Madeline Bender Transcript

Jayne Guberman: This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, February 8th, 2015. I'm here with Madeleine Bender at the Meet Me at Sinai Day of Learning at B'nai Jeshurun in New York City. We're going to conduct an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive. Maddie, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Madeline Bender: Yes.

JG: Great. So let's start with your telling me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

MB: Okay. I was born in Manhattan on November 17th, 1997. I grew up first in Greenwich Village, and then I moved to the Upper East Side for kindergarten.

JG: And beyond.

MB: Yes.

JG: You live in the Upper East Side now. So tell me a little bit about your family and also especially their attitudes towards an involvement in Jewish life.

MB: Okay. Well, my mother went to Jewish day school, so she's always been pretty involved in Judaism. I guess our involvement in our synagogue is mainly her doing.

JG: Which is your synagogue?

MB: B'nai Jeshurun. Yeah. But my father grew up in Indiana, so he's always been a bit distanced from Judaism, but he attends services when he can. I guess both my parents and my sister – I have a younger sister. We're all pretty involved, and we have positive attitudes about Judaism and our involvement in it.

JG: So what was your involvement as you were a kid growing up? I mean, just describe it a little bit.

MB: Yeah. So I went to Hebrew school starting in second grade, I believe. Before coming to B'nai Jeshurun in fourth grade, I attended something like five other Hebrew schools. We belonged to a number of different synagogues because we could never find one that really had a good Hebrew school or that had interesting services. So throughout my childhood, I was experiencing a lot of different types of teaching in Hebrew school and different rabbis. Then, we came to B'nai Jeshurun, and since then, I continued at Hebrew school. I was bat mitzvahed in 2010.

JG: Here?

MB: Yeah. I've been involved in the teen program at B'nai Jeshurun since.

JG: Cool. Is there an educational program? What is the teen program here?

MB: So the teen program's a mix of volunteer work, teaching text studies, organizational meetings, outreach, service-learning trips, things like that.

JG: Sounds very interesting. Where are you at right now in your life in terms of your education?

MB: I'm a junior in high school.

JG: And you go where?

MB: I go to Horace Mann.

JG: Okay. So just tell us a teeny little bit about that community. What is that like in terms of who's there and what kind of a community?

MB: So it's a private school in the Bronx, and I'd say it's predominantly Caucasian and Jewish. But the thing is, related to Judaism, none of the other kids – a minority of the kids are actually practicing Jews. The majority of them, I'd say, were Reform, and they go to Reform synagogues. After they were bar or bat mitzvah, they didn't really attend services after that. They have Judaism almost as a side note. So even though I'm in a community and in an environment that's predominantly Jewish, I wouldn't say that everyone can empathize with me or I can tell everyone about what I'm going through as a Jew or the different struggles or benefits I might have.

JG: Yeah. Do you feel like you have a Jewish community of your own peers and friends through the synagogue or through youth groups and that kind of thing?

MB: Yeah, definitely. A lot of my closest friends who are Jews, a lot of my closest friends in general, belong to the B'nai Jeshurun teen program. We're a very close-knit group of people.

JG: But they go to school all over the place.

MB: Yeah. All over the city – Beacon, LaGuardia, Heschel.

JG: Yeah. So when did you first become aware of matters of gender and that gender mattered to you personally as a Jew and/or just in general?

MB: Okay. I'll first answer that question just relating in general. So all throughout lower school and middle school, so maybe first grade to sixth grade, it wasn't a huge deal. But once I hit sixth, seventh, eighth grade, there started to be honors math courses mainly. I was placed in an honors math course in eighth grade; it was a thirty-person course, and I was one of four girls. So like that's when the gender imbalance, I guess, started to appear weird to me. That's something I noticed. Since then, it's opened up my eyes, at least academically, to gender imbalance, gender inequality, and the different struggles and differences of both genders. With gender and Judaism – when I was studying a lot

and writing the first draft of my d'var Torah in 2009, 2010, so I was around thirteen, I had Parshat Vayigash, which is with Joseph and his brothers. It's a really touching scene when he recognizes that he's Joseph, and they all hug, and they're a family. I was going back to try to find precedents for a scene like that. I kept noticing that all of the figures in the Bible were male, and all the ones that had these great moments were all male. I couldn't really find a strong female figure like that who had an interesting scene in that way.

JG: So that struck you at that point?

MB: Yeah.

JG: Yeah. In your life here at BJ [B'nai Jeshurun] – because you'd been here since what grade?

MB: Fourth.

JG: Fourth. So in your life here at BJ, how would you say you experienced gender, and what women could do, what men could do, what anybody couldn't do?

MB: Yeah. So at B'nai Jeshurun, it's really been an equal opportunity type thing. Because one of our rabbis is female, Rabbi Felicia, I've always thought that women and men have the same opportunity to achieve and to do anything in our community. But I remember I was at a bat mitzvah of my friend who's – I know she's a Sephardic Jew, but I'm not sure what synagogue. Her bat mitzvah, I go – she was one of my closest friends, and she'd been practicing for a while. So I assumed it'd be a normal service. But I showed up in the shul, and she couldn't actually read from the Torah. She just chanted haftarah, standing with a really small podium, not even near the ark. Then she didn't even give a d'var Torah, and she just sat down. I was just really confused.

JG: Did you talk to her about it afterward?

MB: Not really. I assumed that – well, I asked my mom first. I was like, “What’s going on? I chanted Torah. Why isn’t she?” But she explained to me how different synagogues have different policies, different types of Judaism. But I never really talked to my friend about it.

JG: You hadn’t really experienced it before, it sounds like.

MB: No.

JG: What did it feel like to you to watch that?

MB: I was surprised. I was taken aback. I also felt offended in a way because I'd seen male friends who don't have as great a voice, or they clearly didn't work as hard as I knew my friend had. It just didn't seem fair to me that they were allowed to get up on the bimah and chant Torah and give a d'var Torah that just wasn't that great when she had really worked hard, and I knew she was intelligent enough to come up with a really profound d’var Torah, and she couldn’t.

JG: Had you ever noticed anything else, or did that open up your eyes to look around and see other places?

MB: That was, I guess, a watershed moment that opened my eyes up. Afterward, I saw things like that. I went to another bar mitzvah, where I had to sit upstairs, and all the guys were sitting downstairs, and they wouldn't give me a prayer book. I was like, "I know all the prayers. Can I have a prayer book?" And they were like, "No."

JG: Interesting. Were any of the women saying prayers upstairs in the balcony?

MB: It didn’t seem like it. I was sitting more with my seventh-grade friends, who, at the time, were texting during services. But when I looked back and looked at the women there, they were just sitting there, staring at a wall because we were way above the

action.

JG: Interesting. So would you say that you consider yourself a feminist?

MB: Yes.

JG: What does that mean to you?

MB: I think it means just equality between all genders.

JG: Would you say that you have friends who consider themselves feminists? Either boys or girls?

MB: Yeah, I do.

JG: Boys, too?

MB: Yeah.

JG: Cool. Given that you grew up here largely at BJ in a very egalitarian environment, would you say that Jewish feminism has helped shape the way you see the world? What does the idea of Jewish feminism mean to you?

MB: So I'm going to go off on maybe a bit of a tangent, maybe not.

JG: Please do. Go for it.

MB: Okay. So around two to three years ago, I applied and was accepted into a year and a half long research training internship with Ma'yan, which is a Jewish feminist organization. So before that, I really didn't – I don't think I connected Judaism to feminism. Then I started attending meetings twice a month, and I started really doing a lot of deep thinking into what Jewish feminism meant to me. I think now that the internship's over, I can say that the idea of Jewish feminism and the practices it involves

has really shaped who I am as a Jew, and even as a person, and definitely as a feminist.

JG: So say some more about that. How has it shaped you as a person and as a Jew?

MB: Yeah. Well, before I was in the internship, I felt like I didn't have A, the tools, and B, the confidence to really speak my opinion and tell people what I thought and convince them if they had an opinion that was radically different from my own. We learned about what to do – well, one of our sessions – we had a lot, but one of them was what to do when somebody who's an anti-feminist or who's a meninist if they call you out, how to fend off them and how to defend yourself and stand your ground in that respect.

JG: Was that eye-opening for you?

MB: I mean, I always held the first part of that, which was: they're definitely wrong; I'm right and want to know how to be able to argue my opinion in a coherent, cohesive way. I think after that workshop, I felt that I had the tools and the confidence to do that.

JG: Right. So it wasn't that you doubted your opinions. It was that you didn't quite know how to put it out there in a way that wouldn't either totally alienate someone or just shut down the conversation or something like that.

MB: Yeah, exactly.

JG: So what kinds of tools were they, if I can ask?

MB: Okay. Let me think. So a lot of it was more – not keeping your mind open but acting like you were engaged and not getting aggressive because I think a common misconception of people my age is that feminists are like the man-hating, yelling, aggressive-type women; when, in reality, it's the majority of the population who are feminists and who believe in equal rights. During the workshop, we all learned how to be reasonable in our arguing and rational in the way we compose ourselves and act, so

people can hold a dialogue, hold a conversation with us, instead of just getting ranted at by us.

JG: Yeah. Totally understand. So when you now, having gone through this internship – and the internship was basically the meetings? Is that what it was?

MB: Yeah. Then, we devised a culminating project [and] worked on it for a year. It was a video about how the media influences younger to teenage girls in their body image, self-perception, ideas about feminism.

JG: What did you learn from doing that?

MB: Well, I mean, I always knew how the media affected me as a girl growing up.

JG: Which is what? Could you say?

MB: Oh, yeah. I think that after a while, I was able to understand that it was trying to target me and telling me things about who I should be as a girl and maybe who I wasn't. I think before that, it hurt my self-confidence, and I guess I felt bad about myself. But once I realized that, I wasn't necessarily impervious to the effects of the media, but once you know and once you're aware, it's a lot easier to handle. But what I learned was that it affects girls much younger. Again, the thing I just talked about, how, when I was younger, I didn't really realize – you saw this in other girls too, and you like wanted to take them by the shoulders and be like, "Wake up."

JG: Right. So if you take all of that and look at what goes on in the Jewish world, how does that help you think about what you feel satisfied with, what you think needs to change in the Jewish world, if anything?

MB: Well, as a feminist, even as a Jewish feminist, the first step before anything I do relating to those two things, is thinking about the world at hand, thinking about the

problems I might have, and then from there, trying to devise solutions. So when I come into the Jewish world in general with that type of mindset, it's pretty easy to match up my experiences and match up the things I'm seeing with problems I see or potential solutions.

JG: So, can you give me an example of one or two problems you see in the Jewish world that have to do with these issues around gender and how we experience gender and privilege certain genders and not the other?

MB: Yeah, of course. So around a year or two ago, I went to Israel for the first time with B'nai Jeshurun on a family trip. One of our first stops, before we'd really been in the country for a while, was to visit the Western Wall. So we all arrived there, and there's the normal part, and then there's the part for women. So after we walked around there for the day, our rabbi and the people we were with said, "Okay, now if you're a man, you can go here and pray. If you're a woman, don't go pray. Go stand over there." We could approach the wall, but I felt – again, I felt offended, hurt, almost disgusted. I just wasn't in the right mindset, in the right mood to approach such a holy spiritual object.

JG: Yeah. Well, Israel obviously has a unique set of issues because of the role of the Orthodox rabbinate there.

MB: Yeah.

JG: Do you look around your own environment here, let's say at BJ, and see anything that feels to you like it needs changing in terms of gender issues? For instance, what about the language that we use in prayer with all of its male language, male metaphors, God is King, all of that? How does that feel to you as a young feminist woman?

MB: So, as someone who's not a native Hebrew speaker, who learned Hebrew in Hebrew school, but only to a barely passable level, I do the majority of my reading in Hebrew and speaking, chanting in Hebrew when I look at a prayer book.

JG: In Hebrew or in English?

MB: So English on one side, Hebrew on the other. Since I can read Hebrew, I say the Hebrew words and look at the English for what I'm saying.

JG: In terms of meaning? Understanding the meaning?

MB: Yeah, exactly. So because of my experience with the language in that regard, I've always considered – not necessarily Hebrew, but the kind that we read in shul as a semi-sexist thing. I don't know. I've always felt like there needs to be something done about that, but a problem with saying like, "Okay, now we're going to change all the text we've ever had and make it gender-neutral or make it more female pronouns" – I mean, it's so deeply-rooted in my identity and the identity of the Jewish people that I feel like it's just not feasible.

JG: So, how does that make you feel? What do you do with that?

MB: I don't necessarily feel dejected. I feel like I can tell my friends occasionally, just complain about it, and make sure that they're aware as well as I am, but it upsets me that there's no direct action I can take.

JG: Yeah. Do you see, around you, a lot of girls and women, for instance, over the age of bat mitzvah, wearing a tallis or a kippah? Do you?

MB: Well, I always wear a tallis to services, partially because my grandmother crochet needlepointed my tallis bag as a bat mitzvah present. Yeah.

JG: That sounds amazing.

MB: So it's always been really special to me, but I didn't wear a kippah at my bat mitzvah. It's funny because people who get bat mitzvahed nowadays personalize the kippah and put little things with our themes on it and the date of our bat mitzvah. So

mine has blue – it's blue, and it has silver snowflakes. I always thought it was the prettiest thing, and I've never worn it just because it's never felt right to me. It never feels appropriate, maybe because that's how I grew up where all of the men wore kippot, and none of the women did.

JG: Yeah. So if you could figure out what you wanted to spend energy on in the Jewish world and in your community here, that would make girls, young girls feel really good about the possibilities that they had, is there anything that you can think of that you would change about this community or anything else in the larger Jewish world that you would change?

MB: Well, I'm not very experienced in the Orthodox community in New York City, but I've met people – I've met empowered girls from there. It always struck me as – "Wow. You're special if you come from this upbringing." One friend told me that people are always trying to put her down. She always has to wear a really long skirt to school. There's a dress code for women, and it's not enforced for the guys. Yet, she's one of the most outspoken feminists I know. I feel like there should be more people like her, and she inspires me. So I feel like there should be more people in her own community to inspire others.

JG: Yeah. Have there been people in your own life who've been role models for you about the role of women and what women can do with their lives?

MB: Yeah. So my grandmother on my father's side – I didn't really know this until maybe a few months after she passed, but she wrote a long paper about lifting the mechitza at Orthodox services and how it's something that's just not fair to women, and how it's not necessarily correct or just. Since then, she's been like a role model, and I've had her in mind when I do things relating to Judaism and feminism. Also, growing up, I really loved the All-of-a-Kind Family series by Sydney Taylor. I still read it. I have a tradition, where on Yom Kippur we go in the morning, and since we're there pretty much the whole day – I

did this up until maybe a year ago. I take out my prayer book, so I have the prayer book, and then inside, I'd put the first book. Then, after the first service, so getting into the afternoon, I'd switch it for the second book and then the third book. So I stand up; I have my prayer book, and it looks like I'm praying, and I might be, but I'm reading this series. But there's one scene – I think it's on Purim. Well, there are two, actually. There's one on Purim, where the father's in shul, praying, and the kids because they're all girls and they're younger than the age of fourteen, I believe, they all get to go with him and see the service. I don't think the mother can go, or she has to be in a certain area. Also, in the first book, it's Yom Kippur. So that was always my favorite part, reading the Yom Kippur part of the story on Yom Kippur. But you have the father in front, and no females are allowed in that part. Then, you have all the women pacing back and forth behind the curtain, waiting pretty much. It was customary for the children to bring the mother the flowers so that she could get through the long day of fasting. I don't know. The way Sydney Taylor wrote that passage, to me, always seemed like she was a bit skeptical of it. So I wouldn't necessarily say she's a feminist role model, but that passage, among others, has inspired me in a way.

JG: Yeah, I can see that, for sure. If you look ahead in your life, do you have any ideas of what you want to be?

MB: No idea. Recently, when my friends ask me, because I love journalism and I love science, I've told them I wanted to be a science journalist. I'm not sure.

JG: So you'll see. Do you think that there are any lessons from feminism that feel important to you in taking into – general feminism – you take into the Jewish world or the other way around?

MB: Yeah. I think the whole feminist idea of empowerment is something that I can pretty easily apply to my Jewish life and to the things I do with my Jewish community. For example, when I go on service-learning trips with the B'nai Jeshurun teens, something

that I always think about is how to be – not commanding, but confident with the communities I'm helping, and be able to communicate with them. The whole idea of empowerment, regardless of gender, I take that from feminism and put it into what I'm experiencing there.

JG: A lot of people would say that feminism has had a huge impact, obviously. So many different fields are open now to women, young women, that never were and all of that, but that there are still also obstacles out there in the world. What do you think are the biggest kinds of challenges that your generation is going to face? How old are you now?

MB: Seventeen.

JG: Seventeen. You're going to be into your young adulthood before you know it. What do you think when you look ahead and think about what the world is going to look like, and what kinds of choices women have, and what kinds of obstacles they're going to deal with and challenges?

MB: Well, I think now that women have a lot more opportunities, it's definitely going to be easier, but the problem is there's still going to be some deeply-rooted sexism also, just deeply-rooted hatred in general. I think that now that – I mean, some women have definitely paved the way in different fields, and now it's easier for all women to join these fields. You've gotten rid of the top layer of very blatant sexism, and then underneath, there's the more potent, more horrible, deeply-rooted sexism. You still see this. I still see this in the AP [advanced placement] science courses I'm taking.

JG: How do you see it? How do you experience it?

MB: I'm one of three girls in a twenty-five-person class at the moment for AP chemistry. I was talking to a female teacher yesterday about – I was pretty much just complaining about how hard the course is and how difficult it is to say my opinion in a room full of people who are going to judge me. She told me – now, I look back on this – this

happened yesterday, but I'm still reflecting and thinking if she was influenced by gender stereotypes. She told me, "I think women are just naturally more submissive and less likely to voice their opinion." I wanted to yell at her. I wanted to be like, "You are educated. You need to know that you can voice your opinion if you want to. There's no innate submission in women that there isn't in men."

JG: Yikes. Would you ever consider being a scientist, becoming an actual scientist?

MB: Yeah.

JG: In your classes today, other than the fact that there are so few girls in your classes, have you ever experienced anything that feels like actual discrimination or that's really coming out of a stereotype, other than the dearth of women generally?

MB: Yeah. The whole thing about women or girls not talking in classes because [they're] intimidated by boys or because boys are "smarter." I've gotten a drift of that when people talk to me. Also, on group assignments, maybe it's because the guys are all friends with each other, but I doubt that because I'm always partnering with the other girls, even though I say, "Guys, I'm open if you want to be my partner on this assignment." They'll say, "Oh no, I want this person who they might assume is smarter because they're male."

JG: Do you think the assumption is that you girls are smart? You're in the class.

MB: I don't know. I still feel the need to prove myself. Even though I've made it into this honors class that a minority of my school is in, I constantly feel like I'm not talented enough; I'm not smart enough to be in the class.

JG: So what does feminism give you that can help you counteract those feelings or sort of propel you forward even in the face of some of those feelings of insecurity or whatever?

MB: So, I try to apply this – I try to apply this whole confidence, empowerment message that feminism tells me I should have. Although I wholeheartedly believe it can be applied to a lot of situations, and I really believe that I deserve to have equal rights and that I'm endowed with many of the same things that men are, at the same time, it's hard. But recently, like when my friends who are in the honors math class, who are girls, come to me and tell me that they're struggling or compare themselves to the guys in the class, I tell them that they're as powerful, or they're as smart. I think that's something directly from feminism. It's easier to tell people what to do than do it yourself.

JG: That's true. That is true. My final question is, is there anything that you think or that you wish the adults in your life or just people that you get to hear or have access to through the media, whatever, would be projecting out there? Ways of helping young women continue to feel confident and that they have a place, a full place at the table, whether it's in the Jewish world or in the general world, in their personal lives too?

MB: I need to think about that one.

JG: Well, you just had this teacher give you a very negative message, in a way.

MB: Yeah, that's true. I feel like teachers and parents alike need to revise their pump-up talks if that makes any sense.

JG: That's what I want to hear. Yeah.

MB: Yeah, exactly. They need to say less of the "Oh no, it's okay that you're not doing as well because you're a girl," and more "Why do you feel bad because you're a girl? You could be as good but just try. Be confident in yourself, and the results will come."

JG: Final question. Do you think the boys in your classes, for instance, also have [self] doubts, but they deal with them differently or cover them up differently or something differently? Do you think they're just really the same, having the same experience, but

you don’t know about it because they’re talking to themselves and not to you guys about it?

MB: Yeah. Before a test, there are five minutes when we stand outside the door, and all the girls are huddled in one corner, being like, "Oh my God. I didn't study enough. I only studied for –” when we studied for eight hours for this test. We’re all prepared, but we’re saying we’re not. Then, you have the guys on the other side, and I think they have just as many problems; they struggle just as much as we do in the course, but I think they have a different coping mechanism or that it's less almost socially acceptable for them to act unprepared, while it's more of a trope that the girls and I are falling into when we say that we're not ready for this quiz, and we're freaking out.

JG: So what’s the pumped-up message that you would give to yourself and to your friends if you were in that place?

MB: I would tell myself and my friends, “Go stand over there with the guys. You are prepared. Stop telling yourself that you’re not. Don’t compare yourself to anyone else in the class. This is about you, your individual performance.”

JG: Go for it.

MB: Yeah.

JG: Go for it. So is there anything else about Jewish life that you think –? Any places in Jewish life where you think girls need to feel pumped up, to feel that sense of confidence that they could change something that felt like it needed changing or participate in something that they don’t do, whether it’s wearing a kippah or learning to leyn or working on the language of prayer or who takes leadership roles in your teen community?

MB: Yeah. I think there are a few physical moments where a pump-up message would be nice. Right outside, before you enter the doors to walk into a Saturday morning

service or a Friday night service, you have the tallis racks on one side and the kippot on the other, and you have the prayer books right as you walk in. I feel like if women had someone telling them, or just a voice inside them that says, “Okay, today, I’m going to wear a kippah, because why not? Today, I’m going to grab a prayer book, even though it’s usually my husband/male child brother who does.”

JG: So you’d tell them, “Go for it.”

MB: Yeah.

JG: Live the life you want to live.

MB: Yeah, exactly.

JG: That sounds great. Maddie, thank you so much. This has been really, really great.

MB: Thank you.

JG: Is there anything else you want to add?

MB: No, I think I’m good.

JG: That sounds great. Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]