Janet Klein: Okay. First of all I wanted to ask you about being a woman rabbi and how you came to be rabbi and chose...and knew you wanted to be a rabbi, and also about, a little bit about the history of how women in general got to be rabbis.

Rabbi Einat Ramon: I didn't know that I'm going to be a rabbi when I was little. I grew up in a secular Jewish home in Israel, but secular in Israel is much more traditional than secular here, and then...But I was always attracted to religion and was thinking on issues of Jewish identity. Just to make a long story short, I learned about the possibility of women becoming rabbis in 1984 when I read about the fact that the Conservative movement decided to ordain women rabbis. Then I thought that this is really something that I should be doing because I have been concerned about spirituality and the lack of spirituality in Israel and I've been concerned about my own professional choice. It seemed like the rabbinate was both the thing that I should do ideologically and also the right thing for me spiritually.

I applied to the Conservative Movement school and they rejected...They opened a school in Israel, and they rejected me on the basis of gender. Then I applied to the Conservative Movement school in America, and they accepted me. So it was a very ironic situation that my friends—my male friends—in the Conservative Movement, they went to the Israeli school, and I had to go to the American school. Luckily the American school had a branch in Israel where they send their American students, so I took two years there, and then I had to come to the States to complete my rabbinic education and be ordained in America. Then I became the first Sabra woman—the first Israeli-born woman—who was ordained as a rabbi in any movement. The Conservative Movement was really not prepared for me because the Reform Movement at that time did not even ordain women in Israel: they always follow the Reform, they never do things before the Reform. Here was their chance to change that tradition, but apparently they weren't ready for that. So I was ordained in America as the first Israeli woman who was ordained.

I decided to stay in America for a little longer to get a PhD degree in religion, and also to practice as a rabbi, and hopefully I hope to return to Israel. Now the history of women rabbis is...As I told you before there were women who were practicing as rabbis, probably not only in the Reform Movement, probably in other remote places. We learn about the Marranos, that women became their legal Jewish decision-makers because Judaism was only practiced in the home and the women knew what to do. The older women—they were the ones who were the authority. We know about a woman who practiced as a Hasidic rebbe in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century; she was a charismatic leader, and Isaac Bashevis Singer based his story, *Yentl*, on that story about the Ludmil, the lady of Ludmil.
The history of women rabbis is connected with the history of the non-Orthodox movements and the first women who acted as rabbis were Lily Montague in England, and then there were women who were very involved. There was a woman named Bertha Peppenheim who lived in the early nineteenth century in Germany, and she started all sorts of important projects. She actually was the mother of all the social workers. She started the whole activity of social work. Very interesting woman. By the way, she, in psychoanalytical literature, she’s known as Anna O. She was treated by Freud [Dr. Sigmund Freud] because she was sexually abused and stuff like that. Then there was Henrietta Solde in America who was the daughter of a rabbi. She started Hadassah Organization, and she also started the organization of bringing children to Israel as youth. She wanted to become a rabbi in the Conservative movement. She took actually all the courses but they wouldn’t ordain her. That was in the 1920s or...

Women wanted to become rabbis since the changes had taken place in the religion, but really nothing was decided, not even in the Reform movement. Actually, in the Reform movement there was the decision that it's okay, but it was never implemented until twenty years ago. This year, in 1992, we're celebrating the twentieth anniversary...In nineteen ninety...I think in 1992 they celebrated the twentieth anniversary, or maybe in 1993, of ordaining the first woman Reform rabbi, Sally Priesand. Then right after that the Reconstructionist movement started their school, and they were egalitarian from the very beginning. That’s because their founder, Mordechai Kaplan, spoke about ordaining women already in the 1930s. The Conservative movement followed ten years later, less than, a little more than ten years later, 12 years later in 1984. Actually, no. In 1985 they ordained the first woman rabbi, Amy Alberg. Right now she’s a chaplain. She’s the chaplain at Stanford, and she lives in California. In Israel the Reform movement ordained a first woman in Israel just last summer; although, she was not born in Israel. She was an American emigre to Israel, and you know. I was ordained. There are all sorts of firsts in that story.

JK: How does your family feel about you being a rabbi?

RR: They’re very supportive. I think that they followed me in many ways. After my ordination they started becoming more interested in non-Orthodox religiosity. I do what I do as a result of the kind of education that they have given me. It’s not the kind of thing that they expected I would do, but it makes a lot of sense given the fact that my family was very dedicated to Zionism and very dedicated to spirituality, that celebrated all the holidays, that gave a lot of emphasis on values and ethics. My parents were both involved in programs that were connected to the American Jewish diaspora. They are the kinds of Israelis that I think you could expect them to have had a woman rabbi. I mean, it was a surprise for them in the beginning, but generally they are very supportive.

JK: When and from where did your family arrive in Israel?

RR: Russia. Mostly Russia. Well, the area between Russia and Poland that was transferred from
one state to another with the wars.

JK: When did they come?

RR: My grandfather, my maternal grandfather arrived in 1919. The other grandparents arrived early in the 1920s. They arrived with what we call in Israel third immigration. It was an immigration of socialists—young people—that came. Although my maternal grandmother came during that immigration with her whole family, and they only became socialists in Israel. They weren't socialists back in the diaspora.

JK: How did you get to be our rabbi here?

RR: That’s actually an interesting story. I did fundraising in Chicago for a fund that I really very much respect and advocate. They’re called the New Israel Fund, and they were created by young American Jewish Zionists who felt that when they give donations to the UJA [United Jewish Appeal], it does not address some of the social issues that they would like to see addressed. So they established this fund, not as an alternative to the UJA but as an addition. That fund addresses, targets, four different areas. One is Jewish-Arab coexistence organizations—non-profit organizations—that deal with these problems. Another one is women’s organizations, religious pluralism, and social, economic equality. Namely they deal with the social gap between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and help the Ethiopian Jews, etc. I’ve been in touch with them for a long time. I don’t even know how that connection was established. We know of many people who were with them, and who work with them.

One of our friends suggested that I will go and substitute for a woman general who was supposed to speak about women’s issues in Israel in Chicago. She cancelled and they called me the very last notice and said, “Would you go?” I came, and it was very nice. I did the fundraising. Then they made a big event out of this, and they wrote about it in the Chicago Tribune, an article about me stating a lot about what the fund does. Janet Tatz's mother lives in Chicago. She sent her the article because she saw that she would be interested. One day I received a phone call from Janet Tatz in Missoula, Montana, asking me whether I want to become...I either want to come as a scholar in residence and perhaps even a rabbi, and they were thinking maybe, they were negotiating with someone. At that point I wasn’t even looking for a rabbinic position, but two months later I decided to quit the job that I was doing on that year and then I was looking for a position. I called her on the day that that rabbi that was supposed to come into the community cancelled. She said, "This is great, it's bashert [Yiddish: destined, fated]. We worked out the agreement over the phone—I didn’t even see them until I arrived—and it was very exciting.

JK: What were your first impressions of the community here when you first started getting to know the people?

RR: I thought the people were very nice and warm and welcoming. I think that that it was hard
for me to estimate that it’s such a diverse group. My first impression, I really didn’t know the people yet, and I didn’t know the kinds of backgrounds that they came from. I assumed a higher level of knowledge than what turned out to be, but I think the warmth...I felt that from the very beginning, and the fact that it’s a very...a group of intelligent people.

JK: Do you think Jews in rural areas are missing a lot...In what ways are Jews in rural areas who know they’re Jewish and they identify with being Jewish, they maybe vaguely remember songs and traditions, but they don’t have a rabbi around to kind of glue the—

RR: I think it’s a mixture. I think that on the one hand I see that people here are doing things that had they lived in New York City they would not do. I mean, it’s much more difficult for them to be Jewish here, and therefore they make a—some of them—make a bigger effort to read more and learn more and teach the children. Had they lived in New York City or in Chicago or in one of the big cities they wouldn’t, but then we’re talking about people who are generally motivated and active. For people who tend to be more passive on their religious...I mean they would like things to be offered to them, these people are missing a lot. They are not able to provide the kind of education that they need for their children, and they’re basically losing on the continuity.

I sometimes look at the kids, and I wonder which ones of the kids is going to turn out to be Jewish. I think that some kids here, ironically, grow up with a stronger identity because they lie in such a small place and their parents make a major effort to introduce observance to the home and learn it. But other kids, I think that if they went to a larger synagogue and stuff like that, then maybe they would gain more because they’re not the type of people that would do these things for themselves. The other side of it is that the ones of the people who are missing are...they miss the sense of being part of the Jewish people and being part of a Jewish community. I think that there is one...I feel many times on Yom Kippur in the evening that there is this sense—everywhere in the world—that there is this sense that tonight you’re going to see everybody that you haven’t seen for a year, or that you haven't seen for...It's like everyone is there for these five minutes of Kol Nidre. There is a sense of awe that is connected with these masses of people in the synagogue, and I think that people here don't know that. On the other hand I think that people here experience a certain level of spirituality that you don't experience in the big communities, so I think that they're both gaining and losing.

JK: Yes. I've talked to some people and they've said, “Oh, yes, in Chicago, you know, you see it happening all the time; you know it’s not going to die out, but here if I don’t go...” There’s another thing that I’ve noticed about—that seems to me, anyway—to be unique about the Jewish community here, and that’s that there are a number of people involved, who come to services regularly, but they were not born or raised Jewish, but they’ve just...They feel Jewish somehow, and they have adopted it. I was just wondering how, if this happens in other communities?

RR: Well, as far as I know, there are very few people like that in the community. Maybe I don't
know enough. I think that usually people go through the motions of conversion when they choose to join the Jewish community, and here, because it is such a non-established crowd they are welcoming anyone who wants to come. Now that happens every once in a while, you know, in big congregations, but since the congregation is so big you don't really feel the impact of people who aren't... I personally do not...I think that people are welcome to come and see how we live, but I don't think there is such a thing as just adopting the Jewish tradition. I think that if people want to be Jewish then they should go through conversion. If they don't, then they should consider themselves as guests. The community welcomes guests, but I think that guests cannot make decisions and take leadership roles in the community because the rules here are so unclear. That had happened, and I think that some people here in the community are very resentful of that phenomena. I'll give you an example. I mean, two...Well, I really shouldn't give you an example maybe, but I think that, I've seen with a very few cases that I've learned later on that this was the case, that it was not a positive kind of decision making. It wasn't a positive impact on the decision-making of the community with people who were not born Jews and raised as Jews try to influence the decisions. There were a few cases like this. One case was extremely, extremely destructive, I have not even met that person. Other people, I felt, were pushing towards decisions that a Jew would not make. Because even if you're not observant you know what the rules are even on a very vague level.

JK: You've found that there really is...I've felt this too growing up even though our family wasn't strictly observant, just something different about being raised Jewish. I've found that if somebody wants to adopt...It's hard to adopt a culture. It's easier to adopt a religion, I think, but it's harder to adopt the religion that's connected to a culture. Do you think that it's for that reason, that it's so connected to being raised and...

RR: No. I think people who convert, they're equal Jews, and once they have finished their conversion, they are Jews. But the process of conversion means that you have to learn a lot. It's sometimes even surprising how Jews who very, very little have a certain sense of what is okay or not. It's a very vague statement that I'm telling you because there will always be the example that should not prove the rule, but one case that I...like when should the rabbi come on this and what should the rabbi do. There are some things that you do not do on a date that is not the right date. I think that if a Jew who is an informed Jew, I mean, even a non-informed Jew would not push the rabbi not to do something like that. I mean to say a certain liturgy on a day that is not the right day. Somebody who was not born a Jew or who did not...that doesn't seem like a big deal. People have certain assumptions as to what the service should be, and those assumptions many times are carried from people's Christian upbringing. Now if somebody had already undergone the process of conversion, that person would already know that this is a wrong assumption. But if you don't go through these motions, then you are bringing all sorts of alien influences that may not be the kind of direction that we want to go to. These are the things where I think it's problematic, but there were some much more severe cases that were very negative. The community is very nice and welcoming, and everybody wants to contribute. I thought that those things...
Now I want to make a distinction. I think that a non-Jew who is married to a Jew and there is Jewish observance in the home, that's a different case. Because then you live with a Jew and you see what that means and you know the rhythms. That's a different case. I think that the usual... I have never witnessed those kinds of people cause any problems or push in a direction that the community should not go. But people who've decided they are Jews, that's a problematic situation I think. I don't think there is such a thing. If you're a Jew, you're a Jew, and you belong to the Jewish people and there are certain things that come with it.

JK: What ways do you think Jews in this country...Again, it's a general, kind of vague thing that's hard to pinpoint, but are people's identities and their Jewish identification with their Jewish part of them growing stronger or weaker in this country? Do you see?

RR: Weaker. Well, I should distinguish. I think for the masses it's growing weaker. For certain individuals it may be growing stronger. I think that there is a small group in this country that now rediscovers the roots and comes back to more ritual and more observance. But I think for the masses, Jewish identity is being watered down. The numbers of Jews is just going down, so I think that probably speaks for itself.

JK: Do you think that the people...because I've also talked to a few people and they've said, "You know; I don't know why, but just this..." The friend I brought the other night, she said, "I don't know why, but all of a sudden I just wanted to start participating again." She said that she had talked to another friend of hers who all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, she just wanted to start coming to services and doing things with Jews, just having coffee with a Jewish person, something. And so—

RR: Yeah. I think that's part of a small group in America. I think that there is a small group sense like...Look, I'm not a demographer, so I really can't evaluate that. From what I see here in the community I see a lot of people that are coming back, but then I'm told that there are masses of Jews out there who are not even interested, who don't want to come, who don't want to do anything. I think it's still the numbers of those whose identities are growing weaker are...is larger than the number of those that are getting closer. And I think that the commitment of those who are getting closer is still very slow. I would love to see a renaissance of Jewish liberal movement in America that really presents a very strong spirituality and strong commitment, and yet it's not Orthodox. Maybe we're seeing some of the steps towards that, but I think it still doesn't have the kind of power that Orthodoxy has. That's unfortunately...The Orthodox are able to maintain a strong sense of Jewish identity, and I think in the liberal movement it's very hard to keep that.

JK: Why do you think people are drifting away?

RR: I think it's a mixture. Look. I think that when you're a minority it's hard to keep your tradition anyway. Everybody assimilates in America because the culture encourages assimilation of small ethnic groups. So not assimilating means that we're going against the
stream. That's I think a general rule. The other thing is that maybe after the Holocaust there is a lot of internalized anti-Semitism. People feel ashamed to be Jewish. People feel ashamed to be Jewish, and they would rather dissociate. Since in the culture a lot of anti-Semitic aspects are being diffused into the general Western culture, then people internalize that, if it's through images of sex appeal that are not inclusive of people who are not blond and that people are attracted to those who are the opposite of them and feel insecure about their own appearance, if it works on that level. Or if it works about what's the cool thing to do, and the cool thing to do is not necessarily the Jewish thing. Right, it's to go skiing, and doing sports and things like that. And if you do religion, at least you go for the mainstream religion and Judaism is not that. I think that maintaining Judaism involves a lot of learning and reading, and a lot of that is not...it just requires a kind of effort. For people who didn't grow up in that, the average person is not the person who would seek that out. I don't think that necessarily what's happening in America is so rare in Jewish history. I think that Jews assimilated throughout the history, and that some people convert to Judaism, and some people came back from...But nevertheless it does concern me that, when I hear that had all the people who have came throughout the immigrations to America who were Jewish, maintained their Judaism, we would have six million Jews more today. That seems an incredible number to me.

JK: Do you notice anti-Semitism on the rise, either in Montana here where we are, or in California where you are, or in New York, anywhere in this country?

RR: It's hard for me to evaluate because I wasn't born in this country. I don't know how much anti-Semitism was there beforehand. Probably in some aspects there is less because I think when I hear stories of people during the Nazi era—and people felt very vulnerable during World War II and things like that—I don't see that happening today. I hear that in Montana there is, oh, these right white supremacist groups, and they distributed something—leaflets—and they painted swastikas and stuff on the synagogue in Billings, but I don't know if this is something that's new or if this had been here before. In Montana I really can't evaluate, and also not in San Francisco. I can't evaluate. I hear about hate crimes and things like that, but I, as an Israeli, always think that, “Well, that's part of what you get when you live in the diaspora.” But I don't know whether this is worse or better.

JK: Just from when I was looking through the Missoulian index, I saw...I was looking up a bunch of different things, but one of the things I looked up were civil rights, racism, Aryan Nations, things like that. The paper is only indexed from 1978 to present, and from about 1978 to 1985 or so there are very few articles on any kind of racism, whether it's anti-Semitism or any other kind. But from 1986 to present the articles on them saying, this Aryan Nations holds a meeting at this hotel, local hotel or something...They get more and more frequent. Then you see in the world, in France, the fascists are on the rise in Germany. It's coming back again, and it's not only anti-Semitic, depending on where they are, but it's always present. So I was just wondering, if in general a pattern is emerging...

RR: That's interesting that you see...I don't know. I mean see a lot of anti-Semitism actually in
JK: Do you know what the roots, in history, of anti-Semitism might be? I mean it's hard to pinpoint: there are a number of different...

RR: I think that Christianity—and Islam for that matter—contributed a lot for anti-Jewish...By the same token, I think that they spread many Jewish ideas in Western and Eastern civilizations, and in a certain sense made Judaism become a really universal religion in that sense. Both the Quran and the New Testament include a lot of anti-Jewish elements that I think were then internalized, and that contributed to that. I think the other part is the fact that the Jews lived as a minority for two thousand years in different places and minorities are always hated, and particularly when there was so much emphasis on learning and education in Jewish tradition, which made the Jews become very quickly, relatively, part of the societies in which they lived and integrated and very influential. That aroused the resentment of the masses when they...So I think that these, the combination is two. One, I think that culturally, there was this anti-Jewish paradigm that infiltrated Western civilization through the other monotheistic religions. The other thing is the social situation of living as a minority among so many nations, and with the combination, and that as a minority we always refused to assimilate. Yet we were always very ambitious in trying to maintain a good economic and being involved politically. So that resulted almost in every country that we were, except for states in the Far East and China where there was no anti-Semitism, and where apparently perhaps Jews assimilated much more quickly. In places like Iraq where Jews have been for thousands and thousands of years, and were being kicked out in the fifties, or in Germany, or in Spain, or in Poland. All these places, the history of these countries was so much...The history of the Jews in Poland...Well, you can’t imagine the history of Poland without the history of the Jews in Poland, and I guess that is the same case in Iraq and that area and Yemen and Spain. All these places the Jews...Morocco. I mean there are all sorts of cities that were built by the Jews, and yet at some point that did not serve the interest of the king or of the masses, and then the Jews were kicked out. So I think that part is a social part, but I think it's more than the social part. I think that singling out Judaism in Western civilization was introduced to these civilizations by Islam and Christianity.

JK: Where do you see the Missoula Jewish community going?

[End of Side A]
RR: It’s very hard for me to know where the Missoula Jewish community is going to go because, so far what I see is a lot of progress in the affiliation of individual Jews with Judaism, but I don’t see enough in the sense of people’s willingness to embrace communal ways of existence. What I mean is that this country in general, but Montana in particular, is based on the ethos of individualism, and Judaism really advocates communal life with community and giving to the community all the time. I think it’s very hard for people who moved here...that’s what people say to me all the time when I say, “Why don’t you do that, why don’t you do that?” They say, “Well, people move here because they want to escape established religion.” I think that they are caught in a limbo because they seek that. If they weren’t seeking established religion—institutionalized religion—then they wouldn’t be with us. And if you want to have institutional religion, then you have to become involved in that. I hope that ultimately, the Jewish community would become more of a community, that there would be more social events. People would enjoy spending time with one another, that people would inform one another about their simchas—the celebrations—about their mourning, about their troubles, so that the community could step in and support people or celebrate with people in these occasions. But it’s very hard. Over and over again I see how a baby is born in the community and we hear about this six months later. I think that’s ridiculous. I think that once the baby is born, they should inform the community and the community should be out there, helping. Or I hear that there was a death, two months ago, and I say “Why shouldn’t the community organize the memorial ceremony or support the people who are mourning?” That’s exactly what I mean when people don’t have an understanding of what the community is.

I would like see people celebrating Shabbat together a lot more, just getting together and having a meal together, and inviting each other. That maybe is starting to happen, but not enough. Then of course I think developing all this—the talents that are in the community...If somebody offers to put together a play and create Shalom Aleichem theater, then that’s great. When you think about Eastern Europe and all these places, there are so many ways of Jewish identification, and I think that what we’re trying to do here is open up the spectrum for everybody—for the artists and for the secularists and for the Conservative and for the Orthodox and for the Reform and for the interfaith and for the socialists. I really wish that there will be more groups of people who will start doing things together that are Jewish, if it’s the Yiddish or if it’s theater, or if it’s that. I think what would be nice is the whole community would be able to benefit from that and enjoy seeing these things. It’s still not happening. It’s happening, but in very small steps, but I think that some things are happening. I think that the Purim play was great, and I think that the Yiddish group is great. I think it’s better people are talking to me now about starting Shabbat morning service. That’s great, and I hope that that would embrace more and more people. I have less concern about whether they will have a building, or whether they will have a permanent rabbi, because I think that there are some problems. I mean it’s nice to have a permanent rabbi that lives in the community. I’m not sure this community really needs that. I think that first they need to build, their community, exactly, and then fly in a rabbi as soon as they, as often, as frequently as they can, if they can even bring one. That’s fine. The last
thing that they should worry about is a building, and that's not what I hear. Many people say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a building." The fact is, according to Jewish tradition, a building is a least important thing. It's nice to have a permanent place so that you can store things at it.

JK: I've found that the reason that some people want a building is because they think it would be—

RR: —Attract people.

JK: Attract people, and also be kind of a central figure. Even though it's an object, but it's...it would have a library, and it would have a place where people could meet that's big enough in case...my living room is kind of small and people are welcome, but there are only so many people that can fit...

RR: Like a community center. That's a good point. Yes, that's true. That's a point that I didn't think about. That's true. Well hopefully they will go in that direction, but I think that what's so special about people in Missoula is that it's such a diverse community and that there are so many people who are intellectual and have all sorts of interests. I wouldn't want the community to lose that once they become established. I would want to see more of these things happening rather than less. But generally I think that, of course I would like to see them grow. We'll see. I think that a lot of this depends on the people who live here, and what their future plans are.

JK: Was there anything else that I didn't ask you that you would like to—

RR: No, no. What's the purpose of interviewing me? I mean, how do you want to fit me into the paper? Then I can answer that question more.

JK: I just want to know what your impressions of this community are.

RR: I think that maybe one thing that you should add is that this community, unlike many other communities even in Montana, don't have a sense of continuity. I don't know why this had happened, whether it's because the people who lived here in the first place were not religious Jews and they formed cultural means of orientation, whether this is a university town, that's why it's more transient. But I think that what Judaism always emphasized is a communication between the generations, and people don't have that here. They don't have a sense of what an old Jewish grandmother or an old Jewish grandfather is like, and that's a major problem because I can see how kids...I mean there are some particularly Jewish mothers in this community that work very hard in establishing Jewish identity with their children, and that's great. But I think in families when this doesn't happen, if there was a figure of a grandfather, that would have made such a big difference. And there isn't or there is not...

JK: Or they live in another city. Ours live in Miami or New York, so we didn't see them as often.
They were there, they were very Jewish, but—

RR: But even if they live in another city...So you walk into a synagogue, and you see other people's grandparents, but here you don't. It's a very diverse group in terms of the interests, but it's very homogenic, age-wise. That's a problem, I think, for the continuity because if you don't have old people I think the young people sometimes, somehow don't connect so much. On the one hand, it's exciting to see so many forty-year-old people being so involved, and you don't see that in other congregations, and there you see only the old people. But then I feel that that is a mixture of...And then it seems to me that sometimes the older type of people can pass on some things that the middle generation has trouble passing them on. It's a certain kind of emotion, and I think when these kids grow up so far away from their Jewish grandparents or they don't have, or they died, or they don't have anybody else like that around, I think that's a little problem. But it might happen for the next generation.

JK: Well, thank you.

RR: Thanks.

[End of Interview]