any sense. You can say that you're against it, but not based on the Bible.

TS: I couldn't find a penalty in the Bible for eating shrimp, even though it said it's an abomination.

SL: Yes.

TS: Do you think when they said you could be killed for doing these things they ever were?

SL: No. It's a good question because the Bible will prescribe all sorts of death penalties. In the later writings, the rabbis looked back and said, "You know what? They were being strict on this and that and the other thing. They never actually killed anybody. There was no death penalty in Judaism. In fact, one of the rabbis around the year 100 AD said not a single person was ever executed. It was simply meant as an exaggeration.

TS: A little hyperbole?

SL: It's what it was. That's how the Bible works sometimes—hyperbole.

TS: Right. I know "an eye for an eye" pretty quickly became, "What's an eye worth?" And that's what you are going to pay.

SL: That's right.

TS: So, a lot of people are probably taking [Bible] verses out of context.

SL: Sure. You can justify anything with the Bible. Remember that the enslavement of Black people was justified by the use of Scripture.

TS: Absolutely.

SL: The exclusion of women was justified by Scripture. You can use the Bible to beat somebody over the head if you want to.

TS: Did you ever meet [1992-1999 Cobb County commissioner] Gordon Wysong? He was the one that was behind the anti-gay resolution.

SL: I met [Cobb commission chairman, 1992-2002] Bill Byrne.

TS: I wanted to ask you, what was your relationship with Bill Byrne?

SL: We ended up being pretty friendly. I had him actually speak in the synagogue long after the family values resolution had gone away. I think Bill was running for governor [in 2002], and I invited him to speak to the congregation. He was a military veteran. He had flown a helicopter in Vietnam. I had a heck of a lot of respect for him. I didn't care for him supporting Gordon Wysong. But if you remember this story, Bill Byrne's own daughter came out as gay.

TS: Yes.

SL: So, we ended up being on speaking terms and that sort of thing. Gordon Wysong—I'm glad I never met because I find the man objectionable.

TS: Okay. That's interesting because I did an interview with Bill Byrne [Interview with William J. (Bill) Byrne for the Cobb County Oral History Series, 1999].

SL: Does he still live in the community?

TS: Yes, I think so. [According to a story by Wendy Parker in *East Cobb News*, June 2, 2023, Byrne recently joined the board of the Cobb Taxpayers Association.] I asked him about all of this, and, basically, what he said is that it wasn't his resolution.

SL: It wasn't his resolution. He got hijacked into it because he didn't want to appear being pro-gay. So, he went along with Gordon's resolution.

TS: Well, he said that he agreed with the sentiment, but he thought that it was totally unnecessary to create an unnecessary controversy. That seemed to be public opinion as far as I can find out.

SL: Yes, and the greatest opponent of that, I'm sure you remember, was Otis Brumby Jr. He brought the weight of the *Marietta Daily Journal* and said, "This is a silly resolution. This is causing controversy where we don't need to have it. This is discriminatory. This is not what we want people to think of when they think of Cobb County and the city of Marietta. I met with him. He was an ally. He was a good man, as is his son, Otis Brumby III. It's a great family.

TS: Yes, and certainly not far-out liberals.

SL: No, Otis Brumby Jr. described himself as a Nixonian conservative. It's interesting. You probably don't know this, but I've supported a lot of Republicans in office from Johnny Isakson to Sam Olens to others. Of course, the people that I supported as Republicans along the way would no longer be considered Republicans. They would be so-called RINOs [Republican in Name Only] because they're too middle of the road.

TS: Sure. I think I saw somewhere that you called yourself a card-carrying Republican.

SL: That was probably an exaggeration if I said that.

- TS: Okay. So, that's not true. You don't register [by party] in Georgia anyway.
- SL: Yes. I got hijacked at one point to voting in the Republican primaries because George H. W. Bush ran against Pat Buchanan. So, I was contacted by my friends in the Republican Party. "You need to vote Republican in the primary because we've got to get rid of this guy Pat Buchanan." So, maybe at that point, I was an actual Republican.
- TS: Well, in East Cobb, perhaps, you won't have any influence I guess unless you vote in a Republican primary.
- SL: That's right.
- TS: I guess the other thing too from the Bill Byrne interview was he negotiated with Wysong a much milder resolution than what Wysong had originally written.
- SL: Really?
- TS: And then he felt honor bound to support the compromise.
- SL: I see.
- TS: The compromise was offensive enough, but, apparently, the original was much worse.
- SL: Yes. It's hard to know exactly what was going on in Gordon Wysong's mind at that point. I remember, historically, what had happened was just prior to that resolution, the City of Atlanta had extended benefits to domestic partnerships, and that was felt by people in Marietta to be a bridge too far. [They said]: "We're not going to recognize domestic partnerships." Then, all of a sudden, we had Gordon Wysong's resolution. I don't know if you remember this, but within a few weeks of that resolution, the Cobb County Commission defunded the arts as well—the Theatre [in the Square] and the [Cobb Symphony] Orchestra and, of course, the joke is, "Oh, of course, only gay people would go to the theatre or the orchestra," which is an absurdity. But the commission just leaned so far right it was out of touch with the community and, at the same time, gave permission to others to say and do terrible and stupid things.
- The chairman of the commission of Fulton County [1993-1998] was a scoundrel named [Demetrios John] "Mitch" Skandalakis. When this resolution was going around in Cobb, Skandalakis, about 1995—it's a year before the [Atlanta] Olympics—says, "I'm going to blood test every single athlete that comes into Atlanta [to determine whether they had AIDS]. Greg Louganis, the great diver [1976, 1984, and 1988 Olympics] had just come out as gay [in 1994]. And Skandalakis is going to wave that AIDS card. "We're not going to let anybody into the Olympics who is HIV positive." So, it gave permission to a lot of terrible people to say a lot of terrible things.
- TS: Yes. Talk about the Olympics and how that figured into this [Cobb County] controversy.

SL: Sure. There were a couple of Olympics venues that were scheduled to be in Cobb. I think one was an equestrian event. And one might have been a sailing event or something like that.

TS: Something about volleyball.

SL: Yes, I think you're right. I think it was volleyball. I was not the head of that part of the Olympics [protest] out of Cobb, but I supported them in terms of what we were doing on my end. And so, the Olympic Committee pulled those Olympic venues out of Cobb because they didn't want to be associated with anti-gay resolutions and discriminatory statements. It's interesting. As I had hoped and as I had predicted, the business community got behind us, and they interviewed [Bernard] Bernie Marcus of the Home Depot. He said, "We don't need a resolution like that. That's not helpful." All of a sudden, the Chamber of Commerce people, Kiwanis people, and others said, "That resolution is a really bad idea, and we need to move away from it."

TS: The Cobb Chamber took that position?

SL: Yes. I don't know if they would officially or just people that would talk about it at chamber meetings and that sort of the thing.

TS: Of course, Home Depot is headquartered in Cobb County.

SL: In Cobb County, yes. If you remind me, I'll bring my scrapbooks sometime. I saved all my clippings. It was the first time that I got death threats. In those days you were pretty open about how to find you and where your phone number is. I didn't mind so much having them threaten my life, but when they threatened my children, that caused me a lot of pain and a lot of anger.

TS: For sure. Don't you have two daughters?

SL: I do have two daughters. And so, from that time and for several years, I usually had bodyguards. I had protection travel with me if I gave a speech. Nowadays, every synagogue in Atlanta has a policeman that sits outside of it.

TS: Is that right?

SL: Etz Chaim, Temple Kol Emeth, Chabad [of Cobb]: I don't know if you saw what happened three weeks ago, but there's now a policeman who sits in front of every synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia.³ But at that time, that was not [the case]. But because of the death threats against me, I had to travel with personal security.

³ "On a warm Shabbat afternoon, June 24, a handful of extremists carrying swastika flags and hateful messages against Jews, paraded in front of Chabad of Cobb on Lower Roswell Road. Cobb County Police stood between the hate mongers and the synagogue where congregants were

TS: Wow. Well, that's sad. Let me go back and ask you something else from the early days. I believe Temple Kol Emeth didn't become a formal member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations until 1987.

SL: That's right.

TS: What were they to begin with?

SL: They were independent. They were served by the Reform movement and by the Hebrew Union College, but they did not meet all the criteria of being an actual congregation until the year after I had started here in 1987.

TS: What kind of criteria did they have to meet?

SL: They had to pay their clergy. They had to have a constitution. They had to have a membership drive. They had to check all the boxes. They had a part-time guy, and they stiffed him. They didn't pay him, at which point, the union that I belong to and the UAHC stepped in and said, "You can't do that. You can't do it to anybody, but you can't do it to a clergyman. You need to show us that you can have a normal, effective, good working relationship with a rabbi, and then we'll admit you to the larger union." So, that's what happened.

TS: Now, I believe the name, Union of American Hebrew Congregations changed in 2003 to...

SL: Union for Reform Judaism

TS: But they are the same thing?

SL: They're exactly the same.

TS: Okay. You have won a number of awards for standing up for your principles. Could you talk about some of them?

SL: Well, a person doesn't do the right thing because they get an award at the end of the day. But it was nice to be recognized. I appreciated that. Mainly for the anti-gay resolution and that sort of thing I received awards just for taking these stands. If I remember correctly, I was first Jewish clergyman to talk about sexual abuse from the pulpit. I had been abused as a child.

TS: Really?

enjoying afternoon Shabbat services." Jan Jaben-Eilon. "Neo-Nazis Spew Hatred Outside Cobb Synagogue," *Atlanta Jewish Times*, June 25, 2023.

SL: By a family member, yes. So, I thought I could give strength to other people that had been in that terrible family situation. So, I began to speak about being a victim of abuse in front of large crowds of people, and it made an impression. So, one of the organizations awarded me Clergyman of the Year by the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

TS: For standing for children's rights?

SL: Yes.

TS: Are you still working on that?

SL: No, but I'm sure you'll get to it later in the interview, but the main cause I have in my semi-retirement is working for the complete exoneration of Leo Frank.

TS: Okay. We're going to get to that. Let me say first it's pretty prestigious to receive an award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

SL: What's the old saying? That and five dollars might get you a cup of coffee.

TS: In 1995 you also were named "Best Clergy of Atlanta" by *Creative Loafing*, and one of the fifty most influential people in North Atlanta by the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*. That's pretty prestigious. And in 2002 you were designated "Humanitarian of the Year" by the State of Georgia Holocaust Commission.

SL: Yes, that was one that was an interesting award because I shared it with Pat Conroy, the great Southern novelist. I don't want to pretend we were good friends, but we spent an afternoon together. Pat Conroy's story of his relationship to Jews and the Jewish community is that his mother raised him reading to him the *Diary of Anne Frank*, and saying to Pat Conroy, "Now you know what good people do, and you know what evil people do. Always remember to be one of the good people." So, I got to share that with Pat Conroy that year.

TS: Wow. Now, Bill Byrne says the "family values" resolution became invalid because a new commission was elected, and under Georgia law a resolution doesn't last beyond the term of the people that passed it. Is that your understanding?

SL: That is my understanding as well.

TS: They never withdrew it.

SL: They didn't withdraw it.

TS: But it withdrew itself.

SL: It hit a natural sunset, as it were. What happened, and I didn't normally go out of my way to support specific candidates, but I had Bill Byrne speak [at Temple Kol Emeth], and I knew Johnny Isakson quite well. I tried not to favor one politician over another, but it was at that point that Sam Olens came to me. He said, "I'm going to run for Cobb County Commission." I said, "You've got my support 1000 percent. So, we supported Sam, and I feel like his coming onto the Cobb Commission put the imprimatur on the fact that the resolution no longer stood. Having Samuel Olens there and having a Jewish guy for the first time at the Cobb County Commission, was a great step forward for Cobb.

TS: So, he took Gordon Wysong's seat.

SL: That's exactly what happened.

TS: And Gordon Wysong moved away.

SL: Bye. Bye. Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.

TS: I think you said that Sam Olens came to you and asked for your support. What did he say when he came?

SL: It's a long time ago, but I think it was basically, "I'm going to do this. You know where I stand. I am going to run as a Republican, but I'm going to run as a middle of the road, moderate person. Can I count on your support?" And I said, "Absolutely." I said, "Technically speaking, if you're a religious institution, the IRS frowns on making recommendations of one candidate over another. You can lose your tax status, theoretically, if you're a 501c3."

TS: Yes. You were speaking for yourself and not for your congregation.

SL: I can't speak for the congregation, but when I had occasion, I would have him come and say a few words. I mean, I could have invited Gordon Wysong too if he wanted to speak, but I don't think Gordon Wysong would have anything to do with me at that point.

TS: Probably not. Okay, so Sam Olens was also from Florida by the way, and I understand he might have been a Democrat at one time.

SL: That's my feeling too, yes. Sam Olens who got his political start by being the head of the East Cobb Civic Association.

TS: So, he got elected to the commission [in 1998], and I guess about four years later, he became the commission chair [2002-2010]. And, personally, I always thought he was a fabulous commission chair.

SL: Yes, he absolutely was. I thought he was a good attorney general [of Georgia] too [2011-2016]. But he felt a need to move on to other things, and I appreciate that.

TS: I did an interview with him on his tenure as president here [Kennesaw State University].

SL: Which was short-lived [November 1, 2016, to February 15, 2018].

TS: Yes. Well, we don't need to get into that in this interview unless you had anything you wanted to say.

SL: No, I do not.

TS: But I've always been an admirer of Sam Olens.

SL: Me too.

TS: Let's get into the Leo Frank case. Did you know anything about Leo Frank before you came to Cobb County?

SL: You know, I had taken a class in American Jewish history, and I think it was covered in about two or three minutes. It's usually bundled together with the case of Alfred Dreyfus in France and Mendel Beilis in Russia that a Jew was singled out and persecuted and tried for various things or another. Then, it happens while I'm in New Orleans in 1985 that a young writer by the name of Steve Oney writes about a six-page article ["The Lynching of Leo Frank," September 1, 1985] about the Frank case in *Esquire Magazine*, and that piqued my interest. But to tell you the truth, when I accepted the job in Marietta, that was the last thing on my mind. I wanted a job. I wanted to go somewhere and be a rabbi. And it didn't really affect me until I got here, and I would hear stories from people. "This is what happened. The Goldsteins had to be smuggled out under cover of darkness." For the Jews that did live in Marietta it was very dangerous for them, so that I became more interested in the case.

TS: Because 1915 was the year of the lynching. So, you were about seventy years beyond there at this time, I guess. I didn't realize that Steve Oney had written an article about the case that early.

SL: Yes. He said to his publisher, "I would like to write a book." The publisher said, "Sure. How long will it take? A couple of years?" It took seventeen years to write that book [*And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 2003)].

TS: Yes. He did a good job.

SL: He did a great job, yes.

TS: I shouldn't have said that because I wanted to ask you what you thought about the book, *And the Dead Shall Rise*.

- SL: It's obviously a classic—the pinnacle of the scholarship of the Leo Frank case and then the lynching as well. As he says, it's the most famous murder case in the history of the State of Georgia because it was two unsolved murders, the murder of Mary Phagan and then the lynching of Leo Frank. And Steve Oney spent a large part of his adult life documenting that. When I try to get people interested in the case, and I say, "You've got to read the book," well, that book is seven hundred pages long. You could hurt a child with that book. It's how big that book is. But the thing is you don't understand the Frank case unless you read *And the Dead Shall Rise*. You need to understand it. And the book admittedly is on a granular level. It tells you what happened every single day of the trial and things leading up to that.
- TS: It's a fabulous book.
- SL: It's a great book. And if you don't know the background of the case then somebody could ask you, "How do you know Leo Frank was innocent?" You have no answer if you don't know the background of the case and what actually happened. As I said to somebody, "You've got to be able to tell the difference between Newt Lee [the night watchman at the pencil factory] and Newt Morris [judge of the Blue Ridge Circuit and one of the conspirators in the lynching]". Right? There are lots of dramatic characters in the Frank case. And you've got to be able to speak about that and the themes knowledgeably. And that's what Steve Oney did.
- TS: Yes. I think Oney said at the end he was 90 percent sure Frank didn't murder Mary Phagan, but you can never know 100 percent.
- SL: Yes. He ends the book by not saying Leo Frank was 100 percent innocent. In almost every published interview—and I've collected these—Steve Oney has given since the book came out, he says unequivocally that Leo Frank was innocent.
- TS: He made a compelling case against Jim Conley, I thought.
- SL: Yes. Well, Jim Conley was a career criminal. It's pretty obvious, when you start to put two and two together, certainly given the 1982 testimony of Alonzo Mann [a 14-year-old office boy at the pencil factory in 1913], that Jim Conley and Jim Conley alone was the murderer.
- TS: One thing about the book: I'd heard for years who was part of the lynch mob, not the mob, but the organizers, the muckety-mucks that organized it...
- SL: Names of the planners, yes. Governor [Joseph Mackey] Brown [governor of Georgia, 1909-1911 and 1912-1913].
- TS: But nobody would say those names in public.
- SL: Right.

TS: And I think one of the things that Oney's book did is that it brought it all out. I mean, Newt Morris, you mentioned, the judge. A state legislator was involved [John Tucker Dorsey].

SL: That's right. Oney calls the Frank lynching state-sponsored terrorism.

TS: Yes, and the state legislator chaired the House Penitentiary Committee.

SL: That's right.

TS: You mentioned Joseph Mackey Brown, the former governor, who apparently was involved. I know one of his grandsons continued to protest his grandfather wasn't involved.

SL: Oh, really?

TS: I don't know. Then there was the chief prosecutor [solicitor general] of the Blue Ridge circuit, [Eugene] Herbert Clay, who was involved.

SL: Yes, and a Brumby involved [Bolan Glover Brumby].

TS: It's the cream of Cobb County society.

SL: Yes.

TS: And then some other folks actually went down to the prison.

SL: Right. The worker bees. Yes.

TS: And somebody was wealthy enough to have a car in 1915.

SL: They had five cars.

TS: And that's pretty unusual.

SL: It is unusual in 1915.

TS: But I guess, really, one of the questions is how you explain how the cream of Cobb County society could think the way that they did, that they're so convinced that Frank did it that they would be involved in a lynching?

SL: You know, to me, the case is clear that the villain of the Frank case is not so much the lynchers as it is Tom Watson. Tom Watson manages to whip the populace up day after day and week after week, insisting that Frank is a sodomite Jew, for example, and that he needs to be lynched. So, that gave permission to whatever was the worst in men's hearts. I can't explain. How can anyone explain? One of the issues of the lynchers is they were

very good people up till then. They were very good people after that as well. They were pillars of the community, many of them. But they did a very terrible thing on August 17th, 1915. And I don't know how to explain why evil occurs with some people and not with others.

TS: Yes. I guess it's still about the worst case of anti-Semitism in American history.

SL: Yes. It definitely is the worst case of anti-Semitism in American history.

TS: So, talk about your involvement with the case.

SL: So, in 1995, I got a phone call from someone who said, "I'd like to show you some things about Marietta history and Jewish history." I said, "Sure." So, he gives me an address, and I pull up, and it's right where Frey's Gin Road is. And it's a little low-slung office building; it's two stories high. It's got a dentist office in it, and it's got, I think, an accountant. If I remember correctly, it was called the VPI building. It was owned by a developer by the name of Roy [Palmer] Varner,⁴ who was a great man [died 2006 at age 81], and you'll hear in a moment a true gentleman. The person who had called me said, "Well, this is where my people did something really terrible to your people. I thought you would want to know."

TS: "My people," meaning...?

SL: That's what he said. Then he went away, and I thought to myself, "My people; your people." Then I realized I was standing on the site of the Frank lynching. The tree had been long gone. Any vestiges of [former, 1903-1909] Sheriff [William J.] Frey's habitation was long gone. But that day I made the acquaintance of Roy Varner, who owned the land and owned the building. And I said, "Mr. Varner, there has never been a service here on this spot to memorialize where Leo Frank was killed." And he said, "No. I am aware this was the spot." He said he wasn't related to [any of the lynchers] and didn't [purchase the site until the 1950s]. But said, "I was told that this was the site of the Frank lynching." And he agreed—this was in August of 1995—that I hold the first ever memorial service for Leo Frank.

It's called a *yizkor* service, which means a memorial. I was able to get people from the synagogues and the Jewish communities in Atlanta to come up, and we observed that *yizkor* for Leo Frank on the anniversary of his death. I don't go there anymore because

⁴ Mr. Varner's obituary in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (February 11, 2006) says he was born in Bartow County and moved to Marietta at the age of 8. During World War II he was a paratrooper with the 101st Airborne Division and saw combat in Normandy on D-Day. After the war, he returned to Marietta and began building homes. In 1955 he developed the Town and Country Shopping Center on Roswell Road, the second major shopping center in Cobb County after Belmont Hills. He was also involved in the 1960s in creating McCollum Airport and the Cobb-Marietta Industrial Park. His company was VPI Corporation, located on Roswell Road not far from Town and Country.

that site is now been covered over by a superhighway [I-75 express lanes], but I was able to get a plaque placed by the Georgia Department of Transportation. They allowed the plaque. The plaque comes from the Georgia Historical Society. So, every year for the past almost thirty years, I go to that site, and I offer a Jewish prayer in memory of Leo Frank.

TS: What do you think is the importance of the case for the very different Cobb County that we are today?

SL: In some ways, it shocks me that Frank has never been exonerated. It's clear now and it has been clear for many, many years that Frank was innocent. In fact, early on, the attorney for Jim Conley, a great man by the name of William [M.] Smith, later went against the lawyer-client privilege, and he told Governor [John Marshall] Slaton, "It wasn't Leo Frank. It was my guy who did it," which is unheard of that a lawyer would go against the lawyer-client privilege.

TS: Is that why Slaton commuted the sentence [to life in prison]?

SL: We think that's one of the things that pushed him in that direction.

TS: And then there was a riot at the governor's mansion, and he had to flee the state as his term ended.

SL: That's what happened. To me, it's important because it's a matter of justice, and justice has no shelf life. People will say, "Oh, it's such an old case. Why do you care?" And I tell him, "Well, there's no statute of limitations on doing the right thing. It wouldn't affect anything legally, but it would be the State saying that you can't make the future good unless you make the past right. And making it right has to do with clearing the name of an innocent man. You see, Leo Frank never had any children and grandchildren. He has got nobody to stand for him. If you think about it, if it were your grandfather or great-grandfather whose name had been sullied, you would advocate and say that he needed to be exonerated. But he has no relatives to stand in for him. So, it fell to me as a rabbi of Cobb County. I became in effect, Leo Frank's rabbi, and it came to me that this is something important to show that justice delayed is justice denied. So, justice needs to be done to clear this man's name.

TS: Yes. After Alonzo Mann's testimony, what was it, the Board of...

SL: Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles in [1983].

TS: They stopped short of saying that he was innocent.

SL: Well, in 1983 they refused to hear the case. Alonzo Mann comes forward in 1982, to the Nashville *Tennessean*. They don't quite know what to make of it. I mean, it's obviously been decades now, so they put him through a battery of lie detector tests. It turns out everything he says holds together, including the chronology that we now know of what

really happened. So, the Anti-Defamation League lobbied the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles to exonerate Frank, and they turned it down [in December 1983]. They wouldn't really even hear the case. Then, the ADL continued to lobby for that, and in 1986, finally, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles offered a provisional pardon. What that meant is that they would not decide on the guilt or innocence of the case, but simply that Georgia had failed to protect Leo Frank's rights to have another trial—to have an appeal, and, therefore, he was offered a posthumous pardon. That's pretty far away from saying that he was innocent.

TS: So, this is about the same time you came to East Cobb, and nothing has happened since then.

SL: That's right.

TS: So, you're still pushing for...

SL: I'm still pushing for a complete exoneration. The man's name deserves to be cleared.

TS: Any progress?

SL: Well, the Frank exoneration is kind of two steps forward and one step back. But one of my greatest allies is former governor Roy Barnes. You may know, Governor Barnes's wife, Marie—her grandfather was part of the lynch mob.

TS: Right.

SL: But Governor Barnes is very convinced and knows that Frank was innocent. He has worked with us on trying to open up a number of legal pathways. So, we hope that eventually, one possibility would be the DA [District Attorney] of Fulton County to reopen the case and then have it dismissed for lack of evidence and that would, in effect, exonerate Frank's name.

TS: So, it's got to happen in Fulton County because that's where the trial was.

SL: Yes. I look forward to another interview in which I can answer the question, and I'll say, "Yes, we finally in 2025 cleared his name." If you'll be there; I'll be there.

TS: That would be nice.

SL: Good.

TS: I had a student who did a term paper in 2002. Timothy [F.] Weiss is his name—"Diaspora in Dixie: Cobb County Jews in the Twentieth Century."

SL: I've seen it quoted but I've never seen the actual paper.

TS: It's in the KSU Archives, and we're copying it for you. We'll get it to you.

SL: Thank you. Was he a KSU undergrad at that point?

TS: Yes. This was in a history research class.

SL: Were you the professor at the time?

TS: Yes. He did an informal poll. I need to remind myself what he wrote twenty years ago. But it was a poll of Jewish opinion. He concluded that anti-Semitism, at least according to what people were telling him, wasn't any worse in Cobb County than elsewhere. Most Jewish newcomers hadn't heard of Leo Frank before coming here and thought that Cobb had a friendly atmosphere and was a good place to live and work.

SL: Yes. I think those assumptions are more or less correct. But what I left out of the narrative is that in 1991, when we [Temple Kol Emeth] were under construction, some of these skinhead groups, we think, came in and damaged the building structure as well as all the mechanical instruments on the land. We cleaned it up, and insurance covered it. At that time, the GBI [Georgia Bureau of Intelligence] had intelligence inside these gangs. So, the GBI came to us, and they said, "They're going to strike again. They're going to come again and try to burn the building down." So, I got a hold of the Cobb County Police, and I explained this to him: "This is what the GBI told is going to happen. What are you going to do?"

TS: What did they say?

SL: And the guy says, "I'm not going to do anything because it's prom weekend, and we're all busy at various proms, making sure that things go correct." As the saying goes, he totally blew me off. So, I let it get around the congregation. I was frustrated. I didn't know what to do. Well, it turns out some Jews do own guns. There were a couple of, I call them Jewish rednecks; and they said, "Fine. We're going to come on Saturday night. We'll be there to meet them." I wasn't there, but the story goes that when this little gang of white nationalists come on, there's that distinct sound that a gun makes when you [cock it], and they didn't come back. They saw that there were people there with guns ready to defend the site, and they never came back.

TS: I have never heard that story before.

SL: That's a true story. Trust me. I've got all this stuff documented because it's in my book of memories. And this is an odd thing. Not too long after that, somebody wrote on the Temple Kol Emeth sign. It said in German, "Jews go home."

TS: They had to know German.

SL: Maybe they found it in a history book. Either that or they knew German. It was the oddest thing. But, we're still here, and they're gone.

- TS: Well, there certainly have been enough incidents, even recently, to cause one to know it's still a problem.
- SL: Yes. Anti-Semitism is the oldest hatred in existence in history. We know from the Bible, it says, "Now there arose a new king (pharaoh) over Egypt, who knew not Joseph." [Exodus 1:8] What that really means in Hebrew is he doesn't care for Joseph, and the reason he doesn't care for Joseph is because he's a Jew. Of course, that is when the pharaoh begins to plot the destruction of Jewish babies and the institution of Jewish slavery. So, Jewish hatred is probably the oldest hatred that we know of in world history.
- TS: That also points out one of the big problems in translating from Hebrew is what the word "know" means.
- SL: That's right. Probably not for attribution, but I could tell you a few times where I made that mistake with modern Hebrew to use the word "know" incorrectly. It has a sexual connotation to it. So, you have to be careful how you use it. When it says, "And Adam knew Eve" or "the man knew the woman" [Genesis 4:1], it's implying a certain type of knowledge.
- TS: Sure. Okay. Peter Applebome: we had him on campus years ago. He spoke on campus about his book, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (1996). Did he interview you for the book? He talked about you.
- SL: He did. He interviewed me for the book. And, you know, as a journalist, you try to find a peg to hang your hat on, because you have to describe somebody. Was he five foot three? Did he weigh this? Did he look like this? Was he bald? So, in *Dixie Rising* he says, "Rabbi Lebow, who has a whiny voice."
- TS: What?
- SL: Yes. That was like the shorthand to describe me. So, I pick up the phone, and I go [imitating a whiny voice], "Peter, how can you say that I have a whiny voice?" It was just a joke between the two [of us]. I don't care what he said. He wanted to give some physical description to knowing me, and so, the high-pitched whiny voice.
- TS: Well, you've been in a number of books and articles and what have you.
- SL: Yes.
- TS: Bruce L. Jordan, *Murder in the Peach State: Infamous Murders of Georgia's Past* (Midtown Publishing Corporation 2000) also included your role in exonerating Leo Frank. He says a lot about the Frank case. Did he interview you for it?
- SL: He did not. What happened is after I placed that first plaque in 1995, which is the 80th anniversary of the Frank lynching—the original plaque on the VPI building says, "Leo

Frank, Wrongly accused, Falsely convicted, Wantonly murdered.” And it was published a lot in the *AJC* that would publish pictures of it and whatnot. So, Bruce Jordan tracked me down because of that, and he put a little bit in the book about that plaque.

TS: You mentioned earlier the pastor of Mount Bethel UMC that made you an anonymous phone call. You had another controversy with him. I think it was a Walton High School baccalaureate service.

SL: Yes, in 2001.

TS: And he didn’t want to share the pulpit with you?

SL: Yes. I got a phone call from one of the synagogue’s members, a young woman high schooler named Julia Levy. And Julia Levy was a high school senior who was on the baccalaureate committee. In previous years, for the baccalaureate at Walton, it had always been a Baptist minister who had spoken. They stretched themselves, and they got a Methodist once in a while. They didn’t have a Presbyterian or a Jew. So, she said to me, “We’d like you to be the baccalaureate speaker.” I said, “No.” Why no? I said, “I have young children. I can’t be out every single night. I need to be at home to help take care of my children.” So, we hung up, and she was disappointed. She calls me back three days later, and she says, “Rabbi Lebow, a Jew has never been invited to do this. We know what a wonderful public speaker you are. Can you consider doing this?” I said, “Fine, Julia. I’ll be the speaker at the baccalaureate, whatever you want.”

The next thing I know, about two days later, I read the headline in the *AJC*, “Minister Bars Rabbi from Giving Baccalaureate Services,” [*Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 20, 2001]. You could have knocked me over with a feather. I was flabbergasted. I said, “What the heck happened?” Well, what happened is that Randy Mickler at Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church heard that I was going to be the premier speaker and said, “The church is closed to Rabbi Lebow. We will not allow a Jew to address the congregation.” First place, it wasn’t the congregation. It was the kids from Walton who were renting the place. It had nothing to do with the congregation, actually. And every time he opened his mouth, he put his foot in it. You know, he would say things, “Well, we wouldn’t want Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists to come into the church either.” He’d never met a Jew I’m convinced. He was from a little bitty town in North Florida and had gone to UGA. I don’t think he’d ever met a real-life Jew. But he had a certain animus, a certain prejudice. Now, I wrote to him. I remembered this story that he’d been the one that kind of threatened me about the anti-gay resolution. So, I figured...

TS: How did you know that he was the one?

SL: I remembered the phone call.

TS: Yes, but he didn’t tell you his name, did he, on the phone call?

SL: That’s a good question. I don’t remember.

TS: But I guess after it appeared in the newspaper...

SL: That's what it was. He was in charge of the minister's group that was in the newspaper. That's right. That is what it was. So, I wrote to him, and I said, "Pastor Mickler, I have no intention of speaking about gay rights. I will simply make a positive message about their graduation, and that will be all." He still refused to admit me to the church. So, this sort of controversy raged on for weeks, first in the Metro section, on the front page of the *AJC*, then it went all the way to the back to the editorial page. There's a famous Luckovich cartoon, which I have, in which Jesus Christ is trying to enter into heaven, and Randy Mickler says, "Sorry. We don't accept Jews into heaven." Well, the things were not going well. In fact, it went to Neal Boortz, the famous radio commentator, and even he took off after Pastor Mickler.

TS: Really?

SL: Yes. So, things were not good. It was stirring up the community. People were having fights and arguments, and I would hear this from kids in school. They were defending Rabbi Lebow, this other kid was defending Pastor Mickler, and it was not good for the community at all. And in my mind, I thought, "Great. The next thing is he's going to lose his job because the Methodist bishop is not happy with Randy Mickler." And I thought, "That's great because the next headline's going to be 'Jews crucify minister.'" We can't have that. So, I went to the Methodist bishop, and he called in pastor Mickler, and I said, "Look, we have got to find a way to put an end to this. This is not good for Cobb County and Marietta. This is terrible for the community." And he kind of [said]: "Aw shucks. I don't know what to do." And I said, "Well, here's what we're going to do. When we leave this room today and the press comes up to us, we're going to have our arms around each other, and we're going to say that we've reconciled. And we're not going to worry about the service anymore." The service in the meantime had been switched to the Cobb County Civic Center auditorium.

TS: So, you got to do it?

SL: I did do it. But at that meeting, I said to the Methodist bishop, "Let's find some kind of common ground." And the common ground is we would build a house for Habitat for Humanity. I call it the House that Healed. And when we left the meeting that day, we were able to say to press, "You know what? We have our differences, but we're going to concentrate on the similarities between the two of us." That's how that ended. And then, yes, I did in fact address the baccalaureate, but it was done in the Cobb County Civic Center.

TS: Do you remember what you told them?

SL: Yes, I told them that there were ordinary heroes that they could aspire to be as they got older.

TS: Okay. So it sounds like a happy ending.

SL: It worked out.

TS: Mt. Bethel has had a tough history the last year or two.⁵

SL: Well, Randy Micklerr was considered by most Methodist ministers as wanting to be Baptist. The Methodist church is like what I say with the Presbyterians. I say, “They’re normal. Presbyterians are normal Christians. A Methodist is not too far left and not too far right at this point.” Well, Pastor Mickler was very upset about these social issues and wanted to drag Mt. Bethel with him. They still have issues over who gets to be the pastor there, who owns the land that the church is on, and that sort of thing.

TS: Well, it sounds like you ended it as best you could, though, with the house for Habitat for Humanity.

SL: That’s right. We constituted the first-ever ecumenical Habitat built. [The construction] happened just after 9/11 [the September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attack on America]. There was such prejudice and animus against Muslim Americans that I said, “We can use this Habitat building to really show our strength as Americans.” So, every Habitat built has participation with Muslim participants. It’s the only Jewish, Christian, Muslim Habitat built that I know of, and we did it here in Cobb.

TS: Fantastic. I wanted to ask you maybe, about some of your views. You had a sermon. “There were Giants in the Earth,” that appeared in a college textbook, *Representative American Speeches* (2001).

SL: That was the sermon that I gave at the Cobb County Civic Center.

TS: Okay, so the giants are ordinary people who are heroes.

SL: That’s right. If you had told me, I would have brought a copy for you.

TS: Any particular giants that you talked about in the speech?

SL: I talked about their parents as well as people that served, whether they be policemen, or whether they be nurses, people that serve us every single day, and they don’t look for credit. They don’t look for admiration. Those are the people in our lives. For example, I mentioned earlier in the interview I had a teacher that totally changed my life when I was nineteen years old. And I said to these kids, “You may not remember it now. You may not think about it now. But someday you will look back, and you’ll say, ‘There was a teacher in my junior year in high school or my senior year, and they opened my eyes to

⁵ Mt. Bethel left the United Methodist Church in 2022 over a variety of issues. See Wendy Parker, “Mt. Bethel officially breaks from United Methodist Church,” *East Cobb News*, July 13, 2022.

thus and such a thing, they changed my life.” That’s what the sermon was about was ordinary heroes.

TS: I see. Absolutely. I was going to ask how the textbook editors ever found your sermon, but I guess it was in the newspaper.

SL: It was in the newspaper. It was a great honor because the people included in *Representative American Speeches* are basically Supreme Court justices, congressman, and senators. I’m certainly the only rabbi that was ever in there, but I don’t know if any other ministers had had a sermon published in there either. It was a great honor.

TS: You’re also in a textbook by Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (Rutgers University Press, 2003). It talks about your unique synagogue style. Can you talk about what is unique about your synagogue style?

SL: We were the first synagogue in Atlanta of any denomination to use rock and roll music. It’s not unusual in Christian churches nowadays’ it’s called contemporary worship. Sometimes, you’ll drive by a Protestant church, and they’ll say, “Contemporary worship at 9:00, traditional worship at 10:30. Well, contemporary worship, what that means is that it’s rock and roll. And some people like it, and some people don’t. But I am a guitarist. I have a marvelous Cantorial Soloist who works with me, Blake Singer, and he’s a wonderful guitarist. So, when I came in 1986, we made sure that the walls were trembling at the sound of rock and roll. That was one of the things that drew people to us is that we had a modern ethos and a modern spirit. I tell people we built the synagogue on rock and roll. We have, like, a closing song instead of a traditional hymn; we would use a song by Bob Dylan or we’d use “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen. And so, I was able to weave pop culture into the Jewish faith, and that was helping make it approachable for a number of people.

TS: How long do your services usually last?

SL: The Jewish services, I tell people, are mercifully short. The average Friday night service would be about an hour. A Saturday morning service includes a scriptural reading, so that could be as long as an hour a half. The main bugaboo is the Jewish High Holy Days services, which are hours long. That’s just part of the process, and it can be three hours at a time—standing and sitting and sitting and standing. They can be very tedious. So, I would use various tricks to try to make the service interesting. Rather than give a twenty-five-minute sermon—here I am preaching to the MTV generation, to the video game generation, the Star Wars generation. They couldn’t sit still for twenty-five minutes. So, what I did was I would take sermons and chop them into little chunks. At the very beginning of the service, I would start the sermon and say, “You know what? To be continued.” We’d have a couple prayers and I’d say, “You know what? Part 2 of 5.” Then I would split these long sermons into little bitty tangible moments that people could understand. So, that was one of my tricks.

TS: I found a quote from you in *Atlanta Jewish Times* on April 8, 2020. Passover time. It's your Passover thoughts. Do you remember that?

SL: I do not. Tell me what brilliant thing I said.

TS: "Above all the Jews are survivors. Jews have survived the Expulsion from Spain, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Holocaust. At times it seems like all history has conspired to cleanse the earth of the Jewish people. But our glory is that we have survived even the worst darkness of history. The Torah describes the Jews as the 'Prisoners of Hope.' We will survive COVID-19 and by next year each of us will be able to say, 'Next year in Jerusalem!'"

SL: The man who wrote that must be brilliant. It was so well expressed. I won't try to do it again, but I will tell you, I do meditate on the fact that of all the ancient peoples—they're all gone, right? There are no Babylonians. There are no Assyrians. There are no ancient Romans. There is no Greek empire. There are no Ottoman Turks. You go down the list of each and every one of those ancient or even medieval empires. They're all gone. We're still here. We're great! We're the survivors of history, and Jewish people—we're not going anywhere.

TS: In my Sunday school class we're doing the Twelve Prophets now. I've been telling them that I think one of the great miracles of history is that the Jewish people came out of the Babylonian Conquest stronger than they ever were before.

SL: That's right.

TS: They survived, and that was a miracle in itself.

SL: That's right. Our wisdom was portable. You were able to transport no matter where you were or what sort of income you had. The wisdom was portable.

TS: Right. You retired in 2020, I believe?

SL: I did. I tell people I used to work as a congregational rabbi. Same thing is true for all ministers—you're on call 24/7.

TS: I was going to ask, first of all, why did you decide to retire?

SL: That's a good question. My contemporaries were beginning to retire, and I looked at myself, and I said, "You know what? It's not that much fun anymore." It's a lot of work to be a congregational rabbi. It could be as much as seventy hours a week. And I said, "I want to do something different with the next part of my life." I thought it was time to bring in somebody new that brings in new ideas, new technologies, new themes, and new topics. And so, it's a mark of pride that I decided to do it. They didn't ever ask me to. In fact, I had a life contract. I had tenure.

- TS: I was going to say that in 1996, they gave you life tenure.
- SL: Gave me life tenure.
- TS: I think there are probably a lot of pastors that would like that.
- SL: They would like that. I was lucky. I was lucky. But I it just felt like the right time. I tell people, I used to work for those seventy hours a week. Now I only work forty hours a week because in one week, I'll have three funerals, two weddings. There are no rabbis in North Georgia. There are little bitty congregations, but no rabbis to serve them. So, I am the preacher, circuit-riding rabbi. Once a month, I go to Rome, Georgia. Once a month, I go to Gainesville, Georgia. I used to go quarterly to Blue Ridge Ellijay. So, I tell people I'm the chief rabbi of North Georgia because I'm the only rabbi of North Georgia.
- TS: Another quote from you: "Every day I realize how lucky I am. Most clergymen never get a chance to spend their entire professional careers in one congregation."
- SL: I said to somebody the other day—we were talking about various things, and I said, "Well, we're lucky that we had certain things happen to us in life." And the person looks at me straight in the eyes and says, "No, we're not lucky. We're blessed." And I thought that's a better way to look at it. For whatever reason, God was on my side at that point and I got to sink these deep roots into red clay soil, and my children never had to move. My spouse never had to move. They grew up in a community where they felt safe and where they felt rooted in in where they came from.
- TS: Oh, you were saying earlier that you moved into Marietta at some time.
- SL: Right. In fact, I talk about this in some of the speeches that I give about Leo Frank. But the fact of the matter is the Frank lynching site is only a couple miles from where I live. From where I put my head down on the pillow every night, I can think for a moment that that's where Frank was killed.
- TS: Well, I'm about out of questions. Anything that we should have talked about that we haven't covered?
- SL: No. Let's see. You mentioned the baccalaureate. You mentioned the growth of the synagogue. You mentioned the Leo Frank case. Oh, back there was something I forget. But, anyway, yes, you've covered it. You must do this for a living.
- TS: Something like that. Thank you.

INDEX

- Anti-Defamation League, 34
- Applebome, Peter, *Dixie Rising*, 36
- Atlanta Business Chronicle*, 27
- Atlanta Jewish Federation, 13, 14
- Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 37, 38
- Atlanta Olympics, 24-25

- Barnes, Marie Dobbs, 34
- Barnes, Roy Eugene, Governor, 34
- Beilis, Mendel, case and anti-Semitism in Russia, 29
- Bishop, Patrick, Monsignor (Father Pat), 15-16
- Blackman, Murray, Rabbi, 10
- Broward County, Florida, 5, 8
- Brown, Joseph Mackey, Governor, 30-31
- Brumby, Bolan Glover, 31
- Brumby, Otis A. Jr., 23
- Brumby, Otis A. III, 23
- Byrne, William J. (Bill), Cobb Commission Chair, 22-24, 27-28

- Central Conference of American Rabbis, 11, 26
- Chabad of Cobb, 25-26
- Chavez, Cesar, 4
- Cincinnati, Ohio, 5
 - Plum Street Temple, 5
- Clay, Eugene Herbert, 31
- Cobb County, Georgia, 12, 13, 14, 20, 21, 24
 - Blackwell Road, 15
 - Merchant's Walk, 16
 - Old Canton Road, 17
 - Cobb County Commission
 - Passage of anti-gay resolution, 20-25, 27-28
 - First Jewish commissioner, 28
 - Cobb Symphony Orchestra, 24
 - Role in 1996 Atlanta Olympics, 25
 - Cobb Chamber of Commerce, 25
 - Site of Leo Frank lynching, 29-34
 - Frey's Gin Road, 32-33
 - Town and Country Shopping Center, 32
 - Cobb County Police, 35

Walton High School, 37-39
Congregation Etz Chaim, Marietta, Georgia, 12, 25
Conley, Jim, 30, 33
Conroy, Daniel Patrick (Pat), 27
Conservative Judaism, 2, 3
Creative Loafing, 27

Diary of Anne Frank, 27
Dorsey, John Tucker, Representative, 31
Dreyfus, Alfred, case and anti-Semitism in France, 29

Emperor Constantine and anti-Jewish laws, 18
Esquire Magazine, 29

Fire Island, New York, 19
Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 1, 6
Frank, Leo, case, 13, 29-36
Freeman, Nan, 4
Frey, William J., Sheriff, 32
Fulton County, Georgia, 34

Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles, 33-34
Georgia Bureau of Investigation, 35
Georgia Commission on the Holocaust, 27
Georgia Department of Transportation, 33
Georgia Historical Society, 33
Goldstein family, Marietta, Georgia, 29
Greenberg, Martin (Marty), 16-17

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1, 8-10, 26
Home Depot, 16-17, 25

Isakson, Johnny, Senator, 23, 28

Jewish Community Center, Post Oak Tritt Road, Cobb County, 14
Jordan, Bruce L., *Murder in the Peach State*, 36-37

Kennesaw State University, 29
Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, 2, 7
 Church of the Holy Spirit (Episcopal), 2
 Simpson Prize in Religion, 7
 Union of Jewish Students, 8
Kirschstein, Lisa, 11
Kullmann, Eugen, 2-3, 7-8

Lebow, Steven J., Rabbi

Father, Irving (Doc), 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9

Mother, Rita, 1, 4, 5, 8, 9

Childhood desire to become a rabbi, 1, 7

First application to Hebrew Union College, 1-2, 5

Undergraduate education at Kenyon College, 2, 7, 8

Impact of Dr. Kullmann, 2-3, 7-8

Award-winning paper on “*Hesed* in the Psalms,” 7

Founder of the Union of Jewish Students, 8

Beginning of rabbinic studies, 3

Opposition to Vietnam War, 4

Sister, Judge Susan Lebow, 4, 8

March in support of migrant laborers, 4

Ordination at Plum Street Temple, 5

Lack of childhood experiences of anti-Semitism, 5-7

Early memories of racial injustice, 6

Change of family name from Lebowitz, 6

Brother, 8

Sister Sally Shiff, 8

Ziskind fellow in PhD program at Hebrew Union College, 8-9

Decision to switch from PhD to rabbinical track, 9

Rabbinical education at Hebrew Union College, 9-10

President of the senior class, 10

Assistant rabbi at Temple Sinai in New Orleans, 10-11, 29

Marriage to Madeline Sable, 10-11

First permanent full-time rabbi at Kol Emeth, 11-12, 29

Move to City of Marietta, 14, 42

Relationship with Father Pat Bishop at Transfiguration Catholic Church, 15-16

Office in Merchant’s Walk, 16

Building a big-tent congregation, 16-17

Thoughts on the modern Jewish community and biblical illiteracy, 18-19

Opposition to Cobb County’s anti-gay resolution, 19-25

First clergyperson in Georgia to hold same-sex wedding ceremony, 21

Threats over opposition to anti-gay resolution, 25-26, 35, 37-38

Daughters, 25

Awards, 26-27

Efforts to exonerate Leo Frank, 29-34, 36

Organizing a *yizkor* service and memorial plaque at site of Frank lynching, 32-33, 36-37

Reflections on anti-Semitism as the oldest hatred in existence, 36

Interviewed for a number of books and articles, 36

Controversy over a Walton High School baccalaureate service, 37-39

Lee, Newt, 30

Lehrman, Richard (Dick), Rabbi, 13

Leevy, Julia, 37

Louganis, Greg, 24

Mann, Alonzo, 30, 33
 Marcus, Bernard (Bernie), 25
 Marietta, Georgia, 12, 14, 19, 20, 23, 24
 Theatre in the Square, 19-20, 24
 Marietta Daily Journal, 20, 23
 Anti-Semitism at the time of the Leo Frank case, 29-32
 McNally, Terrence, *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, 19-20
 Metairie Park Country Day School, New Orleans, 11
Miami Herald, 1
 Mickler, Randy, Reverend, 20, 37-39
 Morris, Newt, Judge, 30-31
 Mount Bethel United Methodist Church, 20, 37, 39
 Mount Zion United Methodist Church, Marietta, Georgia, 14

 Nashville *Tennessean*, 33
 National Conference of Christians and Jews, 27
 National Federation Temple Youth (NFTY), 4
 New College of Florida, Sarasota, 4

 Olens, Samuel S. (Sam), former Cobb Commission Chair, 23, 28-29
 Oney, Steve, *And the Dead Shall Rise*, 29-31
 Orthodox Judaism, 3, 18

 Parkland, Florida, 8
 Peachtree Street, Atlanta, 13
 Phagan, Mary, 29-30

 Reform Judaism, 1, 3, 5, 11, 12, 13, 18, 20, 26, 40

 Sable, Madeline, 10-12, 14, 19, 20
 Skandalakis, Demetrios (Mitch), 24
 Slaton, John Marshall, Governor, 33
 Slomovitz, Albert I., Rabbi, *A New Look at Rabbi Jesus*, 16
 Smith, William M., 33

 Temple Emanu-El, Dunwoody, Georgia, 13
 Temple Emanu-El, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 1
 Temple Kehillat Chaim, Roswell, Georgia, 13
 Temple Kol Emeth, Marietta, Georgia, 3, 11-13, 25, 26, 28
 Doc Lebow Center, 3
 Early history, 1982-1986, 11-13
 Different locations before building a permanent synagogue, 14-16
 The Sunshine School (preschool), 14
 Building a permanent synagogue, 16-17, 35
 Growth in membership as a big-tent congregation, 17-18
 Member of Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 26

Temple Sinai, New Orleans, 10
Temple Sinai, Sandy Springs, Georgia, 13
The Temple, Atlanta, 13
Transfiguration Catholic Church, Marietta, Georgia, 15
Tulane University, 11, 19

United Farm Workers, 4
Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Union for Reform Judaism), 26
University of Tennessee, 10

Varner, Roy Palmer, 32
VPI Corporation and building, 32, 36

Watson, Thomas E. (Tom), 31
Weiss, Miriam, 5
Weiss, Timothy F., “Diaspora in Dixie: Cobb County Jews in the Twentieth Century,” 34-35
Winokur, Harvey J., Rabbi, 13
Wise, Isaac Mayer, Rabbi, 5
Wysong, Gordon, Cobb County Commissioner, 22-24, 28