

Esther Porush, Congregation K.I.N.S.

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Interviewer

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Esther Porush: EP

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Abstract: Interview conducted at K.I.N.S. Synagogue located at 2800 W N Shore. Adam Yunis interviews Esther Porush about the meaning of Orthodox Rituals, the Holocaust, and her work and role as an employee and worshiper at KINS. The interview took place as part of the *Gathering Places* project at Loyola University Chicago.

Adam Yunis (AY): Okay, so today is Thursday, May 11, at 10:48 am, my name is Adam Yunis and I'll be interviewing Esther Parrish for our gatherings places class. So, Esther first of all, do I have your permission to record this?

Esther Porush (EP): Yes, you do.

AY: Okay, Esther, so I'll be asking you some questions related to the history and your experiences at Cannes. So, to begin, I'd like to learn a little bit about your father's role in Rogers Park and your familial history coming to Chicago.

EP: Okay, so my father was the Rabbi of Congregation Beth Shalom. It was located at 1233 West Pratt in Chicago. Unfortunately, it is no longer in existence. We came to Chicago in 1956, from high point North Carolina, where my father had a pulpit. And he came here. Excuse me, he came here so that his children could all attend Jewish schools for their education.

AY: Had your family been in the United States?

EP: Most of my parents were born in the United States. My mother was born in Chicago. My father was born in Detroit. Their parents came from Russia and the Russia area and white Russia. In the 1920s. My father was born in 1918, in Detroit, my mother 1926, in Chicago, so they were, they were here a long time. And my father got his ordination from the Hebrew Theological College here in Scarborough. Now, it's in Skokie, Illinois, and it was in Chicago. And his first pulpit was in Danville, Illinois. And then he took a pulpit in High Point, North Carolina. And that's where four of my siblings, myself and three other siblings were born in High Point. And, but he came to Chicago for his education for his children. For a more Jewish atmosphere. What else would you like?

AY: Yeah, so I guess, going off of that, how did KINS and the Orthodox community, what role did that play in the 1950s? I guess, at the beginning time for you?

EP: Okay. Well, in the 1950s, I didn't have much to do 60s to do with, but growing up, but growing up my, my class in school, and I went to North suburban day school. And there were quite a few bar

mitzvahs and a few Bat Mitzvahs that were here at congregation kids. At the time, this was a traditional synagogue, not an orthodox one. The difference is the liturgy is the same. But in a traditional synagogue men and women sat together. Yeah. And this changed in the 90s, I think. And when the demographics changed, and the people who were more of a traditional bent, were moving out to the suburbs, and the people who lived in the neighborhood, their children, were basically going to Jewish day schools, not to public schools. So it was a different demographics. And remember, Matanky was approached when the membership was going down, and he was Rabbi of a synagogue where the where the membership was growing, and he was approached to come over and basically save this location. Okay.

AY: And that took place in the 1990s.

EP: I think the 90s because, actually, I came over as a congregant.

AY: Okay, yeah. So I'd like to hear about your experience with kids growing up and then how how it has changed throughout

EP: growing up, I lived in the stretches park, so it wasn't quite the same. But my father knew it was a good friend with Rabbi Mescheloff who was the rabbi at the time when was cancelled and it was Berg. They were all contemporaries. And, like I said, I came here for some bar mitzvahs, and members of my class, okay? And that was basically my association with kins and As a youngster, I didn't have much to do with congregation kids until Rabbi Matanky became the rabbi here. And then that's when this is where I, for many years, this is where I came to services. And, and 20 years ago, I started working here.

AY: So why? Why did you choose to become more involved with K.I.N.S., that I guess what has kept you? What has been a traction of the community? I know its a big question.

EP: I was offered the job actually, I was working for Campo Shiva in Skokie, in their office, and I was approached by staff to Steven Karesh, he was the president of kids at the time. And, and he said to me, if you need a job, if you're working there, why don't you work for kids? And my first reaction was, no. Having grown up in a in a in a synagogue again, in my husband had had a pulpit in Morton grove. I was a little leery about working for one. Yeah. But he really, he came to me. And I said, Okay. And I've been here ever since.

AY: And could you talk about the role that you play? In those 20 years? What is your job title? Or in general, what you feel your role was?

EP: I would basically, I would call myself the office administrator, because I did more than just that I still do more than just answer the phones or are interested data. I do have done and continue doing. I do bookkeeping, I do correspondence. I do a lot of human relation with anybody who calls and you have to know, you have to be able to know who really needs the robot. Yeah. And who really needs help? And who is just pushing your buttons? Yeah. And, you know, it's something you develop over years.

We have a committee, I guess, for lack of better words, to help people make weddings. And it's for people with financial need. And all I do is refer people to the committee. And that's all my job is with that part. But they'll say, people have asked me how do you know who to send? And I say, well,

I talked to them, and talking to a deer in the headlights. I said, I hear something. And they're talking to me about and I say, oh, no, they know, that isn't what they need. And sometimes you just you just experienced just hear it in their voice. And you know, there's something more. And I always say that, a job of a synagogue or any house of worship, worship, your job is people. And, and it's not just you know, dollars and cents, although that comes into it. Because without it, you can't survive. But your job is the people, the people who call you my mother died, my father's in the hospital. I had a baby, but he's an ICU. You know, all kinds of questions. And I'm the one that I talked to first. So you kind of have to know when to drop everything. Yeah. And sometimes all they need is somebody to talk to. I always tell them, you never know, they'll never cry alone. Because if you need somebody to cry with, just call me. Because this is they need people sometimes you just need to know that somebody is there to listen to you.

On the other hand, you also have to know that somebody you have to call the police. And yes, we do have those. And you have to know when it's safety first. And the there was one person who, you know, we've told her you walk into the building, I promise you I will call 911. And I'm sorry, she has problems. I don't have to put up with them. So it's trying to figure out who is what, in the pecking order. And hopefully, you know, you get it right most of the time.

Yeah. It's, like I said, it's, it's, I will say 75% is just listening. Because they're calling. I just said that. I had a baby, I need to plan for circumcision, but the baby's not, so what do I do and how do I plan for it or just you know, congratulations, my son got engaged and we got to have an engagement party. How do I rent a room to have the party there and what's involved and what's needed so You know, that's, that's, I'm the first client, I'm the one they talk to. I'm not necessarily the one who finalizes things or you know, all contracts have to be seen by the board or other things. But I'm the one they talk to, and I'm the one who's helped who's explaining to them, you know, this is, this is what we're doing. And this is what you need to do. And, you know, this is how much food you need to order, believe it or not, sometimes people say, Well, I'm having this party for, you know, 100 people, I don't know what to order. I've been doing it for 20 years, I have a better understanding. And you've talked with people with all kinds of budgets, I think I tell people, everybody has a budget, I don't care if you are a Rothschild everybody has a budget, it's just the size of your budget may change. So, if your budgets a million dollars, that's still it's not it's not million and one dollars. And if your budget is \$1,000, is just knowing what your budget is, as always pick your budget. And then we work with it. We can work with your budget. Yeah. But you know, sometimes I say, tell me what you want, I'll tell you what a person will cost you. And then you can see is that in your best if you don't want to have in your budget?

And sometimes I'll say, Okay. A caterer will tell you, they over order. And I understand because they want the tables to look well, but it doesn't necessarily, that's what you have to order. And people on a tighter budget are saying, you know, you need five dozen. And a few other things, and you'll be fine. And, and, you know, like I said, it's I always tell them, It's the money if you know, you just know your budget and stick with it. And it doesn't matter what type of party you're making. It could be a circumcision, it could be engaged in party, it could be a wedding, doesn't matter, you all have a budget. So those are the things that go through my desk.

AY: Yeah. And so it's an interesting role that you play as the kind of like that first arbiter of the community. So I have a question. Could you tell me about some of the most impactful people that you've met through your time in the congregation?

EP: Well he is an international, known rabbi. It's a very dynamic personality. And it's, it's amazing to watch what he does and how he does it. And to be a part of it, what whatever you might ask me to do, you know, sometimes it's helping to tell somebody, you know, type up these letters or, you know, just whatever you might, you know, somebody's calling, can you ready for a meeting? You know, but it's just to be something just to be a part of it. And to watch, you know, how he's gone from just being active in the community to being active worldwide. And, yes, it's very, today I had a phone call from somebody who had watched a television interviews Rabbi does on Wednesdays, and he was like, Oh, my God, oh, my god. Can I talk to this rabbi, and I told them how to get in touch with them. And, you know, it's like, you get to be a little piece of it written very, very nice. There are members of our community, some of whom would prefer to be anonymous. And I will respect that, who do things behind the scenes that that have to be done and nobody sees? And whether it's, it's financial, or it's just doing the job, and they're greatly appreciated? And I think they appreciate the fact that I know that they're anonymous. Yeah. And we have to know who wants to, you know, it's okay to put my name out and who says, no, no, no, no name. It's that one. Does that no, I'm giving us that way. I'm doing the President that hired me and Dr. Steven Karesh

He was As an amazing, amazing man. And I have known him for close to 50 years. Our children went to school together. We drove carpool together. And he is just his, the family name. Karish is synonymous with community. Him, his children. They are just so amazing people. To be friends, to be able to call them friends is truly remarkable. And, and I'm very blessed to call him, his wife, his children, friends of ours and close friends. And they're examples for the community. Truly, truly examples there are others who were part of the community when I go on now excuse me and you miss them. And you miss, they are part of the community.

The person who was the president when I, when the congregation joined together, which is before I started working here, he actually was my principal, I taught Hebrew school and he was the principal, where I taught, and then he was very still on the board. When I started to work for him. He was such an integral part of the community. It was Mr. Bernard Mir, and his wife, Marsha, they were very much a part of the community and it hurts that they're there are other sample we lost very, very yapping, son. You know, everything's different. You miss them

AY: Yeah. Oh, thank you. So, I'd like to talk a little bit about the importance of maintaining orthodox rituals. And what, what meaning this gives to you to your own faith and your own view of the communities?

EP: Well I am an Orthodox Jew. In many of the connotations, most of the connotations, I would say. That means I wouldn't know how to live life without it. It is who I am. It defines myself, my family. My community. God is a part of our lives it, its not it's not a compartment. It is. And it's how we conduct ourselves how we dress, you know, I, I cover my hair is many Orthodox Jewish women do with the sign of modesty. It's only married women, it's our clothing is more modest.

I don't wear things above my elbow, next to the collarbone, skirts below the knee. And no, we don't wear pants in public. Not that we wouldn't wear under a skirt. But, you know, it's, there's there's a

reminder, always, of your small speck in the cosmos. And we are just here on God's will. And we better take care of ourselves and we better respect who we are and why we're here. And who brought us here. And this is all part of being orthodox. That that it's you can't separate. It's impossible to separate our religion and how we practice our religion from anything else we do. It is it literally, I don't eat without making a blessing. I don't finish eating without making the blessing.

I my prayers during the day the observance of the holidays of the Sabbath of everything is just everything is just centered around God in our religion. It's I don't know quite off how to describe it. Yeah. But yeah, it's just it is. It's it gets great. Comfort. Yeah. Because, you know, it's not you. If you're wealthy, it's not you. If you're poor, it's not you. If you're healthy, it's not you. And if you've got troubles, it's not you. You're, you're. you're never alone is that is not "Oh, woe is me. I can't get better" and. No, there's not that is just knowing that whatever is happened to you, guys, and when my children knows, how do you have a baby? I suppose it takes three things. It takes a mommy, it takes a daddy and it takes them. I said without all three pieces, nothing happens. And that's that without God

AY: Do you feel connected to the past with these rituals?

EP: Oh, of course. No. It's generations. Yeah.

EP: It's literally literally generations. We are very blessed in that my husband's family literally traces back their lineage centuries not decades. For centuries, which is unusual, any, but happens to be blessed. My children just gave me for my birthday, a family tree, myself and my children, my grandchildren and my great grandchildren. And because it is it's the core family is always the court. And and this is again it's sad saying and the family trees and Hebrew, a lamb a lamb, my other Ratata tree the tree, how can I help you bless me How am I blessing you? It's, it's the it's the hope that the next generation will live up to this generation. One builds on the other. There's no this is this is it says how you get high on the shoulder of giants. That's exactly it's you. It's your generations before you. You wouldn't be who you are, you wouldn't be where you are if they weren't there. So you know, so your parents and your grandparents, your great grandparents, if you're lucky that you knew that. This is how we talked about it, we talk about them, our generations we talk about our generations, our previous ones. Yeah, they are, you know, a person is only two if you've never met them. They're alive for us. They're alive for us. There's a saying in Israel that you may have heard it is Sinead Masada multipole. The Masada will never fall again. As you know, the story in Jewish history is a time of the Romans. And it was a fortress in the Negev. And rather than be captured by the Romans, they all committed suicide. And they came up I mean, and they showed they left food delivery to show that that isn't why they died. They died not to be taken. Not to be made slaves and not to be forced to be able to still serve God. And it is still a cry unto us. It's still alive. Now this happened, what 72 or 72. But to us, it's still very much alive. Well, you know, we talk about the Inquisition in the in the you know, 1400s it's still alive. Certainly, the Holocaust is alive. So yes, generations are the building blocks of who we are. And they are still part of us.

AY: Yeah, so thank you I think that's going into question about Holocaust memory. I was wondering how does memory of the Holocaust occur at KINS or manifest itself? And especially for the Orthodox community, the meaning of the Holocaust?

EP: The Holocaust is a very difficult thing. We have been blessed. And I truly been blessed to have members who are survivors. *(tearing up)* If you haven't lived through it, you don't know what it is, again. I am blessed that I never lived through it. And my family did not live through it. They were ready in America. But I know many who did. And there is no comparison. And there's no way to. For us to understand what they went live through and how they live through it and how they live today.

All we can do is be there for them.: It is obviously a very emotional and core emotional thing. I mean, we lost 6 million people. And there was an interesting documentary called paperclips. And it was about a school in middle America who is a project they were learning about the column across them as a project. They started collecting paper clips, because their number 6 million is really big. And there's no comprehension. So they started collecting paper clips. So they collected 6 million paper clips. And they actually put them in they were able to get a hold of the capital card there's it's a number that does not comprehend for Certain things they get there. And it's, it's too big to understand. *(beginning to cry)*

But sometimes, you know, one person or one family, my step daughter, most of her family were survivors. And my son had the opportunity to go on a tour in Europe to some of the concentration camps. And he went to the Majdanek concentration camp for you didn't walk out. And he walked in he said the prayer for the dead if you walked out as he said, Mommy *(pauses)* I walked in, and I walked out it affected him to this day. It's you can't comprehend because it's it's such inhumanity. It's such inhumanity that it's beyond comprehension, because it's not something we can..

AY: I know, the mind rebels

EP: Its, its too much. But to be able to do something like that, just something as simple as that and say, "Mommy, I walked in, he, I walked in and I walked out." And I don't think it matters if you were Orthodox, Conservative reform, the Holocaust burns within us. Because it was it was against all of us. And Hitler didn't care if you were Orthodox, or if you were not, he didn't care. If you were observant if you were not observant if you kept kosher, if you didn't keep kosher, if you're three of your parents were not Jewish, but one was, he didn't care. He just it was see*(sighs)* I'm speechless. No, of course. It's a very it's a very personal very personal situation for not just for the Jews. You're not the only ones who lost but we take it very personal. Yeah. And it is not something we we we diminish and as the years go. I will always be a part of us. *(tearing up)*

(regaining composure) These are most of them are in their 80s and 90s. So we're it's it's not a you know, they won't be here forever they got was Spielberg, Shoah Foundation, also an organization called names, not numbers. Where they do interviews of this actually students doing it grammar schools, high schools, where they pick a survivor and they interview them and the students actually learn how to do the filming the editing, the interviewing how to do the questions and put the whole thing and I've seen several amazing because sometimes you're interviewing a grandfather and sometimes it's a stranger but you know it's never Masada we never forget.

AY: Well thank you for talking about that

EP: Thanks for tissues

AY: Could you discuss one of your favorite lessons from the Torah? Or a story?

EP: Yeah, Love your neighbor as yourself, because if you treat people like you want to be treated, everyone will treat you well, that's a basic tenant of who we are.

AY: So Esther, why do keep coming back?

EP: Well, I work here! (laughs) Uh you know It's a cornerstone of our community, the building itself is about which that in itself, our rabbi is so vibrant, our congregants are growing we have two locations now, we have three rabbis. Its uh showing the community is vibrant and that in itself is a reason to come back.

AY: Is that how you've felt over the last ten or so years that things have been growing?

EP: Yeah I feel like you feel its nice to be a part of something that's growing you know. Better than the other way around! Its uh doing something you enjoy, and you feel that's productive you don't feel like a pencil pusher you feel like you're doing something for your synagogue, first, the community second, and uh it can be very rewarding

AY: So where do you see the future of the congregation?

EP: Well I see it growing. Um Jewish Orthodox demographics are different from the rest of the world. The fact that we can't drive on the Sabbath or the holidays everything has to be walking distance. So uh, your house of worship can't be more than a mile or two from where you live. And that tends to keep communities uh people together. Um, unlike westside which was all apartments on the north side was all houses. So once you buy a house there's stability and if you drive through the neighborhood you see some really big house theses are families that have taken old houses and remodeled them and made them bigger to fit their size family or their economic situation, and they help stabilize the neighborhood, you won't walk away from a house like that. That helps stabilize the neighborhood, all the different Orthodox synagogues and all the other Synagogues you know help stabilize the neighborhood because if you keep your young people, you grow and as long as their growth there's reason for being.

AY: So we've talked about most of the subjects I've wanted to touch on (pause) is there anything about the history of KINS or the role it plays in the community, or the role you play that I've

EP: No we've touched on it all the different aspects. A synagogue a church should be the center of the core of your community, it brings you together as a community. It brings you together with common interests and common beliefs. It makes you a part of something and that's very important, because no one's an island, and if you don't uh, the people are the loneliest are the people who haven't found a place to be a part of. You know uh, if you're a widower or if you've never married or you're moving to a new community, but you make your friends by coming to the synagogue meeting the rabbi or meeting other members and being invited to their homes and uh being a part of activities and finding out where they send their children to go to school, oh you're children go to school with my children or uh finding out about that there are alternatives what would work, we're

not a one buggy town so to speak, we have different types of schools that'll be best for your children and uh it gives you a places to ground yourself.

AY: Is that the role, the orthodox synagogue has played throughout your life, not just KINS but?

EP: Well, like I said, religion is the core and that's also family, they go hand in hand, and then the extension is your community your synagogues your schools, those are.

AY: So you were a teacher as well, played all those different roles?

EP: Yes, uh it uh it uh (pause) it really does set you on a path like I said here I have the Karesh' we've been friends for fifty years, other members of the congregation as well, and uh its just you know you meet so many people because of the schools, of your synagogues whatever your house of worship, and it really does help you through the foundation of your life.