

EXODUS Project

Interview of Joanne Kahane

January 24, 2017

Page 1

EXODUS

Joanne Kahane.mp4

Date: 01-24-2017

Lynnie Mirvis: Hi, I'm Lynnie Mirvis. I'm interviewing Joanne Kahane today for the Exodus Project, and it is... what is the day? Tuesday, January 24, 2017. Okay, Joanne. Just... would you tell me your full name?

Joanne Kahane: It's Joanne Kahane, and...

Lynnie Mirvis: When were you born and where were you born?

Joanne Kahane: I was born... let me go into this, 1949 in Brooklyn, New York.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Joanne Kahane: Lived in Brooklyn my whole life until I got married, and my husband and I moved to Pittsburgh, where he went to school, and after Pittsburgh, we came down to Memphis and we've been here since 1974.

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you comment a little bit about your education, your background, your family?

Joanne Kahane: We... my husband and I went to public school in Brooklyn, in New York City. We both... in Brooklyn, and we met at Brooklyn College, which was part of the City University of New York. We went to Brooklyn College for our bachelor's degrees and our master's degrees, and we went to the University of Pittsburgh, where he got his doctorate. Mm-hmm.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, wonderful, and what was your field?

Joanne Kahane: I'm a speech pathologist.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. So you're both speech pathologists.

Joanne Kahane: Both speech pathologists. Right.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Going back, did you...?

Page 2

Joanne Kahane: Sure. I have two sons.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: We are very blessed. I have my older son... lives in Jerusalem. He's a rabbi. He is married to a Memphis girl, and they have given us five beautiful grandchildren.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh-huh.

Joanne Kahane: And my younger son lives here in Memphis, and he also married a Memphis girl, and they live here. He's an attorney, and they've given us four beautiful grandchildren.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah, wonderful.

Joanne Kahane: Yes.

Lynnie Mirvis: So tell me, how did you get involved with the Russian Jewish Resettlement Program?

Joanne Kahane: Someone from Jewish Family Services called us and said they were looking for volunteer families to adopt a family that was coming over here, when all... the wave of Jews left the Soviet Union, and they explained to us what would be involved, and we were very excited to help. We thought we would like to do that.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah, wonderful. So what was that like when you first met them? Do you have memories?

Joanne Kahane: It was very interesting. It was quite an experience. We had a beautiful family, and by beautiful, I mean physically they were just... they looked like they could be in a TV commercial. They were just beautiful. It was a wife and a husband and a small boy who was about 5 or 6 years old. They spoke very little English. We spoke no Russian, so it was difficult, but I remember meeting them at the airport, and we made welcome signs. We had one of the other Russian families write welcome signs in Russian, saying "welcome to Memphis, we're happy to have you," that kind of thing. We met at the airport and we took them to their apartment, and we had stocked the refrigerator with foods and everything although we had no idea what they liked or what they would eat, and that's where it started, and then we worked with them to try to find them jobs, get the boy settled into school. We took them to English classes, tried to get driver's licenses for them and that kind of thing, so it was... but for a while, for several months, it was really kind of full time, working with them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. What were your feelings about meeting them for the first time?

Joanne Kahane: I was nervous. I wanted them to have a good im-... I figured they had got to be really, really nervous, and I wanted to try to make them feel comfortable, and I wanted them to be happy and to be... feel like they made the right choice to come here and wanted them to appreciate their Jewishness and the fact they could be Jewish here and it... at first, I was very nervous, and as I got to know them and they got a little bit of English, then I... you know, they became just friends, and the little boy became part of

Page 3

our family. He would sleep here because he was... I had two sons and he was a little younger than they were, but he was like a little brother to them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh.

Joanne Kahane: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: So what kind of things did you do with them?

Joanne Kahane: So I guess that we took them to English classes, tried to teach them English, although the little boy, he learned most of his English from TV. He...

Lynnie Mirvis: Really?

Joanne Kahane: He watched TV. Oh yeah. He could say "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" real well. Um... and then I... we tried to get them jobs. She was very easy to get a job for. She was a kind of accountant type, numbers kind of person, and there were a lot of businesses in the city that were offering positions for the newly arrived immigrants, so we took her down. I remember taking her down to this office downtown. I don't remember the name of the company, but they were needing someone with numbers, and so they gave her a test of... a math-type test, and they gave her this test and they handed her a calculator, and she looked at them and gave the calculator right back, like that. She went through this whole test, got everything right, doing all the calculations in her head, so they immediately hired her. She was very easy to find a job for. He was more difficult because he was a male nurse, and you have to pass the boards and you have... and he couldn't pass the boards because his English wasn't good enough, and it was much more difficult to find him a job. We found him a few little part-time... kind of practical nursing jobs but he should have been able to become a registered nurse, and that never quite happened.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: Do you remember what year that was?

Joanne Kahane: Oh, gee. All right, so I think Josh was in the third grade. It was the mid-'80s.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: It was probably... Josh was born in '79... it was probably like '86 or '87.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: So what surprised you about the experience working with this family? Were there any surprises or really challenges that you didn't expect?

Page 4

Joanne Kahane: There were challenges. I remember one time that the school had a candy sale and the kids got to sell candy as a fundraiser, and the parents had to sign a permission slip, and when I brought the permission slip to him, he refused to sign it. Apparently, I guess, growing up in the Soviet Union under that regimen, he was very wary of signing anything, and I tried to explain, this... all this does is give Pavel permission to sell candy. He said "I don't sign papers. I don't sign anything." It was a real fear for them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: About signing things. The other thing was their confusion about what freedom meant. I remember when I told them we had to go shopping and buy Pavel school uniforms, and he said he didn't want him to wear a school uniform, and I said "well, you know, he really has to." He said "I don't understand. Where's my freedom?"

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: And I said "okay, so your freedom is that you can choose whether or not to send him to this school, but once you've made that choice, you have to follow the rules," and they really didn't have much of an understanding of what freedom meant.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. Hmm... what about the rewards of... anything come up for you?

Joanne Kahane: I got most of my, you know, internal rewards from the child.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: He... we... he really became part of our family, and he was like a sponge, just soaking everything up, and the parents were... did not seem to be happy for... for the month... you know, several... few months that they were here in Memphis. They... he was not happy that he couldn't get a job. He... I tried to explain that he was going to have to learn better English to take the nursing boards. In fact, you have to take first the English as a Second Language Test before you can even take the nursing boards, so he couldn't be practicing his profession. She... she liked her job. I think she was okay at her job, but I think that in Russia she had a much higher level position job. She was extremely bright. I think this was kind of menial work for her, but the little boy just was thriving. He had friends and he loved school and he was just doing really well and he... English, of course, came much more quickly to him.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. What did you notice Jewishly about them and...

Joanne Kahane: It was the same...

Lynnie Mirvis: Like as far as your family...?

Joanne Kahane: Yeah, it was the same situation. The little boy was enthralled with Judaism, with the rituals, with the learning. He couldn't get enough of it. The parents, when... I assumed that they had come here to be Jewish. That was what I had always been told, that they had no freedom of religion and they came here to be Jewish, which in this... but the case in this particular family was not the case. They were not so much

Page 5

interested in being Jewish as they were interested in being successful, having material things, and being part of the capitalistic society.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. So what happened to them?

Joanne Kahane: Yeah, so that's... that's our great failure in life. It's... I... the... they had been here almost a year, and we went to Israel to visit our children. We were gone for two or three weeks. We were gone for a lot of time. When we came back, they were gone. They apparently had been reached out to by some Mormons, and... who promised them home and job and a better life than they had here in Memphis, and so they picked up and moved to Utah, and we hadn't... we really never heard from them again, I had no way of contacting them, until about seven or eight years ago, when I got a phone call from the little boy, who was... had just graduated from college in Utah and was heading to Milwaukee to go to dental school, and he called me because he was dating a girl who was also a Russian immigrant, also from a Jewish family that had been reached out to by the Mormons. They met in Utah, and she was going to go with him to... she was also going... not dental school. She may have been going to medical school, but they were going up to Wisconsin together to go to graduate school, and he said they wanted to learn more about their Jewish roots, and he told me that he remembered everything from those months he had spent at our house. He said [any concept at all that I have of Judaism I have from the time I spent in your house.]

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: So he said "I... we've connected with a rabbi in Wisconsin, and we're going to study with him, but he asked me if I had a Hebrew name, and I didn't know the answer to that, so I'm calling you," so I told him, yes, that he had had a bris when he came here, which was... you know, he was not a child. It was not a baby, and he had a bris. I said "tell him that your bris was performed by Rabbi Nathan Greenblatt," I said, "so he will know that it's legitimate, and your Hebrew name is 'Pesach.'" We chose the name 'Pesach' because it was a holiday of freedom and we thought that that was appropriate," and he was very excited to find out that he had a Hebrew name and he had had a bris, so we kept in touch for a little while, and then that kind of... but he and this young lady were studying with one of the rabbis in Wisconsin and I'm... so it wasn't a total failure.

Lynnie Mirvis: Well, Jewishly, when he was here, what kinds of things did you do with him?

Joanne Kahane: Well, he used to come and spend Shabbos here. He would sleep here and go to shul with us, and eat the Shabbos meals, and he really liked that. He loved Hanukkah, lighting the candles. He came to our Pesach Seders. He... and he was at the Academy, so he was learning. I mean, he was... he was not in the regular Hebrew classes at the Academy. They had a resource teacher that was working with the Russian immigrants, but he was learning the history, and he learned some Torah, and he learned about the... you know, the chomesh, and so he had... he just... to him it was... it was a love of learning, which I did not find in his parents, but I'm... I like to imagine that he and this girl got married and that they are raising a Jewish family.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. Tell me about your background and how do you think that that might have impacted on the choices you made to get involved, you know, with this program?

Page 6

Joanne Kahane: Well, we... I came from a home that was pretty much not religious at all. We... I mean, we did... kind of go to shul on Rosh Hashanah, you know, we got dressed up and we went for a little while, and we lit Hanukkah candles, and our Pesach Seder was really more of a dinner than a Seder. My husband's family was a little more religious. They lit candles on Friday night, although they didn't strictly keep Shabbos, and they did keep a kosher home, but after we got married, after we had children, we both felt the desire to learn more and become more religious and it was a very long process. It was really... I mean, from the day we decided we wanted to become more religious till the day we started actually keeping Shabbos was like 11 years. I mean, it was very slow process, but I understood because of that that things don't happen quickly, like I didn't expect this Russian family to come here and immediately start keeping Shabbos. I knew that they had to take everything a little step at a time, just learn a little bit, and you know, understand you can't just start doing something with no understanding. I had to learn that, so I wanted to help them... again, because I thought that their families were coming here to find their Jewish identity, and that's what made me want to get involved, and maybe that was naïve on my part, but that was why I wanted to get involved.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm, so tell me, do you have other stories about other people you've helped?

Joanne Kahane: Yeah. Oh, yes.

Lynnie Mirvis: Who are from the former Soviet Union?

Joanne Kahane: Yes, well, my big success story is... it has to do with my little friend, Yuri. Yuri was in my son Michael's class.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: At the school, a delightfully lovely young man. They did not come with that big wave of immigration. They came a little earlier because his sister had, unfortunately, leukemia, and in the Soviet Union, they had not been able to do anything to help her, so they granted them visas to come here to go to St. Jude Hospital, which specialized in children's leukemia, so they came, he and his mother and his sister came here, where she was treated. This was in the very early '80s, and I guess it should be noted that his sister, baruch HaShem, is still alive and well and living in California. She had a bone marrow transplant, and Yuri had had a feeling for Judaism really from the time he came. This was something that was important to him. In fact, I remember so clearly that the day of his sister's bone marrow transplant, it was on Yom Kippur, and he sat down at the hospital downtown the whole day and the nurses and the doctors and the people there had kept trying to give him something to eat, and he refused to eat because it was Yom Kippur, and he did not eat until that night, and he... it was his... you know, his sister was having the surgery and he felt this was the time to ask God for help. He wasn't going to eat on Yom Kippur.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Page 7

Joanne Kahane: So he really had a sense of, I think... well, anyway, he did extremely well at the Academy. He had to work on Shabbos because his mother and his... they just had a mother, didn't have a father. They needed the income, so one of the rabbis at the school arranged for one... someone in the community to donate to Yuri the salary that he was making working on Shabbos, donate that to his family so that he could keep Shabbos, and he did that right through high school. He would come here every week and spend Shabbos with us and would get paid from this anonymous... I know who it was, but he didn't want Yuri to know who he was. This anonymous source would pay him what he would have made working that day so that he could keep Shabbos. When he graduated from the high school, because of the experiences with his sister, he wanted to become a doctor, and so he was able to get a full scholarship to Rhodes College, where he graduated phi beta kappa, number one in his class, went on to the University of Tennessee Medical School, became a radiologist, and he married a girl he found... also she was a Russian immigrant. She came to America very, very young. She was 3 or 4 years old, lived in California, and I'm not sure how they met. I think his sister might have made that shidduch, and so we flew out to California several years ago for their wedding. He is a radiologist, working in... just outside of San Francisco... no, it's just outside of Los Angeles. I'm sorry. He's working, and they have two beautiful sons, and we saw them last February. We were in Los Angeles for a wedding and we got to meet with them, and it's a very... that... he's... it's a very beautiful story. It really is. It's one of the great successes of the Russian immigration movement.

Lynnie Mirvis: Hmm.

Joanne Kahane: And then we have another... I have another young man who was in Michael's class, who was a year older than Michael. He still lives here in the city. He is successful professionally. He is a logistics... he has a master's in business, MBA. He works in logistics. He has a beautiful son who I actually tutor. His son needed a little tutoring, so I see him every week. He comes here and I tutor his son, and he's a wonderful father, and you know, he goes to Baron Hirsch, and another success story.

Lynnie Mirvis: How did you get involved with him? With...?

Joanne Kahane: Well, he called me. I mean, I see... well, we've seen him a lot. We would see him at Baron Hirsch and we'd see him at various... I mean, I...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: I hadn't lost touch with him, and when his son was in kindergarten, he called me, and he said that "my son is seeming to have some learning problems. Could you recommend someone for me?" And I said, "well, bring him over," because I do tutoring, and so he brought him over, and I said "I'll be happy to work with him," so it's now... I started in kindergarten. He's now in the fourth grade, and he has made the honor roll this quarter, so he's doing real well, and so I see them every week. That's...

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh-huh. Wow. So tell me, thinking about all of these experience... what stands out? Is there anything else that you haven't talked about that might stand out for you?

Joanne Kahane: Well, I have no regrets. Even though, you know, with Pavel's parents, it maybe didn't work out as I had planned, and for a while I was a little bit upset about that, but I have no regrets because this... I feel like they have found their niches in life

Page 8

and they've... and they're happy, and if we played some role in that, then that makes me happy. It's... it's just being part of something bigger than yourself, and you know, I would do it again.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. Thank you so much, Joanne.

Joanne Kahane: You're so welcome.

Lynnie Mirvis: I appreciate that.

Lynnie Mirvis: I'm going to... Joanne, tell me more about your family and about Yuri. You were... we were talking before.

Joanne Kahane: I did mention that Yuri graduated number one in his class from Rhodes College. He was the valedictorian, but one of the things that was pretty amazing was that the graduation took place on Shabbos, and so he never went, and he did not give the valedictory address because he would not do that on Shabbos. That... I... that's something that has really always stood in my mind. He was... but he... when he was installed in phi beta kappa, that was on a weekday and we were there for that.

Lynnie Mirvis: How wonderful. So what were you feeling when you experienced that?

Joanne Kahane: Just incredible pride. I mean, that was... we were so... and we actually went to his medical school graduation also. I just... if we played any kind of small role in him being able to do that, and he still calls us, right? He would call us for advice, career planning or things like that, and he still calls us now. When we saw him in California, it was just last February when we saw him, and we went out to dinner, oh, and he took us out to dinner, which I thought was very sweet, I was talking with his wife and he was still asking my husband for advice, and you know, his career planning. I mean, it's just... he is very, very special.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: And he lives out there with... his sister is out there too, and the one who recovered from leukemia...

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

Joanne Kahane: And his mom moved out there, so they're all there together.

Lynnie Mirvis: What happened to his sister? Do you know?

Joanne Kahane: She's not married. I think she may have been engaged at one point, but we saw her at the wedding, and she's a beautiful, beautiful girl, and so she... I'm not sure what her profession is, but she works out there.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: And thank God, I mean, she's still... she's still healthy and well.

Page 9

Lynnie Mirvis: I'm sure it's nice to say you made a difference.

Joanne Kahane: Well, that was more St. Jude that made the difference in her life, but I think that a lot of that pushed Yuri towards his faith and his... his commitment to Judaism because he felt like God had done this incredible thing for his sister.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. Is there something in your growing-up years with your family that you learnt that you think might have made a difference in what you did with the people here?

Joanne Kahane: Only... only that in... just as I said before, in our becoming religious, I understood that it was a very, very slow process.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: That you can't... you can't rush it. It has to...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: Has to come when...

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

Joanne Kahane: As you are ready, and it has to come a little at a time.

Lynnie Mirvis: Well, I hear that. I guess I'm asking what made you become so involved. What do you think... is there something...?

Joanne Kahane: Oh, okay.

Lynnie Mirvis: That you were taught, like the fact that you... you know, that you did become so involved with these people?

Joanne Kahane: Just the importance of being part of something bigger than yourself.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: That you have to... that you have to be willing to give. I don't know if you... if someone's life could be better because of you, then you shouldn't miss that opportunity.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: And you know, I think... I think that Yuri practices that, and this other young man whose son I tutor, I think he also practices that concept of... of never miss an opportunity to show an act of kindness.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. And what would you tell your grandchildren about what you did and how it impacted...?

Joanne Kahane: You know, it's interesting. I've never really talked with them about that.

Page 10

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: But I would just encourage them to put themselves out there to try to give of themselves, never miss an opportunity... um... there was a quote once that we come through this world but once. If there is any kindness we can do or anything we can share, do it now. Don't postpone it, because you may not pass this way again.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Joanne Kahane: That's... and I think if they learn that, that's all I need to teach them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay. Is there anything else that we...?

Joanne Kahane: No. I appreciate the opportunity to speak like this. Brought back a lot of nice memories.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh. Thank you so much, Joanne.

Lynnie Mirvis: Sometimes... okay.

Joanne Kahane: I remember one Pesach Seder, right at... this was right in the height of when all of the Russian immigrants had come here, so we invited... I don't remember how many. There had to have been at least 20 of the new Americans here for a Pesach Seder, and we ordered Russian haggadahs. They were Russian Hebrew haggadahs, and I remember moving all the furniture out of our den and putting tables in there and then Yuri sat at the head of the table with my son, Michael, who was running the Seder, and Yuri translated into Russian all the instructions that Michael would give, like, you know, make the sandwich out of the matzo and then he would... Yuri would translate that for them, and so we had a true bilingual Seder. It was one of the most beautiful Seders I ever remembered in my life. It was very special.

EXODUS/pti:dh