

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1512

ARLENE B. BREWSTER

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

June 29, 1992

ARLENE BREWSTER

Mrs. Arlene Brewster was born on March 4, 1942 in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, the daughter of Herman and Ida Blank. Growing up in Hartford, Mrs. Brewster attended secondary school at William Hall High School, graduating in 1960.

Following high school, Brewster entered college at Stidmore College, earning her Bachelor of Arts Degree. She then achieved her M.A.T. degree at the University of Chicago. Brewster furthered her graduate career by earning her Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Michigan in 1980. She arrived in Youngstown, Ohio in the late 1970's. From 1983 to 1991, Brewster practiced psychology at the Family Practice of the Western Reserve Care System. Along with her duties at the Western Reserve Care System, Brewster also operated a private practice from 1987 until the present time.

Presently, Mrs. Brewster continues to be very active in the Youngstown community. She resides with her husband, Reverend William Brewster, at 117 Mill Creek Drive, Youngstown, Ohio. She continues to be an active member of the congregation of the Temple Rodef Sholom. Brewster also continues to practice psychology from her private office.

MB: This is an interview with Arlene Brewster for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Rabbi Berkowitz, by Matthew Butts, at 117 Mill Creek Drive, at 9:45 a.m., on June 29, 1992.

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, your childhood, and your education?

AB: Well, I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and I have lived in the Midwest since I got married right after college, which was in 1964. I met my husband at the University of Chicago. We lived in Chicago, and we lived in Michigan. Then we came here to Youngstown because he was rector of St. John's church. I am a psychologist. When I came here -- I had done other work -- I was at Youngstown Hospital in various capacities. Do you want me to go into it?

MB: Yes.

AB: Okay. I was the Assistant director of the Adolescent Psych Unit when it opened. Then, I became the Associate Director of Behavioral Science for the family practice residency program. I did that until 1991. I had had a small private practice and then, in 1991, I resigned and went into full time private practice. So I do that now, plus I do some consulting for various agencies. We have three children. We have two grown children. They are in their early twenties. In 1983, I became pregnant again, and we have a nine year old. I think that is about it. Is there anything else you want to know?

MB: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

AB: Yes. I have two brothers. I have one in Washington and one in New York.

MB: And your parents' names?

AB: Ida and Herman. They are both deceased.

MB: When you arrived in Youngstown, what was it like? What struck you about Youngstown when you arrived here?

AB: [Laughter] I felt like I was in a time warp. We had lived in much bigger cities. Well, I was born in Hartford, which is not that much bigger than Youngstown, but I had lived my adult years in major cities. I never lived in a place that was as small, and I never lived in a place that had one industry. Well, Hartford had the insurance industry. [phone interruption -- tape stops]

I found it, in many ways, very provincial. When I first started, I think what struck me the most was when I first started working at the hospital. I was in a manager's position. I think the director and I were the only ones who were from out of town, which was just amazing. Everybody else had been born and bred here. I remember someone saying to me -- it was my first day -- "How come

your husband let you work?" And I thought, "Oh, my God. What have I walked into?" [Laughter] And I found that there was just this, what I thought at the time, incredible provincialism as to what was going on in the rest of the world. The kind of social and political movements, the women's movement, things like that, part of what I was used to just did not seem to be happening here. I also found that it was very hard to find woman friends. I found that there were not a lot of professional women and, interestingly enough, I found in many cases -- I would not say exclusively in the Jewish community, but sort of in the community of the north side, which is where a lot of the Jewish community is and a lot of people from St. John's are -- a lot of women who still define themselves primarily as their husband's appendage; and that was real hard for me. I still think I am an odd duck here.

MB: What did Youngstown look like, physically, when you arrived here?

AB: I think the downtown certainly had aspects, on the north side, of deterioration. I think that there were some very lovely areas. There still are, I think, because of Youngstown's reputation, was surprising to me. I loved the fact that, within a few minutes, you could be out in the country. That really, to me, is just wonderful. So I think it looked better than I thought it was going to. I think it had more to it than I thought it was going to. It had more to it than I thought.

MB: Moving into the temple, do you remember the first time you met Rabbi Berkowitz?

AB: Yes, I do. Very shortly after I came, I was asked to speak at the Rotary Club. Do you know anything of the Rotary Club?

MB: I know he was president.

AB: Right. Well, fortunately somebody warned me because, at the time, it was all men. I was the only woman in this room with, like, 500 men. I was to talk about adolescent problems. And honestly, they introduced me as the "cute administrator." [Laughter] It was something horrible. Also, they all sing songs. I do not know if you were aware of this, but they sing songs and they have salutes. It is like a fraternity. It was just absolutely appalling. But, he was very nice. He really greeted me and he said how much he enjoyed what I said. I remember being very grateful for that, because the whole experience had been a shocker to me. That was my first introduction to him.

MB: What was your involvement at the temple Rodef Sholom?

AB: It was really peripheral. Obviously, my husband was employed by St. John's. I have never given up my religious identity. I was really quite concerned that I would be accepted there, but he was very accepting of me. So, I attended on

major holidays and other days like that.

MB: Tell me a little bit about the things that Rabbi Berkowitz did that were special.

AB: William might be able to attest to this -- I think he very much represented the Jewish community to the non-Jewish community. He was really the senior rabbi, the dean. I do not think, since that time, there has been anybody in the Jewish community who has had quite that strong a role. See, we really kind of came here at the end of his tenure, and then he died. When did he die?

MB: Ah, 1982.

AB: Yes. See, we did not come until 1979. So we just knew him for a short time. I think he had retired in 1981?

MB: Right.

AB: So, during that time, he and my husband developed a cross pulpit exchange. There was probably more interaction between Rodef Sholom and St. Johns than there ever was, before or since then. I think he was the spokesman for the community, and his contemporary really was not some who was -- a very nice man -- but probably not as outgoing and as charming as he [Rabbi Berkowitz] was.

MB: How did you perceive Dr. Berkowitz's role within the Youngstown community? I heard a lot of people tell of him being very active with Rotary and other things.

AB: That would be a hard one for me to answer. Remember, by the time we came he was really at the very end of his career. I mean, he was really slowing down, and I think the people that you have interviewed that knew him a long time would be much more accurate. He was really letting go of a lot of his stuff. He was looking forward to retirement. [Tape stops]

MB: Regarding your cross religious family, you spoke of Rabbi Berkowitz being very positive in that right. How did other members of the congregation feel about that?

AB: That is a very good question. It is very hard for me to answer. I am sure that my husband and I have been the subject of a lot of speculation., not only in the Jewish community, but in the non-Jewish community. It is fairly unusual to have a marriage like ours. I think that the community was more open to me because they were probably surprised that, even though I married Will, I had not converted, not raised our children as just being Episcopal. So, I think there was a sense that they saw it as somewhat positive. I always felt people treated me well, but I do not know what they said. When Will would accompany me to

services, they always were extremely respectful of him. And when they had pulpit exchanges when Rabbi Berkowitz was there, I remember one Sunday morning, a young group of people came from Rodef Sholom. So, that was my personal feeling. The larger issue of assimilation, which is a huge issue, is a very interesting one. You realize that there are three branches of Judaism?

MB: Yes. I am familiar with them.

AB: Yes. There is Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. The Reform movement has, by and large, embraced mixed marriages. There is a lot of debate about that. Most rabbi's will not marry anyone who has not converted, will not preside at a mixed marriage. The reform has decided as a movement that, if Judaism is going to survive, they must embrace these mixed marriages and try to get their partners to bring their children up Jewish, because it is happening at such a huge rate. Within the Jewish community, even here, there are many mixed marriages. The Orthodox and, generally, the Conservative branches shun them. Particularly Orthodox see it as a real betrayal and not only will not embrace that, they remove themselves from it. So I think, as a general rule, most mixed marriages will end up at Reform. For one thing, the service is accessible. It is not so much that the whole thing is completely in Hebrew, and you do not have to have an enormous background, which is great. Did that answer your question?

MB: Yes.

AB: So, there is two issues. There is an issue of how I was treated, which was very well. Then, there is the issue of what I see, because I get a magazine called *Reform Judaism*, and every issue addresses that, what they are doing about mixed marriages.

MB: I interviewed a couple of individuals who spoke of Rabbi Berkowitz going out to the First Christian Church of Youngstown. Did he ever make an appearance at St. John's?

AB: Well, my husband and he arranged a pulpit exchange. That is where they met. So, he preached at St. John's and my husband preached at Rodef Sholom. That was during Rabbi Berkowitz's time and, I think, during part of Rabbi Power's time. It is not done anymore. I do not know who initiated it, but it was very clear Rabbi Berkowitz was very amenable to that. I said that there was a number of congregates from Rodef Sholom showed up the Sunday he was preaching, and came to St. John's. So, yes, it was done. It may have been my husband who initiated that. I do not even remember. You will have to ask him about that. He would know better than I.

MB: Okay. Was Rabbi Berkowitz still involved with the American Red Cross when

you arrived?

AB: If he was, I am not sure. I do not really know too much about what he was involved in at the time. Except Rotary.

MB: When you attended service at the temple, how would Rabbi Berkowitz run his service?

AB: That is hard to remember. That is three rabbi's back. [Laughter] I would call it being very personal. You know, that is the best I can recall. Do I recall him being very punctual? Not particularly, but I am not sure I can remember all that well. How old was he?

MB: When he passed away, he was seventy-one.

AB: Yes. So, he was in his early seventies, so I just have a piece of the end of his career, and I do not think I can talk too much about his rabbetical style, except it was a very personal style. I do not remember whether it was punctual or not punctual.

MB: How about some personality traits of Rabbi Berkowitz?

AB: Well, he was extremely outgoing. He really was a very wise man. He really was. The one thing about old age is we develop wisdom, but a lot of people do not. He really did. He told his wife, which is something she told me after he died, he said the way he characterized his congregation was there were a few people who had a great deal of prestige and wealth, but he said most of them were "ribbon makers." What he meant by that was they were really small town kind of business people, and that is how he saw it. And that was pretty accurate. He was much more cosmopolitan than most of his congregation was. He traveled all over the world. He was highly educated, but he did not look down on the congregation. I think he saw their limitations. He was very tolerant. His youngest son, which you may or may not be aware of -- is out in California. Do you know that?

MB: Yes.

AB: He has gone through a series of marriages, none of them to Jewish women. I think that was very hard on him [Rabbi Berkowitz]. I know how his wife felt about it, but I do not know how he felt about it. I think it was difficult for him to deal with that. His wife did not play the traditional rabbetical wife. Did you meet her?

MB: Yes.

AB: I am sure you did. Of course, she is an extraordinary looking woman. I mean,

this is a woman in her sixties, and she probably looks like she is in her thirties or forties. She taught French. She was not American; she was born in England. She was very sophisticated and very cosmopolitan. He never required of her to play that traditional role. She had her own career. But, she was extremely devoted to him. She was younger than he was. Rabbi Berkowitz was not a prepossessing looking man, and she was just a knockout. But yet, they had a very, very good marriage, but they were very different people. Very different. She is a very cultured woman. He was much more down to earth. Is there anything else?

MB: If you can think of anything, would you like to add it?

AB: Okay. [Laughter] About personality traits, that is the main thing I remember. [He was] very gregarious, very wise, very outgoing, very realistic about what Youngstown was and the problems of Youngstown, and the problems of the Jewish community. I mean, he did not have any illusions.

MB: Okay. A lot of individuals speak of his humor. Do you have any personal recollection?

AB: No. Except that he was very funny, and from the pulpit he would be funny. His sermons, as I recall, were not all that intellectual. They were more plain speaking, and he would be very funny.

MB: He would integrate that into his service?

AB: His sermon was very much integrated. He also was not afraid to say what he thought. The sermons, I remember, were where he was talking about what the responsibility of Israel was and things like that. He was very outspoken about that, as most rabbi's are. Taking care of Israel was one of their missions.

MB: Speaking of his staunch support of Israel, was there any other parts of the congregation being opposed to his support?

AB: I do not think I knew the congregation well enough to understand the political factions of it. After he died and the next rabbi came in, there was a lot of dissention, a lot of splitting. I do not know if that is even what you want to hear.

MB: Yes. If you could, expound on that a little bit. There was a small faction that were causing problems within the temple, from what I gathered.

AB: Yes. Do you want me to tell about after he died?

MB: Yes.

AB: Well, he had hired Rabbi Powers. He was the designated heir. I think that was the first time that there had been two rabbis there, but I am not sure. But, usually, there was a rabbi and a cantor. I think Powers came almost exactly to the month prior to when we came, so Powers was being groomed. Everybody knew it. Powers was quite young, good looking, very bright -- an extraordinarily bright guy. He gave, I thought, terrific sermons, and everybody was real pleased.

Well, there is this phenomenon that happens in the life of congregations where, if you have a long-term head of a congregation, and particularly if the person dies in office -- Rabbi Berkowitz had retired and very quickly happens -- typically there is a lot of chaos afterwards, from a psychological stand point. Typically, a lot of issues that the old person -- the person who died and who is long-term, sort of becomes sanctified -- and the person who takes his place inherits all kinds of unresolved issues, which is exactly what happened to Powers. A lot of the congregation would say that he was not very good and they had a lot of problems with him, and Powers did have a lot of problems. Unfortunately, I think it was going to happen to whoever took Berkowitz's place because he was not Berkowitz. And that just typically happens in congregations. Unfortunately, the congregation never had enough insight to see what their part in it was; and so, they began to really do a lot of fault-finding with Powers.

Now, Powers was not unlike Berkowitz. He was not warm. There are three things that a clergyman needs to be -- well, maybe more. But, one is a preacher, one is a pastor, and one is like an administrator, where he would have to run the organization. Berkowitz was very much the pastor. Powers was very much the preacher. Typically, what also happens is that when they hire a successor, they always hire a person who is strong in the area where the other was weak. Berkowitz was not that great a preacher, so they said, "Well, we will hire a great preacher this time." Then, they blame the rabbi because he is not Berkowitz. I mean, that is just a really, real typical thing. So, after Sidney died, David Powers ran into a lot of problems: some of which he cause and some I do not think he could have stopped, because it had a lot to do with his succession. That was when the congregation became very divided. There was a lot of bitterness. It became a pretty ugly place.

MB: How long was Rabbi Powers there?

AB: Well, he came in 1979, and Berkowitz died in 1981. He was really forced out. I am not quite sure, but I would say he was there probably about five years. I am not sure. My dates are not complete. That is what I would say.

MB: Who is the present rabbi?

AB: Jonathan Brown.

MB: Could you compare him to Rabbi Berkowitz?

AB: Is this confidential? [Laughter]

MB: You will get a transcript and you can edit it out.

AB: [Laughter] I do not like Rabbi Brown. I really do not like him. I do not think he is anywhere near the person that Rabbi Berkowitz was. He does not have the warmth -- I just do not get along with him. In fact, I was one of Powers' supporters, so I would have been real happy to see him stay; but I was certainly in the minority. It was not as if I was all that active in the congregation, so I am very peripheral. But I do not think he has the qualities that Berkowitz did.

MB: Speaking of the declining membership within the temple, why do you think that is occurring?

AB: Oh, I think there are two reasons. One is that there are not that many places for young people to be here. The sons and daughters, including mine, are not going to come to Youngstown. You are not going to stay in Youngstown. There is just not opportunities here for young people who generally are highly educated. I mean, it is very, very small. Most of the Jewish community, if you look at it, have small businesses here. That is really the main stay. Some of those businesses will survive; some of them will not. Some of them have gone under. There were a number of steel related industries. Even if they survive, some of the kids are going to want to come back, and many of them will not.

So, I think the main issue is the issue of Youngstown. It is that what are the opportunities for young families to come back? So, I think that is by far the biggest issue. The other issue is assimilation. And the issue that the Jewish community, as a whole, is much smaller than it was. So, obviously, the temple is also. I think the other issue probably is -- although I do not know how big that is -- there is a young and very well liked rabbi at El Emeth now, and I think there are a number of people who are switching. If I were more versed in Hebrew, I would switch. So, I think that there is not, for someone like me, who has not been a lifetime member, there is not particularly the loyalty to one congregation. There is more when you kind of go where you like the people or you like the thinking. But, for me to switch, I would have to understand the literature. I would have to know a lot more Hebrew, and I obviously have not been willing to do that.

MB: Is El Emeth conservative?

AB: It is conservative. It is a big conservative temple. It is on Logan Way Road. I think it is a bigger temple, anyway. It always has been.

MB: When you arrived, you spoke of the North side. Is that where the Jewish community was centered?

AB: Yes. It still is. North side and Liberty.

MB: Speaking about dealings with St. John's and Rodef Sholom, was there a strong bond between all the major religions within Youngstown when you arrived?

AB: You know, that really is a question relating to dealings with my husband. He really has that whole issue down about the inter-relations, probably about as well as anybody. And I do not know the way he would know. Those are questions he really could answer. The whole political question of where the community was then, where it is now is really quite interesting because there has been a lot of issues recently that have had to do -- now, they may change with these new elections. But, Israel's stance in recent years has not been on that has been popular in terms of their treatment of the Palestinians. That has been a big issue. It is becoming a much bigger issues between the members of the Jewish community and the non-Jewish community; because the Jewish community feels they must support the Israel in whatever Israel does -- in general. A lot of them, say the more liberal Christian community and the main-line Christian community, feels Israel has really been guilty of a lot of human rights violations. So, that has become a real source of tension. That is something you probably can ask him.
[Tape stops]

MB: Is there anything else that you would like to add at this time?

AB: Is this the final question?

MB: Yes. Is there anything that you can think of that we have not touched on?

AB: Just, I guess, to re-emphasize that they [Rabbi and Mrs. Berkowitz] had a very good marriage. It really was not private. They were very open. What has been your impression of him since you have been interviewing?

MB: Only positive things have come out so far. Speaking of humor, that is usually the first thing that people say. They mention his humor. I tried to interview Attorney Bob Hammond, and he spoke of some specific incidents that he remembers after seeing The Ten Commandments. Everyone had stood up and applauded. Rabbi Berkowitz also stood up, I guess, and shouted, "Author, author!"

AB: [Laughter] Was that at the movie?

MB: The movie, yes. Just positive things, his role in the community. He was very active. He had a whole series of things, the civil rights movements.

AB: See, I bet that is true. I know that is true, but that was all before we came. But, I know he really was an emissary. You know, to survive that long, and you could not tell. [Laughter] I do not think there was any dissention. I am sure there was;

you cannot have a congregation without it, but, obviously, I think he was able to handle it.

MB: Okay. Thank you very much for your time.

AB: You are more than welcome, and good luck to you.

End of Interview