Suzanne Offit Transcript

Ronda Spinak: If you could you state your name and tell us a little bit about what you're doing in your rabbinate?

Rabbi Suzanne Offit: My name is Suzanne Offit, and I am a hospital chaplain. I do acute care, post-acute care, and I'm the rabbi on the palliative care team.

RS: I want to go back before we go to your job and what you're doing. More specifically, I want to go back to your use.

SO: Wow, okay.

RS: I want to know if you have any special Jewish memory from your youth or a sacred memory from your youth that you'd like to share with us.

SO: My Jewish identity is very strong. I can't even pinpoint it; it's so all-encompassing. My uncle is a Rabbi in Boston, and his children are younger than I am; one is a rabbi who's married to a rabbi, and another one is also married to a rabbi. So there's this inculcation somewhere along the way, I think, of being proud and very deeply connected to the Jewish people. I have to say the first experience of my own sense of Judaism was summer camp. I wasn't with my parents anymore, and it was Judaism on my own terms, and although I grew up in a conservative movement, I went to UAHC [Union of American Hebrew Congregations] camp in the Reform movement, so it was Judaism according to Debbie Friedman. So there was a song for every sensation, and that was really profound in my Jewish development.

RS: Great. Excellent. I understand summer camp because I went to summer camp. I understand the strength [inaudible]. It's overpowering and really defines – and I know

that you come to the rabbinate later in life. Maybe you can piece together some movements that helped lead you to the rabbinate, if that's at all possible?

SO: Sure. So I'll just give you some highlights along the way. My junior year abroad, I went to Oxford University. Before I got on the plane, my mom said to me what she always said to me whenever I was traveling with her or without her. "Wherever you go, you'll find Jews, and you'll be home. So if you run into any problems, just find some Jewish people. Not like, "Go look for the policemen. Look for the Jews, and you'll be home." And so I got to Oxford, and the first thing I went [to] was to the Jewish society, which was indeed true; I could eat the food, I could be with the people, I was really welcomed, and it was a wonderful experience, and I'm still in touch with some of those people today. So that's the first thing. The second thing I would think, which was probably nine years after that, was the birth of my first two children, which happened to be thirty seconds apart, so I had twins. At their bris, here are these babies I had carried. And when they were born, the first thing I said to my mother was, "If you could just promise me that nothing will ever happen to them. That nothing…" And she said, "I wish I could promise that. If I could, I would." And there I was, eight days later, putting them under the knife. What is it about religion that causes us to do something like that? I'm glad I did – welcoming them into the covenant. I also noticed, in that moment, the power of bringing my boys into the covenant, the tradition of our people, is that it was the first time I felt welcomed into the covenant because I don't have a mark on my body. What if I had had girls? I have three boys now. Would I have been welcomed into the covenant? Would I have had that sensation of being welcomed into the covenant? So that was very big for me also, really foundational. After the birth of my boys – and I was nursing them all the time – I lived down the street, literally two blocks away, from Hebrew College where it used to be, and my mom said to me, "While you're home" – because I was staying home with them – "just take a class. Take any class. Just keep your brain going." Hebrew College was close enough that I could nurse them, go take a class, and come back, and not miss a nursing opportunity. So I signed up for a class, and I was the

only one who signed up for “Modern Israeli Women Writers.” So disappointed, but someone called me and said, “We have this new teacher Judith Kates; she’s a fabulous teacher. Why don’t you take whatever class she’s teaching?” It happened to be a Tanakh class. I had never even heard the word Tanakh before. I’d heard Torah. I have so many things. So I took this class with Judith Kates, and I enveloped myself in Torah in a way that I had never experienced anything before. Maybe it was the combination of being a new mother – all these things. I just could not get enough Torah. PS I stayed studying with Judith Kates for years [and] started at the rabbinical school. She also taught my Bereshit class and Devarim class. So she was my Torah in my mother’s milk as well as all through ordination. I think those are really my pivotal Sinai moments in my life of Jewish experience.

RS: Nice. [Recording paused.] – no idea about wanting to be a rabbi. Had you ever thought about wanting to be a rabbi? Maybe you can share with us – was there an “aha” moment? There must have been a tipping point when you knew you wanted to become a rabbi.

SO: I never thought about being a rabbi. There was an "a-ha” moment when someone said to me – I had had a job and I left and I was staying home with my kids – “Well, what are you going to do?” I found myself saying, “I want to be a rabbi.” It just kind of came out. Over time, I went to New York; I looked at JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary]. It was too hard to go back and forth. But I really found that I wanted to be a rabbinical student. I wanted to be in this room with books and study and just dwell in Talmud and Torah and the discussions and the sense of the divine. I just love that. So they ordained me, and I had to leave. But I just wanted to be a rabbinical student.

RS: So, in other words, you really don’t really want to be a rabbi; you just want to be a rabbinical student.

SO: It's interesting. My whole perspective now is on Parshat Pekudei because that's the Parshat this week, so that's where my head is. So I wanted to be a rabbinical student, and I didn't know what kind of rabbi I wanted to be. Since I didn't start rabbinical student school until I was forty, I knew that I couldn't change directions and go and really be a pulpit rabbi. That would've been really hard on my husband and my family. But then I found my niche, but the sense of being in rabbinical school – I realized just like the Mishkan, the Mishkan in Shemot, the Mishkan in the book of Exodus is portable; it's made to be portable. It's this place where you have the in-dwelling of God, the sense of the sacred, but it's actually portable. So I learned, by the end of rabbinical school, that I'm an embodied theologian, that I carry me with me, and I carry my sense of the sacred with me wherever I go. I don't have to be in the rabbinical school. What I do need to be is with other people who are interested in engaging in the sense of the sacred.

RS: That's great. Let's change directions. I'll come back. Sense of the sacred? Is that God? If it is God, could you share your understanding of God? If the sense of the sacred is not God, then you could share with us what that means to you.

SO: Okay. So people love to say to the rabbi, "Do you believe in God?" And I have that brief moment that I don't answer, and it totally freaks people out. Because I want to say, "What do you mean by 'believe' and what do you mean by 'God?'" The term God is just so big and so used and abused that it's a really hard word for me to use unless I know I'm in a safe space with like-minded individuals. It's like talking about anything that's really intimate and personal and could go in any direction. I say sacred. I say divine. I say that I have an inkling, I have a sense, I have a desire to have an experience of the divine and the sacred. I can't even say those words: "I believe in God." It's too big, and it's harsh, and it doesn't resonate with me.

RS: You're not the only rabbi.

SO: I know. I know.

RS: How do you bring the sacred into your life? Can you tell us a story around how you bring the sacred into your life?

SO: Yeah. So, again, going back to the Parshat – well, the Parshat last week – when they're building the Mishkan, they're the Cherubim, and they're these two things. They look at each other. Right? They look at each other. It's kind of Buber "I-Thou." So, for me, if I'm in deep connection with another person, that's my sense of the sacred. That's why I think of myself as an embodied theologian because I live my theology every day, and that's why I found my rabbinate, my place in the world, my sacred space in the hospital chaplaincy because I make these deep connections with people. I honor their vulnerability. They're scared, they're worried, and they're really honest. I work with families, and I work with maybe parents or children, and we're in a really sacred space. If you've ever been really sick or you know someone who's dying – or I sit with dying people – it's a really holy place, and I love that. It's also really intense, which I also love. So all those things enable me that sense of the divine. There are other ways I feel the divine in the world – blessings of gratitude, like most people, that sense of nature being that vastness that we can't even comprehend. But for me, the theology of connection, being in conversation with someone and even deeply listening or just being, we don't even have to be talking. That, to me, is a very sacred place …

RS: This might be redundant, but I'm going to ask it anyway because I have a sense what the answer might be. Do you have a mission or goal in your rabbinate?

SO: Wow. Do I have a mission or goal in my rabbinate? Sometimes my goal is just to make it through the week, from one Shabbat to the next. Sometimes, my mission or goal in my rabbinate is to somehow get everyone to be thoughtful or mindful about the trajectory of life because I deal with a lot of people in end-of-life issues. Sometimes my goal is just to shout from the rooftops that end of life is not a medical procedure but a life cycle event that we should think about and plan and enjoy and honor. Is that a rabbinic

mission? I don't know. I never even thought of it that way, but I appreciate the question.

RS: You're in the early phases of your rabbinate, even though you're a bit older.

SO: Right. I'm still in my first five years.

RS: That's what I'm saying. Just wondered if you had a sense. That's a very good answer. That's a very good answer. Can you tell us a story around your work with the seniors and their end-of-life issues that taught you something that was particularly meaningful to you? I understand that they're all holy moments in a certain way, but is there one that stands out in your mind, where you just felt like, "I learned something new," or "I got something different," or "I heard something for the first time?"

SO: There's so many. I'm just trying to figure out –

RS: [inaudible]

SO: This is not so new for me anymore, but I think probably my first patient who said to me, "I'm ready. I'm ready." I didn't understand that with my first patient, and I needed to listen carefully. My first patient who said that to me was a ninety-year-old man, a Holocaust survivor, and he had outlived everyone in his family. The social workers and everyone was working to get him to take his heart medication because then he would feel better. And he just said, "I'm finished. I'm done. I'm not sad. I'm tired, but I'm complete." And it scared people around him, but I think it's something to really honor. We worry, of course. It could be depression. It could be all sorts of psychological issues, but I do think we need to honor when someone says, "I'm done. I'm full of gratitude. I feel great, but ninety years, ninety-five years – I'm done." It really enabled me to actually enjoy my end-of-life work even more when dealing with healthy seniors. I'm not working in pediatrics. I need to make that very clear. I'm working with seniors. So being able to hold that sense of "Thank you, I'm done."

RS: You have the opposite side, right? You're here. You're working with somebody, and they take your hand. They say, "I'm scared. I don't want to go."

SO: That happens all the time.

RS: Okay. What do you say? How does your being a rabbi help you to –? Can you tell us a story around something like that?

SO: So I say, "Let's talk about it. What do you think?" So someone says to me, "Rabbi, I'm afraid." And then I say, "You know, tell me about that. What do you think you're afraid of?" Oftentimes, people are afraid of pain. Right? They're afraid of pain, and we assure them that we can help them with pain. I said to a man one time, "Are you afraid of dying?" And he said, "I'm not afraid of dying. I'm afraid of not being here anymore." And that's a really important language that I now give to people because they can't quite figure it out. They're not afraid of dying. They're afraid of not being here. "I'm afraid of missing my child's wedding, my grandchild's birth." But what's it like to be absent and to know you're absent? So, I talk to people about why they're afraid. They're afraid of not being here. They're afraid of pain. They're afraid of what's dying like. We assure people that this passage could be very calm. I've read a lot of books. One book I love called *Final Gifts* talks about, from a hospice nurse's perspective, that most people die, if they're dying of an illness, in a really calm, thoughtful, easy way and to assure people that they're fine. Some people are very anxious, and they say they want to die. They want to die. I might say well, "Tell me why do you want to die." "Because I'm in pain." So some people think of dying as a relief from their symptoms, and then I often say, "We have less drastic measures than dying if you want us to help you with your symptoms." Some people are just so afraid they don't even want to talk about it. So just creating that sacred space of, "I'm here to listen to whatever it is you need to talk about." The most difficult ones are people who have a theology of punishment. They think that their death or the pain they're experiencing is punishment for something they've done wrong. Then

we get into discussions about forgiveness, forgiving others, forgiving self, and those are a little more complicated. But people's understanding of death so much has to do with the theology that they lived with. So it's kind of uncovering all those complications to be able to get someone to a more comfortable, accepting place at time of death.

RS: Interesting. Just a side question; it has nothing to do with this, but do you think that people who have had a stronger sense of Judaism in their lives have an easier way with death, or do you think it has no relationship at all to the strength of their commitment to religion?

SO: It's an interesting question. I've been reading a lot of grief theory lately. "Grief" as in any time you have a loss – could be your own loss of yourself. Grief theory has not really been connected to theology so much in the past, so it's nice to read grief theory as a theologian. But most people who have an ability to make meaning in their lives do better with grief. Right? What is the meaning of this, or can you make meaning after the loss? So, people who tend to have a sense of a connection to a belief system, perhaps that belief system could be Judaism, they see their loss or their end of their life in the spectrum of belief, and that makes it easier. I don't think we could make a blanket statement that anyone who's religious has an easier sense of loss or grief because they can make meaning. Because like I said, the theology they might have is punishment, and that certainly doesn't make it easier. But to be able to find meaning and to make meaning in your life definitely helps with any kind of loss, including the loss of self.

RS: Very interesting. Did you actively seek to work with seniors?

SO: No.

RS: When you were in rabbinical school – I want to hear how that ended up happening. Was that a surprise to you?

SO: It was a surprise. So I came to working with seniors by mistake. I wanted to do chaplaincy, and here in Boston, we have Hebrew Senior Life, which is a huge institution for housing, health care, and medical research, all about the elderly. It's a Harvard teaching affiliate, so it's a very big institution. They had a new clinical pastoral education program on Jewish geriatric chaplaincy. And I really liked it because I had three kids at home when I was in school, and they didn't have overnight call. So I decided this was a CPE [continuing professional education] unit for me because I could still go home at the end of the day and be with my family. And within the first week or so, I just fell in love with the demographic. And within the first month, I knew that this was what I wanted to do, and I haven't left Hebrew Senior Life. I've done five units of CPE there. I've been working there. I started my internship there when I was in rabbinical school. I did my CPE residency there. I've been employed there for years. I've done my professional development. I've done community work, congregational work, and now I'm doing acute care hospital chaplaincy. So I've been very blessed that I found this, and I really believe that it's my place. Frederick Buechner, who's a Christian theologian, says the place God calls you to is the place where your deep joy and the world's great need meets. And I really feel like this is my place.

RS: That's good. You go home at the end of the day. You don't have call, right?

SO: Yeah, I do have call during the day. Now I do, but that's okay.

RS: Your kids are a little bit older. Do you still have children at home? What I want you to talk about is the balance between career and family and how you manage those. Maybe a story around that.

SO: When I started rabbinical school, I had three children in elementary school. In fact, I started rabbinical school the day before my youngest son started kindergarten. So I need to thank my parents for getting my kids off to school for six years. And then when I started High Holidays in my third year of rabbinical school, my parents would have to

come – because Judaism is so much in the kitchen, right? So my parents would come and shop, and they would create all the yontif meals, and I would be preparing for the holidays, and I'd be on the bema, and I could not have done it without my parents and my husband. I mean, everyone was great, and my kids were falling into the role of rabbi's kids. So now I have two kids who graduated from college, one who's going to be graduating from high school, but I'm still home, and I still have my husband, thank God. My parents are fragile and not able to come anymore. Balance. Every day's different. Some days are balanced one way, and some days are balanced another way. It's a journey. I don't think it's something that you achieve; it's something that you're constantly working on. I am never quite sure. I'm always feeling guilty one way or the other. Am I with my kids enough? Am I with my husband enough? What about work?

RS: Not unlike many people. Going back to your job now, do you ever get attached to seniors? How have you dealt with continual loss? It's got to be a lot of loss for you.

SO: The question that people ask me the most, is how do I deal with the loss? The weight of the intensity or trauma or this constant loss. So when I worked in the housing sites, it was more of a congregational setting. I worked there for seven years, and I loved my people, loved them, and then I would lose them. It was hard. It was really hard. But part of the training in being a chaplain is learning how to hold that and where to hold that and creating rituals for those losses. Sometimes my doing a funeral was so helpful to me, so I could have that ritual of putting them in their final resting place, covering them with Earth, and then hugging the family and walking away. That was really helpful. It doesn't mean I don't miss them. Now it's a little different because the relationships are much faster, but the intensity and the loss still exists. I practice yoga a couple times a week, one on one with the teacher, who is very in tune to the challenges of my work. I very much live in my body. I try to be as integrated with my body and my work. I am very particular about what I eat. I'm very intentional about the food I eat. So the only way I can take care of myself is holistically. I try to get outside even in the winter. I love

snowshoeing. My husband and I just walk and walk and walk. And having close friends. Again, it's a journey. It's a constant effort to be able to hold the stress and the pain and the sadness and the joy of life all together in one body.

RS: Great answer. Let me ask you this question. Are there special qualities or a special skill that a chaplain must have in order to be a good chaplain?

SO: Yeah. To be a chaplain takes a lot of training. Right? A lot of training. A lot of self-awareness. A lot of patience. A lot of deep listening. Strong sense of self. Oh, there's so many things. I think if you can deeply sit with someone and really honor where they are and hold them from underneath and respond in a way that they're prepared to respond to me. For instance, I had a woman who was clearly, clearly dying. And her son and daughter were not prepared. They were just preparing to take her home, and she was going to live, and they couldn't see. She wasn't eating. She wasn't moving. She wasn't talking. She was only sleeping. They weren't really ready for anything else to happen but to take her home, that she would live, and they would be great. So while the son was telling me all this – "We ordered the hospital bed, and we have the twenty-four-hour nurse and everything's going to be great." I knew I couldn't push him. All I could say to him was, "So, what's your plan B?" That's all I said. He goes to my shul, so I, of course, saw him at the shiva, and he came up to me. He said, "I need to talk to you." It's his shiva; he can say what he wants. He said, "I just want you to know when you said that to me ..." I said, "When I said what to you?" "When you said 'Plan B' to me, at first, it really made me angry, but then I realized what you were saying to me. I realized that I couldn't hear anyone else, but I could hear that." Okay. So much of my work is getting people from point A to point B but solely on their terms when they're ready and in a way that they can accept it. The doctor comes in and gives a prognosis and then he or she leaves, and then it's me and the family. So how do you talk to someone in a way that they can handle, they can hear, they can respond? I think that's the most important thing.

RS: Did you come into this work … Here, at Hebrew College, did they [inaudible] skills to do this? Do you think that you came with a certain desire to connect going in? Obviously, you have to have a desire to connect with people to do this kind of work. I'm curious what the [program] – I actually know somebody who came here, went through two years ago. I didn't realize it until I got here, and I was like, oh, this is where – Jessica (Yosefi?) became a chaplain. I don't know if you know her.

SO: So where do you gain the skills to become a chaplain? So clinical pastoral education is very important because, in clinical pastoral education, you learn by doing. You get a goal, you go out, you do your chaplaincy, you come back, you review it, you realize what was good, what was bad, and then you integrate and you go deeper. So every time you learn, you're going deeper and deeper and deeper. But that's professional development, like in any career. But I think what I learned in my rabbinical school, what was so profound here at Hebrew College, was the value and the sacred sense of intentional deep connection with people. My teachers were so supportive and loving. The dean at the rabbinical school here, Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, who's part of your process – she said, "The rabbi has two things for her community. One is to love them, and the other is to have a vision better for them than they actually can see themselves." That's really my beginning point with everything. I love people and my vision. I have a vision for them. Not a job description for them but a sacred vision for them. It reminds me of a Mary Oliver poem. Mary Oliver is a Christian theologian poet. She's from Cape Cod. She's a nature poet, and in her volume called *Thirst*, [which] came out in 2006, the first poem is called "Messenger," and the first line of the poem is, "My work is loving the world." If I had a mantra, I think that would be it. So to greet each person with a posture of love and a desire for deep understanding takes me pretty much where I want to go.

RS: Do you believe in touching [inaudible]?

SO: I do.

RS: Maybe you can speak to the physical aspects because it would seem to me that you connect. You said you were in your body. So would you share with us your belief about touch in terms of healing and sacredness?

SO: So, I believe, in my chaplaincy, I use all five senses. Touch is very important. I ask people if I can touch them. When I give them a blessing or prayer, I ask if I can hold their hands. Older people and even some younger people who I've worked with, if they can't hear or they're feeling so incapacitated, I ask them if I can touch them, and I put my hands on their face. I go very slowly because if they start to withdraw, then I would immediately respond to that. I think touch is so important, especially in the elderly. Could you imagine that the only person who touches you would be someone medical? I know that they love to go and get their hair done. Not only because they want their hair done but because someone's touching them. So touch is very important to me with all my patients, but also in my patients who are depressed, or if they have a compromise, I use music. We have an art department. So sometimes, for some patients, I'll ask the art department to do a little art show. We need beauty in our lives, right? Real beauty – it nourishes us. I sing. Thank goodness for my iPhone; I can call any song at any time for anyone. So music, art, touch, sometimes taste. Any way to bring beauty or joy into a moment is a very powerful tool that I love using.

RS: Great. Do you have a favorite piece of text?

SO: Well, my favorite piece of text this week because it's Pekudei – I love the end of the book of Shemot when God comes down and fills the Mishkan. Moses can't even get in. I love that. It totally goes against everything I believe, that God could actually fill a space that we can't go in, that God actually has a physical nature, that I'm actually believing that God comes down. I mean it goes against everything I believe in, but it is one of my favorite texts of all time. I just love that idea. Maybe that's what I crave. I don't know.

RS: In the population in which you work, is there a single most asked question within that population? "Rabbi …?"

SO: A single most asked question that someone asks of me – family members always ask me, "How do you do this work? How do you hold this pain? It's so sad?" Even when I was doing a lot of funerals, people would ask me, "How do you do this?" And I always say, "I'm not burying my mother every day. I'm not with my mother in the hospital every day." There is a little distance, and I have to honor that distance, and I'm only good to my patients if I have a little distance. So that's the most frequently asked from families. Because my patients are older, a lot of my patients say, "I didn't know a woman could be a rabbi." In fact, half of my patients, maybe more than half my patients, are not Jewish. So they're fascinated that there's such a thing as a women rabbi. I have many little old Catholic ladies who are so happy to have a female clergyperson and [say] "How? Why did you get to be here?" So that sense that a woman can be a clergyperson is often a point of astonishment and a beginning for a conversation.

RS: That's great. That's really good. What advice would you give a rabbi/chaplain starting out today? A chaplain, I guess, who's a rabbi starting out today. A young woman you're counseling; she comes to you. What advice would you give?

SO: If a young person came to me and said that he or she wanted to be a chaplain or is starting to be a chaplain, I would really ask why? "Why do you want to do that?" I would just encourage that person to be really patient because it's in the patience that you open your heart to all the learning that you need. You cannot hurry chaplaincy training. It only can go as fast as you can develop, that you can integrate your learning and how fast you can evolve into this, being a chaplain. Same as a rabbi. The same as a rabbi. I mean, as soon as one starts rabbinical school, people often call you a rabbi, and then you spend the next ten years feeling like a fraud. But I do believe that patience – because you really evolve and develop into both of those roles that you fully embody. So it takes

time and patience.

RS: Have you ever had a personal crisis in your life? I guess the question is can you share with us a personal crisis in your life and how Judaism might've helped you get through it?

SO: I think the biggest personal crisis in my life now is the decline of my parents. It's very hard. My mom was strong and mighty and a force of nature and just loving and good and kind. And through a series of strokes, she's been reduced to an empty vessel. So not only is that hard to see, but she's in Pennsylvania, and I'm in Massachusetts, and I see people like her all the time. So the crisis for me is, why am I taking care of other people's parents and not my own parents? But it's the same – honor your mother and your father. I'm honoring someone else's mother and father. How does Judaism –? I can't separate myself from my Jewish self. I really can't. I don't even know how to answer that question because that would mean that there's a part of me that's talking to another part of me. And I just feel so integrated that if I'm making it through, it's because of my Jewish practice. It's because of my Jewish education; it's because of the hours of text study that I've done. I don't have a better answer.

RS: That's a good answer. That's a good answer. Do you have a spiritual practice? I know you do yoga. Do you combine that with Jewish meditation?

SO: So I do meditation. Yes, I love mediation. I don't meditate [for] a long period of time, but I can grab five or ten minutes here and there, and that's really powerful for me. One of my newest things is I listen to a lot of gospel music because it's really beautiful. I have faith envy because they're so faith-driven, and a lot of gospel music is based in text, so I just translate it into Hebrew, and it's something that I did in my own morning prayers. It's just really beautiful. I use gospel music in my work. It helps uplift some of my patients if it's culturally appropriate. I find myself really drawn and supported by really gorgeous gospel music.

RS: That's great. Your organization was given a grant. Maybe you can tell – that's pretty exciting – how that came about and what does that mean. Share a bit about that.

SO: A few years ago, a woman called Hebrew College Rabbinical School looking for a rabbi to spend a few hours every week with her mother. She didn't identify herself, but she was just looking for a rabbi, and so a friend of mine answered the phone, and he said, "I have just the person for you," knowing that I love working with older people and this was great. So, this woman called me, and she said, "I was wondering if you could meet with my mother and me, and I want to see if you're the right rabbi to spend some time with my mother." So we met at a deli in Brookline, and the older woman was Mrs. Charlotte Bloomberg, who's Michael Bloomberg's mom. The woman calling was Mrs. Bloomberg's daughter, Marjorie Tiven. I didn't know, but she had been looking for a rabbi for a year to spend some time with her mom, and she had a very specific bar that this rabbi should meet. We hit it off. We had a great time. So every Friday for – I don't know – a year and a half or so, I would go visit Mrs. Bloomberg in her home in Medford, Massachusetts, and we would sit, and we would talk. Sometimes we would sing Adon Olam, whatever she wanted to talk about. She told me a lot about her past, and she loved playing Scrabble. We'd play Scrabble. She's the queen of the two-letter word. We had a lovely relationship, and I also built a really lovely deep relationship with the daughter over those few years. When Mrs. Bloomberg was in the hospital, I would go visit her in the hospital, and just became an important source of support for the whole family. So when Mrs. Bloomberg was a hundred and two and a half, and a half, she quietly passed to the next world, and I did her funeral, so there was a private funeral; it was about fourteen people. Then I did the public memorial, which was a few hundred, four hundred people, and then I did the unveiling. After that, the daughter asked me – at the beginning, she asked me if she could pay me, and I said, "No." I didn't know how to be paid for such a thing. So after, she wanted to pay me in some way. I said, "The best way to honor my work with your mom would be to give a gift to Hebrew College. That's how we met. That was our connection." I would love it if it could be a gift to create some

kind of support for people to learn chaplaincy because my education helped me to understand what I was doing with Mrs. Bloomberg. So the Bloomberg Philanthropies created this lovely gift to Hebrew College, enabling students who wanted to to pay for their chaplaincy education, for one unit of chaplaincy as well as a stipend because when you take the class, you can't be working. That was it. Also, it includes some more professional training when they get back into the classroom. So it was really beautiful, lovely. I'm honored by their gift, and it's really just a wonderful connection for me, for the Bloombergs, and for the school.

RS: That's great. How wonderful is that?

SO: Really wonderful.

RS: So amazing. One of those nice, little paybacks. That's great. Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that.

SO: Sure.

RS: Is there a question that I haven't asked that you had hoped I would ask? I always ask that because sometimes I don't – sometimes people are hoping I'm going to ask this, and then I go in this direction.

SO: The only thing I would add because you asked about the work-life balance is that going to rabbinical school when you're forty and then also becoming a chaplain – so I had six years of rabbinical school, then my chaplaincy residency, and all that – that's a huge personal transformation, huge personal transformation, which I loved every second of it, but it was really hard on my husband. I think that's a really important thing to talk about. It was very difficult, and we went to counseling together to help us through that. We talk about it openly and out loud because to go to rabbinical school is to change, and to be a woman rabbi is to be in a difficult place. And to be married to a woman rabbi, whether you're a man or a woman, is a difficult thing to do. I would encourage people to seek a

third voice to help navigate those really difficult things. My husband then actually underwent his own transformation, and he left twenty-five years in the investment business and went back to Harvard for graduate school and now has a totally different career. He said that he brushed his teeth every morning next to someone with a soulful job and that he wanted a more soulful life as well. So through our work together, he was able to transform and has a lovely existence himself. I do think when talking about women rabbis that we have to talk also about women rabbis' partners because the old model was that the rebbetzin was supportive and subservient, and that's not true. Shayna Rhodes, who's in school here, who went to school with me – when people said, "If a women spouse of a male rabbi is a rebbetzin, what do you call a man who's married to a woman rabbi?" And she said, "Lucky." So it's an important conversation to have. "What's it mean to be married to a woman rabbi?"

RS: So would you say then that your husband owes you in a way for his transformation? I don't know what he's doing now and if it's more soulful. I can imagine it must be. It must have been a spark for him.

SO: So I wouldn't say he owes me just because we don't use that kind of language, but I'm so appreciative that I could turn our household upside down, change it by one hundred and eighty degrees by going to rabbinical school. We just do this constant dance of support and gratitude so that we could both become our fullest selves. Every night in rabbinical school, I'd be exhausted, fall into bed, and he would just look at me and say, "I'm so proud of you. I'm so proud of you." It's a lot of work, but we are so appreciative of each other. We started going the resentment route, and that wasn't working. Right? The anger and resentment route. So it was really very freeing to find the gratitude and growing route, which is another option.

RS: What did he end up doing?

SO: He went to the Harvard Kennedy School, and he is doing a couple things. One is he works for the mayor of Somerville, which he's loving. He loves the mayor and learning all about public policy and what it means to serve a community. He also is working with some non-profits. He works with Grameen America, which is microfinance. He works with My Life My Choice, which is a remarkable non-profit to help women and girls out of the sex slave industry, and he works with a group called Generation Citizen, which takes social sciences into the classroom, and he also works with another group helping people have a second career in whatever they're looking for. He just became President of our shul, which is crazy. So we're both busier than ever but in a really great way.

RS: Thank you so much. This was a pleasure to meet you …

[END OF INTERVIEW]