



**Rabbi Stephen Slater  
Temple Beth-El  
Birmingham, Alabama**

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Interviewer: Michelle Little  
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski  
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[*Begin interview*]

[00:00:01.14]

**Michelle L.:** Okay. Today is December 5, 2019, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Rabbi Stephen Slater in Birmingham, Alabama. This is for the Southern Foodways Alliance Project, and we are here at Temple Beth-El in Birmingham. To get started, will you just state your name—your full name—and your date of birth, for the record?

[00:00:27.03]

**Stephen S.** I'm Rabbi Stephen Edward Slater, and I was born July 1, 1983 in New Jersey.

[00:00:34.23]

**Michelle L.:** Okay. Now, where did you grow—you were born in New Jersey, where did you grow up? Where all did you grow up?

[00:00:46.23]

**Stephen S.** Right. It's right. I grew up between two continents, between Africa and the United States, but most of my childhood was actually in West Africa in the Ivory Coast. I was there because my dad is doctor and a medical missionary. So, I grew up on that hospital compound, and my dad was not the first one to do this. My grandpa was over there, Dr. Dwight Slater. Actually, my dad's name is actually Dr. Dwight Slater. So, Grandpa was still working when I was a child there, and dad was working with him. They were in the Baptist tradition, so you'll recognize that. And I grew up on this small compound with other missionaries, a very tight-knit community. A really beautiful way to grow up,

actually. We all knew each other and prayed together weekly, and felt very, very safe on the compound.

[00:01:39.06]

**Michelle L.:** Did you have brothers and sisters?

[00:01:39.26]

**Stephen S.** Yep. Older brother, two little sisters.

[00:01:43.08]

**Michelle L.:** Wow. So, can you tell me a little bit more about that? About growing up in that environment and just what your kind of day-to-day life was like?

[00:01:54.01]

**Stephen S.** Yeah. It was such a great way to go grow up. So, I remember a lot of time riding bikes with my brother, handful of friends, a lot of time playing soccer every afternoon with neighborhood kids who would—Ivorians who would come play soccer with us. I was never very good at sports; that was really my brother's department. But it was really the only thing going on. So, if I wasn't going to just read books all day, I would go play soccer. And I was a little bit fat, so I was also, like, the last kid to get chosen 'cause I was slow and not good aim etcetera, right? But I'd be out there. There was a lot of climbing trees and going for long hikes or adventures in nature. It was the kind of place, by comparison now to, say, this country, that just grew a lot of confidence. 'Cause you took

a lot of risks. We were basically unsupervised within the walls of the hospital compound, we would just go around and have some fun, little adventures on the couple acres that were there.

[00:02:48.08]

**Michelle L.:** Wow. So, what was school like there?

[00:02:52.02]

**Stephen S.** For school, I went away to boarding school, because the local schools weren't very good. The French system, at the time that I grew up there—and I don't know what it's like even to do this day, but I don't know that it's been reformed—would tend to fail about one-third of the kids in the class each year. [Laughter] They just didn't need to come back. And that was probably because there wouldn't be jobs for all those highly-educated people, right? They just didn't exist. So, it was really kind of education through attrition, and pretty regressive methods. So, that was not really an option for our family. Instead, I went away to the boarding school American System, also a missionary school, about two hundred kids, fifty faculty. Again, a really tight-knit community; everyone knew each other pretty well, actually. It was a lot like a decent number of small towns or small schools that people might have been to here in the South.

[00:03:41.24]

**Michelle L.:** Hm. So, what were some food traditions that you had there, living in there? What kind of foods did you eat?

[00:03:47.27]

**Stephen S.** Well, we ate in a dining hall. It was really kind of a fairly wide range of Americana; different peoples' favorite sort of traditional recipes were involved. There was the typical casserole things and beef stroganoff that I was like, "Ugh." But I think one of my favorites when I was a kid was something called David's . . . no, it was called Special. It was just called the Special, and it was rice. You put a very thin sauce over it, and then you had about six sides, including fruit. Pineapple was my favorite and you would put a soy sauce on top of that, but you would also have bell peppers in there. Little crunchy Chinese noodles and stuff. And I loved that, probably because you got to assemble your own. So, I felt like I was putting it together and making it yummiier than the average.

[Laughter]

[00:04:42.21]

**Michelle L.:** Were there any things that your parents made for holidays or . . . any family, special family food traditions growin' up?

[00:04:54.28]

**Stephen S.** Oh, yeah. Well, the family food tradition was Sunday lunch. And Grandma would make a really big casserole that always looked, to me, somehow the food had gone badly. It had gone bad. But, of course, it had just been cooked down. The tomatoes and whatever were obviously shrunken. It didn't look like identifiable foods to me. Actually, Grandma and I had some fights over whether or not we would eat food—if I would eat

her food—but she always won those fights. Grandma was not gonna have you disrespect her food. There was a rule that, if you didn't eat it, you got seconds. [Laughter] And you had to eat that. You would stay at the chair until you—so, we cleaned our plate every day. That served me well for boarding school, where there were also struggles over food, and I was already past that so not struggling. You know . . . sometimes in boarding school, you wouldn't find anything you wanted to eat in the dining hall. So, for me, Mom sent me a can of freshly-ground peanut butter, which of course is all-natural peanut butter. And you do it with the shells on there, the red shells. So, actually, this peanut butter had a kind of red—it was a thick, but also a red, look to it, kind of like the red of the earth here. Actually, the earth looks the same here in Alabama, Georgia, I don't know what it's like in Mississippi, as it does in West Africa. It's just very, very ferrous and a bright red color. So were peanut shells, and this peanut butter looked a lot like the earth, and it was delicious. I would put that on French bread and that would be my meal whenever I couldn't eat at the dining hall.

[00:06:26.08]

**Michelle L.:** That sounds pretty good.

[00:06:26.08]

**Stephen S.** It was pretty good.

[00:06:27.13]

**Michelle L.:** So, your grandparents were there growing up and your parents, siblings—

[00:06:33.22]

**Stephen S.** My grandparents moved there. But my grandparents were there as I was growing up.

They raised my dad there, and Dad raised me there. Yeah.

[00:06:42.00]

**Michelle L.:** That's really nice. And did you get to come back to the States some, or were y'all pretty much there? Or did you go back and forth . . . ?

[00:06:51.11]

**Stephen S.** We went back and forth. So, they sort of have a general schedule that they put missionaries on, which is that you come back every fourth year. We actually came back slightly more frequently than that, or we would stay longer, so that our average worked out to be every three years. As in, like, three years there, one year back instead of four years there, one year back. But I spent, altogether, about ten years growing up there between the ages of five and eighteen, when I graduated and came back here. So, most of my formative memories are over there. This was the strange country. This is like, what took figuring out, and to some degree still does. Like, I'll never be fully acquainted with popular culture and movies and songs that people care about. I just don't, had no exposure to. [Laughter]

[00:07:41.07]

**Michelle L.:** Do you feel more acquainted with West African popular culture?

[00:07:45.12]

**Stephen S.** No, I am basically—popular culture is lost on me. [Laughter] If it's not classical or it's not like Rabbinic culture or the deeper history of either Judaism or Western culture, then I haven't spent much time with it. [Laughter]

[00:08:05.27]

**Michelle L.:** So, how did you decide where you were going to go to college?

[00:08:10.06]

**Stephen S.** On a recommendation from my grandparents. There was, actually, a pretty standard application process and advising process, but I listened to my grandparents. But before I went to a U.S.-side school, I spent my first year of college in Canada, in part to save money 'cause it was less expensive than U.S. schools. It was, like, less than half the price. Transferred those credits. But that I figured out on my own. That was the place I wanted to go to, and so I went to it first and sort of checked it off my list, and then went to a small liberal arts college in Michigan called Hillsdale College.

[00:08:49.08]

**Michelle L.:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, Hillsdale. Now, where'd you go in Canada?

[00:08:54.01]

**Stephen S.** A very small, tiny program in Ottawa, Canada called Augustine College that basically did a one-year specialty in Western intellectual and cultural history. That's what I wanted, so I went there.

[00:09:07.26]

**Michelle L.:** Okay. So, leaving high school, did you know what sort of study path you wanted to take and what you wanted to focus on?

[00:09:16.17]

**Stephen S.** I did, but I was frustrated, 'cause I couldn't really get what I wanted in standard offerings. So, just to back up a bit, when I was young, people would ask me did I want to be a doctor like Dad or Grandpa? They asked me this when I was in the operating room, which was a terrible place to ask me such questions. In theory, perhaps I would have committed to things, but in practice when looking at organs . . . and just sort of the combination of bored and perhaps terrified for the excessive responsibility, I was like, "No! I have no interest in standing for hours." [Laughter] So, medicine was off my list. My brother's now a doctor, another Dr. Dwight Slater. So, I wanted to study a couple of things that I couldn't really get to. I wanted to study Hebrew and I wanted to make a study of earliest Christianity and Judaism when I left high school. I would do that, but I couldn't do it as an undergrad. There, like, wasn't really a program that would focus on that that I knew of. Probably could have pulled it off at, like, Brandeis, but I didn't know about Brandeis. That was not on my radar. It's a pretty unique program. I'm also glad I

didn't do it undergrad in the end. Instead, I studied philosophy 'cause I could do that, and I tried to figure out Hebrew on my own. That was getting nowhere.

[00:10:36.15]

**Michelle L.:** Hm. So, how does wanting to study Hebrew come to a Baptist growing up in— what introduced you to Hebrew and what gave you the urge to study that?

[00:10:47.16]

**Stephen S.** Right. Right. I was always super interested in exegetical questions, and there was a lot of sort of emphasis placed on ability to work in the languages and understanding them. I cared a lot. Like, I grew up as a pretty faithful, believing Christian kid, deeply invested. I went through a crisis of faith when I was seventeen and realized, "I don't know if I believe the things I've been taught. I don't know if I could validate that these are all correct." And here's my family, sort of promoting this to people halfway across the world, I should really know this. So, some of my questions were largely exegetical in nature at the beginnings, and that's why I wanted the languages. I studied Greek on my own; that went a lot further, actually, 'cause there are some resources there, but Hebrew is a different animal. Then I'd have to go to Israel to learn it from people who speak it, and use it to study, and that's what I did in my master's degree. I also did a semester abroad in undergrad, and that's when I decided I would go back for my M.A. So, yeah, exegetical questions led me to studying Hebrew, took me to Israel, where I actually lived for four years in graduate school, 2006 to [20]10.

[00:12:06.28]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about that time?

[00:12:09.02]

**Stephen S.** Yeah, yeah. That was way fun. So, after college, my wife and I got married once I graduated—I'm younger than her. We left for England. She wanted to complete her degree. She was doing a degree in Jewish studies, nineteenth-century theology, Adolph von Harnack and Leo Baeck, and she did that at a little study institute in Oxford, England. So, we did that for our first year. I worked at a local county council. When she was done with her program, it was my turn, and I wanted us to go to Jerusalem and I wanted to learn at the Hebrew University, largely 'cause I wanted to learn Hebrew and I realized—well, Hebrew, there are really three reasons I needed to be in Israel. I wanted to learn the language fluently, not be messing around for years and years with dictionaries and stuff. I wanted to know it instinctually, and that was the best place to do it. I'd seen that during my semester. I wanted to be able to learn through osmosis, also, about peoples' practices and customs, and Israel's a really easy place to see everyone doing Jewish holidays and observing Jewish law and such. I wanted to be in the land of the Bible and just sort of walk around and explore it. It was really rewarding in all those ways, so, that's what took me there for my master's degree. We were there between 2006—we went right after there was, of course, inevitably a hot period of conflict between Israel and Gaza shortly before we left, before we left for Israel. There was, of course, some worries there. In truth, where we were, we were beyond the range of any rockets and quite safe through most of the time. We were there sort of between the

Second Gaza and incursion of the second Lebanese war. Those were the two ends of our time there in [200]6 and [20]10.

[00:14:09.00]

**Michelle L.:** Wow. And can I ask, had you already converted at that point? Or were you still thinking things through? I mean, and if you don't want to get into, I'm just really interested.

[00:14:24.05]

**Stephen S.** No, we hadn't converted. Really, going and studying there, my purpose was still to follow that dream I'd had before I went to undergrad, which was to study the beginnings of Judaism and Christianity. That's what I did. But, I didn't have enough information to do something like make a decision; this was really kind of a research question for me. And, of course, also a personal question that I would be asking along with my study. But I wouldn't have had the basis to make a decision—well, we did learn a lot of things in Oxford, and we actually went to both church and synagogue throughout that year, which is really lovely communities in both. Very welcoming, warming Jewish community in Oxford, a family who took us in. We would spend Shabbat meals with them and, actually, some lovely people in the local village that we spent the year with on Sundays. We would go explore the countryside with them 'cause they wanted to show off England to these American travelers. Lots and lots of fun, but not enough to make a decision with. That would wait for our time in Israel.

[00:15:28.16]

**Michelle L.:** And so was there—I mean, your entire time there, or was this moment of . . . and please don't feel like you have to say, but how did you come to that decision?

[00:15:45.18]

**Stephen S.** Oh, of becoming Jewish?

[00:15:45.18]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah!

**Stephen S.** Right. So, emotionally, I would have been—had I known more, I would have been ready to be Jewish upon arriving in Israel. But . . . [Laughter] You enter Israel, and . . . [Laughter] The person there at customs asks you not only what your name and nationality is, but also what your religion is. We were like, "Well . . ." How am I supposed to answer this question? [Laughter] It's just sort of a bureaucratic fact, from their point of view, right? They were like, "No, your options are you're Jewish, you're Muslim, or you're Christian." We were like, "This is so awkward." They're like, "Were your parents Jewish?" We're like, "No. Great, so you're Muslim? No. So you're Christian, good. Write it down." [Laughter] That was, in large part, really the attitude of the entire country, right? You are what your parents are, none of this Protestant soul searching of what do I believe was going on for more Israelis, right? So, that was weird. Israel also slotted us into the Christian category, so we very quickly became part of a church. Wonderful, wonderful Christians in Jerusalem, the most thoughtful people I've met, doing lots of

good charitable work. Also doing a lot of research, also interlaced Christianity and early Judaism, too. Also just a really good community there; they looked out for each other. Ex-pat communities are some of the tightest I've ever known. Like in Africa and in Israel, because you have to rely on each other, so people make themselves available and just really are good community members, hiring each other, making sure someone has a place to live, really caring about that weekly time together and beyond.

[00:17:44.27]

**Michelle L.:** Mm. Yeah.

[00:17:44.27]

**Stephen S.** Oh, but you wanted to know about conversion decision, right. So, in Israel, we were sort of slotted into the Christian category, and that was great. We learned a lot there. We were, the whole time, making lots of relationships with Israelis and with Jewish people, and I ended up going to the Hartman Institute, which is this really neat study institute—so, this was outside of Hebrew University. I took a year off from Hebrew University and actually studied with them, a lot of young scholars looking at issues of contemporary importance for Israelis. It was pretty much sacred and traditional texts that we were studying, but also some modern literary stuff. Got to know them a lot better, and that was really becoming, in some sense, our community. Sabbath observance was really important to me throughout. Pretty early on when I was a kid, I realized that was going to be the center of my family life. I saw the difference it made in my parents' life when they added a Sabbath practice and the positive things for their marriage and for all of us, and I

said, "Oh, yeah." Not only is that in the 10 Commandments, but that is a recipe for human thriving, and it's something God wants for me, also. I feel obligated to this. I'm gonna do it. And probably the most decisive reason for being Jewish was that I would have a community to celebrate Sabbaths with, and not have to argue that this was a good idea with people all the time, but just do it. Now, as it turns out, there are some Evangelicals exploring Sabbath actively: Eugene Peterson, for example, has a Sabbath practice, and he's not the only one. There's other thought leaders who are doing this, too, and it's a good, good thing. Really, I think the idea of Sabbaths should be for everyone; everyone needs to take time and cultivate their spiritual life every week with their family. But I wanted that to be part of my life, and that was—Shabbat was sort of the carrot. That was what drew me in, enticed me. I wanted to do other things—the whole tradition of interpretation in Hebrew, and being part of a living and vital chain of interpretation, where you're not just sort of stating your opinion because you read a book on your own, but you've read with centuries of commentaries of people who are also involved in a living tradition of practice and interpretation. It was really important to me. I wanted to be in that tradition that had never departed from Hebrew and never departed from the practices, and I saw a lot of continuity there within Judaism, whereas I saw a discontinuity in Christianity, practice, language, and even the people as carriers of these practices. I just wanted to be kind of closer to the texts, and to its life, than I felt I would have access to. That was probably, in general, the motivator. By then, we'd been practicing de facto kosher practices, kashrut keeping, for a couple of years. We—in order that we could have guests in that were shomer kashrut and shomer Shabbat, we had taken, we had made our kitchen vegetarian. So, we had removed all meat from it. We

kept dairy. It was really clear for my wife, if we had to choose between meat food, right, and dairy foods, she was gonna take dairy. [Laughter] That was not so clear to me. I was like, "Really?" But that was very clear for her, right, between cream puffs around Thanksgiving to just . . . she loves good cheeses and wines to this day. Nothing's as amazing as butter. Dairy was where she was going. So, our practice became—already in Israel, we were eating meat about monthly, as opposed to my childhood average of something like meat in every plate. [Laughter] Because Mom didn't think it was a meal until there was meat on the plate. So, suddenly, we were discovering that vegetables actually taste good and you can make them in different ways. There was vegetarian cuisine, which is really great. My family still doesn't really get this; if we go out and we take them to a vegetarian restaurant so that we can eat there, too, and there's a big bill at the end, they're kinda like, "We paid what for lentils?" [Laughter] "And brussels sprouts? Sweet potatoes? That's the side." [Laughter] You know. I'm really hopeful that Beyond Burger or the Impossible Burger will push this; what if you eat a burger and it's actually good?

[00:22:14.24]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. [Laughter]

[00:22:17.11]

**Stephen S.** Would that feel like a real meal? Would you pay more at Burger King for a really healthy, really delicious burger? I don't know, we'll see if people will do that. I've done it. I went just to support—I think it's great that we have vegetarian burgers now. It's good

from a health perspective, lots of perspectives, and also, I just happen to think it's really good-tasting. [Laughter]

[00:22:39.16]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. That's an exciting development.

[00:22:42.29]

**Stephen S.** So, at some stage before we came back to this country, we said, "You know, we have to decide what to do. We have to decide if we're going to be Jewish or Christian." And that was actually kind of a hard moment, 'cause there was still so many positive connections in the Christian community. But the desire to keep these commandments, to keep the mitzvah and to have Sabbath be at the center of our life, and the fact that we kind of knew what a kosher kitchen was—and for a lot of people, that's also an additional barrier of, "What would I eat?" That all made sense. So, we took the plunge and converted. It's been great. [Laughter]

[00:23:22.27]

**Michelle L.:** Now, you said your parents started a Sabbath practice, so what did that look like for them?

[00:23:30.21]

**Stephen S.** Um-hm, um-hm. Right, right.

[00:23:33.18]

**Michelle L.:** Was there . . . yeah, what kind of . . .

[00:23:35.16]

**Stephen S.** Well, I hope I'm not sharing too much, but I do—

[00:23:37.12]

**Michelle L.:** Well, if you'd rather not go into, I was wondering—

[00:23:39.21]

**Stephen S.** No, it's okay. It's okay.

[00:23:39.22]

**Michelle L.:** Wondering if that included some food traditions . . .

[00:23:44.18]

**Stephen S.** No, this is okay to say, I think. So, my dad did a lot in his hospital. It was a small hospital, over a hundred beds in-patient, though, and he was both the Chief Physician during many periods and the Director throughout. So, he was doing a lot of work, like sixty to eighty hours a week. One time when they came back to this country, they went and talked to their counselors, and they were talking to them about their relationship and about how things weren't going very well. They said, "Well . . ." And it's really hard, in that context, for my dad to back off and say, "I'll just do less work." 'Cause it just means

that people die or the place is inadequately administrated, so, they said, "You need a Sabbath practice in your life. This is wisdom from the Bible; it's a Biblical principle. You should practice it." So, he took his day off—which I think was on Thursdays—and we would actually leave town. So, he would go to the adjacent town, which was about forty miles away and there were no cell phones then, so you were just gone, right. So, if someone was dying, you wouldn't know about it. The nurses will just have to handle it. He took us as a whole family there, and we would be poolside and Mom wouldn't cook. They would buy the meal that day of the week. We didn't go out much, but we did then. And we'd play a little tennis and Dad would read a bunch of books, and Mom, too. They'd basically relax, which otherwise I didn't really see them do. [Laughter] And they would talk about what they were reading, and sometimes Dad would call us over and we would talk about something he really cared about in his reading. Those days were just the sweetest days of the whole week. I looked forward to them. I realize that they were kind of an anchor in everyone's relationship because it was intentional time together. It had a spiritual character, it had a physical character. For us, it was poolside, so there was a lot of exercise, too. I saw the benefit of it. But that was something they added when I was still a kid, and I could see. My dad would explain how it came from . . . the Bible, and it wasn't just a good idea; it was also a fulfillment of what God was asking of us. So, that was probably one of my most formative early experiences of a mitzvah, of God asked to do this, we're gonna do it, and it was great. [Laughter]

[00:26:01.26]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. So, when you were in Israel, can you kind of explain what Sabbath—the Shabbat dinner and what . . . I remember, when we were there, being in a market on a Friday afternoon and just everyone kind of gathering out what they needed. So, for someone that's never been there, can you kind of walk through what it's like?

[00:26:21.18]

**Stephen S.** So, Shabbat dinner is the center—it's the focal point of the week. Really celebrating the good things we've received is kind of what you look for each week. So, what does it look like? I mean, we begin planning it probably after the last Shabbat is done, right, in terms of inviting guests. My wife will figure out what the menu is; she's an amazing cook, not a trained chef, but an amazing cook. We'll go shopping several days ahead now, anymore, so that she can spend most of Friday cooking in one way or another. There's also a tradition that, when you get up on Friday, you should—like, first thing in the day, you should do something for the sake of Shabbat. That could be beautifying a place or setting the table or starting one aspect of the cooking, and then you go off and you'll do other things too, and you'll come back to it, but you spend that whole day sort of preparing. So, you're right; in Jerusalem, we were often heading down to The Shuk and buying up things for the dinner, which was frequently vegetarian. Though, on Shabbat, you can have meat too and it's sort of ideal to have meat. Then, the guests arrive. Hopefully, you have the house clean and tidy and the guests arrive, normally on a Friday night is when we're serving instead of on a lunch. We hosted a lot of lunches, too. You make them comfortable and have time to actually spend with people, because there is nothing else that you're gonna do. For that whole evening; that whole day. There's no

running off to something else, and there's no cell phones or technology or news to worry about. So, you just talk about what you care about. Frequently, in our earliest days, I think Bethany and I were probably driving the conversations at many Shabbat tables. We were interested in theological questions and we would raise those. We still do. I'll try to raise some kind of connection to, either, the Parsha or to . . . something that's seasonally significant, or just allow people to go deeper in terms of their relationship with other people around the table. Now, as kind of a facilitator of Shabbat for a lot of people, what I'm hoping is that they can see how this can be spiritually vital and also connective to other people in the congregation or beyond the congregation. So, I'll ask a question and allow them to reflect. We still have a good time every Friday night.

[00:28:46.28]

**Michelle L.:** Were some of the things you would—the foods you would have in Israel that were just some of your favorite . . .

[00:28:57.06]

**Stephen S.** Mm. Well, the first food is pretty iconic that pops into my mind; I ate a lot of falafel sandwich when I was there. I would eat it in the *laffa*, the big one, and I probably put on weight eating the *laffa*. Not as fast as I put on weight here in the South, but I did put on . . . [Laughter] weight with the *laffa* falafel. [Laughter] Oh, wow. Really, we were experiencing vegetarian cooking on a more routine basis. What you can do with eggplant is really incredible. It has a rich texture. At that time, it was one of the closest things I knew of to meat; I wouldn't discover things like seitan or soy products or what have you

until I came back to New York and discovered what people were doing with that on Shabbat. There's some spices, as well. I think I discovered things like that roast vegetables can knock your socks off, if you actually allow them to simmer, and for some of the natural sweetness to caramelize a little bit inside of 'em.

[00:30:12.24]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. So . . .

[00:30:15.22]

**Stephen S.** And meat tastes better if you haven't eaten it recently, I also have discovered.

[00:30:20.15]

**Michelle L.:** [Laughter] I bet so.

[00:30:20.15]

**Stephen S.** You get more of, like, a longing for it. I think that's part of why we do it, actually. I mean, it's not that we can't eat on a weeknight, it's just not as common.

[00:30:33.16]

**Michelle L.:** [Laughter] So, you're in Israel for four . . . years?

[00:30:41.06]

**Stephen S.** Four years, yeah.

[00:30:41.11]

**Michelle L.:** And then did you leave there and go to New York . . . ?

[00:30:46.13]

**Stephen S.** Initially, yeah.

[00:30:47.01]

**Michelle L.:** Okay. And what all were you doing in New York?

[00:30:51.15]

**Stephen S.** Right. So, in New York was our yeshiva, the house of study. Then the rosh yeshiva there was a rabbi who actually sponsored our conversion. So, we went there to study. We took jobs; we actually were, then, after that in Los Angeles, where I taught at a high school, a Jewish high school. My wife began a rabbinic training that she didn't complete. We instead moved back from New York City from L.A. and I was working in education. She went back to the yeshiva; basically, it was her time to study. She was interested in doing less sort of professional track stuff for the rabbinate and still sort of extending her Jewish learning for its own sake, rather than for the sake of a specific profession, so what we would call Torah Lishma, Torah learning because it's something we should do; something God asks us to do every day. But she was really just kind of getting the lay of the land of rabbinic teaching. There's so much to learn and so many skills it requires. The bookshelf is endless. You could spend your whole life and not have finished it, for most

people. So, we went back to New York and she was doing that while I was in educational work.

[00:32:05.15]

**Michelle L.:** Um-hm. Then, was the . . . was there anything between New York and Birmingham?

[00:32:13.15]

**Stephen S.** Yeah, my rabbinic training.

[00:32:16.06]

**Michelle L.:** Okay.

[00:32:16.06]

**Stephen S.** And her PhD. So, from New York, we started to do a little bit of soul searching, and once her time in studying was up and we were both saying, "What do we want to do in terms of a career now?" We've had all this formation and study for personal purpose, which really had covered a full—well, five years abroad, England and then Israel was five years studying. One of us studying and always sharing with the other. Then three years back in this country. So, we did plenty of that, and we were like, "Well, what are we gonna do for an income and such?" We did some soul-searching. We both thought about graduate programs, and then she did that, and I got freaked out that it was not a good living, which I'm glad I read those articles and took it to heart, 'cause that has saved

me a lot of distress. I was sort of choosing between working on books and the knowledge industry versus working with people, because the thing that I do as an alternate to more graduate school would be to work with people in a spiritual capacity. So, I also applied to rabbinical schools and go into Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and Hebrew College in Boston, and she wanted to go to her program in Boston, so that kind of made the decision. It's also a really good program in terms of, it has a really spiritual emphasis in Boston that doesn't really exist in New York. It's also a new place, and lacks a sort of cynicism that New York City is plagued with. So, we went up there.

[00:33:52.19]

**Michelle L.:** Hm. So, New York's plagued with cynicism? [Laughter]

[00:33:56.21]

**Stephen S.** Well, it does connect a little bit to food. I often felt—sadly—and I love these people, good friends in New York City, but New York has so much. Right? New York . . . has endless opportunities, extraordinary culture, a rich and vibrant Jewish community with quite a history there and all these kind of learning opportunities and relationship possibilities. Lots of people just go there just to work, find their fortune and such. So many times, I found that people were just incredibly cynical. They weren't idealists anymore; they were sort of idealists robbed of the hope that it might ever happen.

[Laughter] Who resented that it wasn't going to happen. Around Shabbat tables, there was so much frustration with the political process or . . . and conversations would endlessly come back to politics. Actually, you're not supposed to talk politics on Shabbat. We all

knew that, but it was really hard to not do it, 'cause for many people, it was the only thing that was real. So, you'd always end up talking Republicans and Democrats. It's just not the point of Shabbat. So, these meals would always . . . you'd make some sarcastic comment about something and it would come back to politics. Or people would just be very frustrated. There's very little room for the soul or the relational work that's going on, once we're talking about how those guys are doing it all wrong and sort of blaming the world's problems on them. But I found that cynicism in general, there's a real fight between hope and despair in New York City. A lot of people sort of despairing of positive changes.

[00:35:42.18]

**Michelle L.:** Hm. But Boston, different feel there?

[00:35:44.22]

**Stephen S.** Boston's just different. It was one of the reasons we were happy to leave New York, but . . . Boston's just different in so many ways. Much more relaxed, much more lower, not this sense of endlessness of everything. It can feel small and homey. People aren't as cynical. They are not less political, unfortunately. The whole East Coast, I think, suffers from that. But yeah, there was more space; there was more breathing room. There was a little more idealism. Hope was winning, at least in the communities I was in, over despair.

[00:36:23.14]

**Michelle L.:** That's nice. So, what was rabbinic school like? What is that process?

[00:36:31.14]

**Stephen S.** Right. Yeah, well, it's five years of deep diving into the Talmud and Mishnah, rabbinic codes, the Torah. There's so much to learn, like I was saying before. Thankfully, they also made sure in this program to put in pastoral training. That's not a given, actually. And some of the practical skills. It's a lot of . . . it's a lot of sort of pushing yourself to your limits in terms of, "Can I learn this material?" Frequently learned in Aramaic out of an ancient text with a culture that I don't share, assumptions that I don't share, can I stomach it even when it's making difficult assumptions? Right. Some of the material is actually quite hard to read because it's sexist or . . . just . . . all kinds of ethical issues arise. And yet, there's plenty to learn there, is what we believe, right? And what I believe, too. I think it's actually a kind of training in cross-cultural—even though it's the past. You know, it's a different culture. Cross-cultural engagement, and making it work, and actually being able to learn from it rather than just look down on it. It was a constant struggle for my peers; I think that they forgot there was much to learn from it. I actually happen to think that a lot of this material is sacred, and so, sometimes I feel indebted to it, like I owe it something—my allegiance and my . . . following it. So, that's hard, too. There's a lot of hard in rabbinical school . . . thankfully, I didn't go there primarily to figure out my spiritual identity; that would have been a mess. This probably was one of the best contexts for that, among rabbinical schools, there's a lot of space for exploration. But I was there really as a professional, training, kinda knew who I was when I arrived. I had worked a couple of jobs. I was doing it so that I could be a rabbi, and that simplified

things to some degree for me. I could not focus on what I felt or thought, even, about these things, but how to teach them and how to advance my skills or understanding of that material. So, that was really useful. I started a practicum in my third year, which was a little bit earlier; most people start that in their fourth or fifth year. That really helped me through, because it gave me a practical focus and real people who needed this stuff on the other end were within view for three-fifths of the time that I was there.

[00:39:11.29]

**Michelle L.:** Mm. And were you . . . were you able to maintain true Sabbath practice while you're in school?

[00:39:23.12]

**Stephen S.** Yeah.

[00:39:25.03]

**Michelle L.:** Does it ever get hectic? [Laughter]

[00:39:30.04]

**Stephen S.** Well, life is always hectic. But yes, we were able to. That was a bright red line for us, right. That's what tempted us in, so yeah, we did. I wouldn't say that I never read an article that had been assigned for school on Shabbat, though I never loved how I felt about that, because that was a bit stealing time. But there isn't a strong prohibition of any kind of reading, whereas writing is out, right. No writing; no paper writing; no taking

notes on what you're reading or even highlighting. Just reading. [Laughter] Now, I didn't do a lot of reading, 'cause I would try to save that day. It also helped—I was able to get through the sort of intense period of that sort of graduate training one, because much more easily than my peers, because I already knew Hebrew. Some of them were learning it. You know, as monolingual Americans. I had Hebrew from my time in Israel. And also done a whole graduate degree; I'd done a master's in second temple Jewish history, so, some Jewish history; a degree in Jewish civilization. So, a lot of the basics and sort of graduate training aspects weren't new to me. What was new was mostly the rabbinics and practical stuff. To some degree, I was also learning the American Jewish community, 'cause it's such a thick culture, one that I hadn't grown up in, that actually it was in some sense what I needed to learn. Right? Having mostly learned Judaism over in Israel. The American Jewish community is its own thing.

[00:40:58.07]

**Michelle L.:** Right, okay. Can you explain a little bit more about that? What that . . . ? I mean, what characterizes the American Jewish community?

[00:41:10.08]

**Stephen S.** Well, our historical experience is just so, so different, say, than the Israeli one.

Israel's such a young country; it's such a mix of people from all these different countries. It's basically gathered in everybody from the Jewish diaspora. There's specific waves of immigration to America, Jewish immigration. The German Jews came first; they built pretty successful businesses, already in the early twentieth century, and tended to do quite

well in the U.S. There was a lot more poverty in Israel, by comparison. Jews have really done well in this country, in a meritocratic society. But economic progress is harder. It's coming in Israel now, but it's much harder. In terms of the actual character of the countries, we are much more or less focused in this country, right? Like, American Jews are all in—being American is awesome; it's the best thing in world history. And there are so many opportunities there, right? So, so many Jews are focused on doing whatever, like Ira Glass making great radio or . . . doesn't really matter, doing that thing that is the passion, doing that. Judaism falls somewhere pretty low on the priority list, right? 'Cause there are so many other things to do; so many other achievements to go after. But in Israel, Judaism is kind of the shared lifeblood, and it's very, very hard-fought. A lot of disagreements, massive divergences and movements within Judaism. People really care about that. But everyone kind of has the same set of assumptions about what Judaism is, whereas over here, we've taken a denominational model where, really, we are kind of different. We are sometimes so different in terms of how we practice that we behave as if we're slightly different religions from each other, and that comes home really, really clearly in the American who travels to Israel and feels totally alienated by the Judaism they see around them, that isn't their Reform Judaism at all. And, actually, doesn't even respect Reform Judaism. Or, it isn't conservative; it isn't American conservative Judaism either, sort of a dominant Orthodox Judaism that is assumed by everyone, while only twenty percent of people are at all religious in practice. [Laughter] So, most people are just not doing it, but they still think Judaism is the Orthodox form of Judaism. Whereas, in America, if you're involved in a synagogue, that's what you think Judaism is. People still might not be involved in it, but they're gonna have a wide range of what they think it

is. Right? Reform Jews believe that Reform Judaism is Judaism, as do conservative Jews, as do Orthodox or Hasidic Jews or Reconstructionists or Renewal Jews. Right? They all think that's what it is here, so we have a much more diverse palate, and we also, in general, tend to be much more liberal socially and intellectually, and Israel, really not. 'Cause they have people coming from totally different stories, right? Sephardi background, you're coming from Arab countries, life was very hard, very poor, it was very all-or-nothing, black and white, and haven't had a lot of education. There's just no reason—or people coming from a Russian background, even more so the things I said for people from a Sephardi background. So, there just wouldn't be any reason in their family story to be liberal in any way. So, American Jewish community is much more liberal than, say, its Israeli counterpart.

[00:44:41.25]

**Michelle L.:** Mm. Interesting, okay. And so, once you finished school, how did you end up here in Birmingham?

[00:44:56.22]

**Stephen S.** Well, that one's pretty simple. Beth-El advertised, and I was really interested in its write-up. It was definitely the most interesting write-up that I had seen about a congregation.

[00:45:08.09]

**Michelle L.:** What was—

[00:45:08.09]

**Stephen S.** Every congregation fills out, like, a forty-page form, so there's lots of information there.

[00:45:13.01]

**Michelle L.:** Okay.

[00:45:14.19]

**Stephen S.** And the thing that stood out to me was that it was a congregation that really wanted to head in a new direction. It had sort of reached its decision point and was looking for a leadership change and decision. That's unusual. Normally, when you head into a synagogue, they think they've got it, like everything's okay. But it's not okay; it's not okay anywhere. No one's got it. [Laughter] There's a couple cutting-edge places, but I would quibble with them, but no one's just got it, right? But normally you'll get a lot of resistance to change, and it was clear that Bethel was ready to go through some changes. They actually wanted to follow the rabbi's lead, and so that was interesting. So, I remember walking down the stairs and saying to my wife, Bethany, "Bethany, would you ever consider living with me in Birmingham, Alabama?" She was like, "Yeah. I mean, why not?" I feel so lucky about that, because I think—it's not that she didn't have these thoughts, either, I can think of a lot of people who wouldn't want to move to another culture or move South or deal what it is to be a woman in a slightly more traditional

society and those sorts of things. She was just like, "Yeah, I would do that. That sounds like an adventure." [Laughter]

[00:46:39.08]

**Michelle L.:** So, you've lived a lot of places, but you really thought, "She may not. Birmingham, Alabama, maybe!"

[00:46:51.24]

**Stephen S.** [Laughter] Well, I've asked her lots of times, "Would you go with me to Israel?" I've also asked her, "What about New York? Los Angeles? Boston?" But, yeah, Birmingham was—yeah, it was definitely new. And yet, her spirit of adventure didn't stop there. This, I actually knew about her. I had precisely one test for Bethany about whether or not we should get married for not. I was like, "Well, a lot of people in my family live in Africa, and so something I need to know about someone that I would marry—" This is when we were getting slightly more serious. "Is, how would they do living in Africa?" And not that much later, when I went to Israel in undergrad, she went to Uganda and lived with my aunt and uncle over there. So, I was like, "Whoa. She's really serious." [Laughter] She had a blast. So, I learned that she could deal with changes and difference and lack of comforts and whatnot.

[00:47:47.28]

**Michelle L.:** And you knew, you knew you all were good. [Laughter]

[00:47:50.03]

**Stephen S.** Yeah. I was like, "Okay."

[00:47:55.03]

**Michelle L.:** "She'll go to Uganda." [Laughter] That's funny. So, once you all got here to Birmingham, how has it matched up to what you were expecting? What you thought you were coming . . .

[00:48:11.25]

**Stephen S.** Right.

[00:48:14.23]

**Michelle L.:** Had you ever been to Alabama before?

[00:48:18.23]

**Stephen S.** Well, I got to interview in February and I came down mid-June. So, it was definitely hotter than in February, but it was in the sixties when I visited in February. I was like, "That's weird." [Laughter] I didn't know that could happen on this continent. So, I've been pleasantly surprised that you can basically have it all, on some level. You can live in America and it can still be warm most of the year. That's wild. [Laughter] My experience has never been that, New Jersey or Michigan. It's plenty cold. You only get, like, four months of the year that you really want to be outside, and those are almost too hot. I think you have, like, three months on either end where, there's no reason you wouldn't be on

your porch here. It's really stunning; that is very, very rare. The people are really warm. I've decided that, where the weather is warm, the people are warmer, as well. That's actually played out in a lot of places for me: Africa, Los Angeles, much warmer than Boston, New York, Michigan, New Jersey. That's really cool. I have been surprised how much traction I got with my congregation. They actually do want to change. So, there's the question of, "Do you just think you want to change or do you want to?" I've also been very pleasantly surprised that Jews in the South, I think because of their Christian neighbors, are actually more involved in theological questions, which are really important for me. Because they're constantly hearing from their Christian neighbors about theological stuff and the Bible and what do you believe and where do you go to church? And "Oh, yeah, you go to the Jewish church." Which is so funny. [Laughter] So, we've had really important conversations here. There's a kind of openness to the spiritual and religious dimension that some people are closed off to on either coast, and I appreciate that a lot—or even in Israel, actually, for that matter. It's like, "That's what those Orthodox Jews do; I don't do that." My people are very, very involved. There's a team spirit here that I recognize from my childhood as well, and I really appreciate; it makes all the difference for community. It could be Team Birmingham, it could be Team The South, Team Alabama, Team Beth-El, Team Jewish, but it's nice. People, I think, understand themselves correctly to be part of a larger organism, the group and the whole that we've forgotten in other places and we pay a price for not being a part of it.

[00:51:05.03]

**Michelle L.:** So, what are—'cause you said something interesting earlier about Shabbat dinners in New York often devolving to politics. What do you see most often as conversations around the dinner table around Shabbat dinners here?

[00:51:26.24]

**Stephen S.** We do, actually, stay personal. So, we've had a decent number that are actually theological; those are our favorite, my wife and I's favorite, where we'll talk about something that bothers us or that we draw inspiration from or whatever in something about Judaism. We've had a lot of conversations with people, even at Shabbat dinners, about their spiritual needs, and that's really where it's at. But otherwise, it'll be personal; we'll share stories. It is not politics. Now, we basically tell people that we can't do that.

[00:52:03.04]

**Michelle L.:** Do you need to get that? I can pause this if you need to.

[Telephone rings]

[00:52:07.25]

**Stephen S.** Go ahead and pause. I'm . . .

[Break in recording]

[00:52:10.26]

**Michelle L.:** Okay. So, we paused for a minute, but we were talking about topics of conversation at Shabbat dinners here in Birmingham.

[00:52:19.04]

**Stephen S.** Um-hm, right. I feel like I don't have to work as hard to keep people off of politics. It'll come up, and maybe if people are polite, they'll decide they're upsetting someone, which is part of why we don't talk about it, to go back to other conversations. Or maybe people just understand that the person is a whole person, and they're more than their opinions or their political beliefs; I don't know, but we have conversations that are more wide-ranging. My wife and I kind of just won't put up with just chit-chat. It would be a bummer to get through a whole dinner and just have chit-chat. You know? We'll ask people to go deeper. Not everyone can, but someone will.

[00:53:03.15]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. So, do you feel like . . . 'cause we think of food bringing people together, so it's interesting that sometimes politics can, and that's immediately more a divisive . . . experience. But typically, we like to think of food bringing people together. Do you feel like, on the whole, that's more . . . the experience?

[00:53:37.29]

**Stephen S.** I do think that food brings people together. And actually, I think if we had more communal meals, we could deal better with our sort of political fractiousness. To New York's credit, I want to say that, when we moved to New York, I felt like we hit the

ground running communally because of our Jewish community, because of Shabbat, because of having communal meals together all the time with people—and worship experiences, but also Shabbat meals, really. So, while the way we were using that time was really too bad, we could also check in with each other and make sure the other person was doing okay. And hear their updates, and they could process, right? There's something deeply healing and human about just spending time with other people and getting to talk about all the things that come up. Just being known somewhere. I, actually, didn't experience New York as an impersonal place, like many people do, because I had a community there. Actually, a really vibrant one. So, that was neat. And, probably, those meals allowed—to your question—those meals were the context that allowed us to have discussions that are normally hard to have, because it was bringing people together.

[00:54:49.29]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah.

[00:54:51.10]

**Stephen S.** What I resented about the political discussion was actually the way that it would normally function, as if it were norming; we were norming what people should believe politically, and I actually would rather just respect—I would want to have an open-ended conversation where people are free to disagree, or just respect that they can figure out their own politics without a norming discussion that tells them how they should think about things.

[00:55:13.07]

**Michelle L.:** Um-hm, yeah. I guess I just wanted to touch on one other thing, 'cause I know we need to wrap up, but before we started recording, we were talking about the very vital and important connection between the Jewish faith and food.

[00:55:32.10]

**Stephen S.** Yeah.

[00:55:33.22]

**Michelle L.:** So, could you talk a little bit more about—I know that's a very broad topic, but—

[00:55:41.09]

**Stephen S.** I can. I can talk about it.

[00:55:44.08]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. So, just what are some . . . especially from your point of view, from growing up Baptist? And to your faith now.

[00:55:55.11]

**Stephen S.** Um-hm. Right. So, you know, food plays an essential role in Jewish practice. We even have a lot of distinctive foods, partly 'cause necessity's the mother of invention. So, if you're not gonna be cooking food on Shabbat, you're gonna have to do something differently with food so that you can have the food but not have cooked it. That does

mean that, say, by Saturday lunch, you're often eating cold foods, which I discovered actually can be pretty good. But the alternate to that is a real Jewish classic called *chulent*. *Chulent* is basically a stew. It's best been done with meat, but you can make a good veg one.

[00:56:40.26]

**Michelle L.:** How do you spell that?

[00:56:41.08]

**Stephen S.** C-h-u-l-e-n-t. *Chulent* is a stew with beans in there and potatoes, possibly eggs. It cooks from Friday night; you have to have lit the flame that it's on Friday night, but most people start it somewhere on Friday or even Thursday. So, it will cook for eighteen hours on the short end to, you know, getting to thirty-six hours on the longer end. So, the flavors just really stew in there. And that is an absolutely delicious lunch, and it's there for the necessity of not being cooking, so you have to just set the flame and leave it in the pot beforehand. So, it's crockpot cooking. As it turns out, one of my very favorite dishes—just, like, far and away, and we ate this on our honeymoon in France before we were keeping kosher—is *cassoulet*. *Cassoulet* is basically made in a cauldron, and the meat is duck, but they also thrown in a bunch of sausage, hence that case, very un-kosher. Duck is a kosher animal, but a bunch of sausage. You'll also do—it has beans. These foods are probably related, and I don't know the history or story of them, but they seem to share a common ancestor. You cook that one for, definitely forty-eight hours, and I

learned just the other night, actually—two nights ago at my wife's birthday dinner, from someone who really knows food—that you should also then baste the duck. [Laughter]

[00:58:18.16]

**Michelle L.:** Ooh.

[00:58:20.15]

**Stephen S.** If you're gonna do it correctly, like all the time. He described getting up in the night on the hour to do it, like, what a mess. [Laughter] To do *cassoulet* right. It was actually the tradition that *chulent* was from the French *chaud longue*, hot long time. It was something that just cooked for a long time, and I think that would make sense, that *chulent* would be *chaud longue*. And then really would be related to *cassoulet*, if that's correct. So, that's one of my favorites. That's an example of something out of necessity, because of keeping Shabbat. I don't think other—that many societies make a big fuss over their long, stewed thing, unless it's gumbo.

[00:59:02.05]

**Michelle L.:** Mm.

[00:59:03.23]

**Stephen S.** Yeah. Ooh, we figured out recently how to make a vegetarian—or not a vegetarian, a kosher gumbo that, after we went to New Orleans and tasted a vegetarian one, we had to figure that out.

[00:59:15.11]

**Michelle L.:** Oh, wow.

[00:59:18.09]

**Stephen S.** And it was excellent. Yeah. It was so good. But out of the specifics and into the general food in Judaism, yeah—well, and also maybe my story. So, when I grew up, I feel like I paid very little attention to food in general. It sort of just happened; it had a purpose, which was just to make sure you weren't excessively hungry; and it was fuel. It also played a role, of course, for bringing your family together. We actually had at least, when I was at home when I was not at boarding school, we had three meals together each day. All of us together. So, it definitely played that role. It was connective tissue, and I had no idea how unusual that was becoming for everyone else. I still really think that sitting at a table opposite someone is really important—as hard as it is to make a contemporary family do that, it's so important. But so, I treated that as fuel. And I think that, actually, food in Judaism is much closer to . . . well . . . it's sacred. We're . . . we're treating our tables as if they were an altar, is actually what we're doing. All of kashrut is on that premise. It's as if the food were being served in the temple. You wouldn't have the kosher restrictions that you had unless you were trying to basically approximate temple food. It's really clear, when you look at the development of these things—early on, for their early rabbis, that was their requirement. Hence washing hands before eating a meal, before eating bread is how it comes out in the codes, which is a sign that you're eating a meal. If you have bread with it, then it's a meal by definition, so you have to wash your

hands before any meal. You had to wash your hands before entering the temple compound or eating sacred food, the offerings that you would bring to the priests. Even the separation of meat and milk I don't think makes any sense, 'cause you can't find it black and white in the Torah. It's a rabbinic tradition. A lot of people resent it, including my congregants here. I don't think it makes any sense unless you follow Philo's explanation for it, and he says that basically each fluid, milk and blood, represent different potencies in the world. Milk represents nurturing and life-giving, 'cause this is how mammals nurture their young, and blood represents death, 'cause you see it once you've killed an animal. It's an essential part of the slaughter, right? And in the temple, you're basically collecting that blood, 'cause the blood is also sacred. So, the principles of life and death, the temple completely separates. It's the temple that separates that thing; it's not a mitzvah in the Torah, but our food should approximate Temple food. So, you just don't mix those things. All that we have in the Torah is, "Don't cook a kid in its mother's milk." That's all that's written there, which doesn't mean separate meat and milk. I don't think you can—that's our filing system, 'cause it's something that identifies both blood and milk in the same verse, so we file it there and we talk about it when we come to that verse. But on the other hand, it's why we do it. We do it because of temple practice. You're here to separate yourself from everything to do with death before entering the temple compound through total immersion, right; basically a type of baptism, in Christian terms, so that you can remove any kind of death impurity. Then you can enter the temple; you were ready for that. So, death had to be removed, right, because God is the God of life. So, we do that with our food. You separate meat and milk, I think, as actually kind of an allegory or just also an imitation of what the temple means about

God, that God is in favor of life, that God is alive. That we don't want to be tracking in death, deathness into the presence of the Holy. So that, I think, is how you can make sense of it. That, of course, creates a whole lot of creative necessity, because you can't have chicken cordon bleu or cheeseburgers or any, you know, of what I see everyone enjoying. [Laughter] Almost always be like either you put pork with that in America or you put cheese on top of that meat, and now it's really good meal. [Laughter] So, these things are out, fundamentally. [Laughter] It does create a lot of self-control, right? You don't just eat 'cause you're hungry, you eat 'cause you eat when there's something appropriate to eat that's available, in addition to the creativity. Then also, before you eat, you say a blessing. So, that blessing is specifically acknowledging God's gift in this specific thing, before you eat anything. That was what was new to me, right? I used to do it before meals, but that was before a drink of water or a bagel or whatever, even snacks. There's a specific blessing for different kinds of food that acknowledges it as a gift. So, yeah, it very much has a sense of it's an offering, so that there's a sacred dimension to food is what I think I have learned, and what's new to me in Judaism. What I'm not telling you that you would normally hear from talking to a Jew about food is a lot about Polish cuisine or Sephardi cuisine, right? 'Cause any one of these specific cultures—if you're a Moroccan Jew, then you grew up with all the spices of Morocco, and that was in your mom's food, and that's what Jewish food is. If you grew up from Poland, you probably heard me talking about gefilte fish or herring, and these are, like, profoundly—that's in the blood and the culture about what Jewish food is. It's actually more specific and local. I really like the mix, and the Mediterranean food that we're getting out of Israel now is awesome, like really, some of the most interesting stuff out there. Not that it's the best

food in the world, but it's interesting, because it's expanding our imagination and we didn't have it. Even recently. Like, I love some of the Iraqi dishes that they're doing. Mostly from the Arab world, those spices are new to me and interesting, and I want to have more exposure to them. So, yeah. Food is a big deal, because it's part of a spiritual practice, right? And a communal practice. And it can even define the boundaries of who you get to eat with, so then, community and food are actually somehow co-terminus. In a conservative congregation, you can find an awkward situation where you can't necessarily eat with all of your congregation, because they won't necessarily be keeping it very strictly or at all. We've found leniencies to use to get around that, because community is so important; there are leniencies. But we do have to ask them to cook differently than they might have cooked. We can't just eat whatever's on offer, right? So, there are leniencies to use, but the food will have to actually be kosher, the food that's being served. So, vegetarian or fish or something like that, if it's being cooked in a home that isn't used to keeping kosher rules and wouldn't go out of its way to get kosher meat and prepare that in a way. But there are ways to do it, and I think that's actually intentional in the process. You can see the early rabbis sort of trying to make the food practices definitive of the communities as well, like along with Shabbat. Actually, between the two of them to this day, I think across the Jewish world, those are two of the most publicly practiced mitzvahs that kind of define the Jew that you are and the circle that you're in, 'cause it shows very clearly your commitments; how you keep Sabbath and how you eat are at the center of your religious commitments.

[01:07:32.17]

**Michelle L.:** And do you get to eat regularly with a lot of your congregants here? Do y'all all gather for some meals?

[01:07:42.25]

**Stephen S.** Yeah. I used to think the turnout to my evening Friday service was really dependent on how good my teaching was or how good the music was, and I discovered that, actually, the single factor that with it we have lots of people or without it we didn't have many people, is food. So, if we have a communal meal, afterwards people will stay—people will come and not bother with making their own dinners. So, we'll get a big boost from that. So, we've been having roughly monthly communal dinners called Shabbat T'ruah, and we stay and we serve dinner here. That's made a huge, a huge difference. I've also introduced potlucks, which people had wanted to do for a long time; very popular here. [Laughter] But not commonly practiced because of their differences in kosher-keeping standards. So, there are practical solutions to that. You can have two tables, a strictly kosher table and a not-very-strictly kosher table, that is, that evening, has to be kosher. So, there are things you can do to deal with it, maybe just need to practice that more often. We did it once and loved it, so I think we're gonna do it again.

[01:08:49.19]

**Michelle L.:** Great. That's wonderful.

[01:08:51.03]

**Stephen S.** Yeah. And I'm eating in peoples' homes, people who will make just a couple accommodations, you can figure it out.

[01:08:57.22]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah.

[01:08:59.07]

**Stephen S.** And plenty of people who are kosher keeping have already had me over to dinner, and that's been really cool. We've had a lot of people to our house, but the neat thing is that people have invited me back. [Laughter] To theirs.

[01:09:14.11]

**Michelle L.:** That is good.

[01:09:16.11]

**Stephen S.** Um-hm.

[01:09:18.26]

**Michelle L.:** Well, is there anything that I have not asked that you wanted to talk about or that you wished people knew about Judaism or . . . Jewish food traditions? You know, just anything that . . .

[01:09:39.22]

**Stephen S. Hm.**

[01:09:42.02]

**Michelle L.:** That you would want someone to know in the future that was reading this.

[Laughter]

[01:09:48.07]

**Stephen S.** Well, I don't know how long this will be around, but this is a big idea that I often give around kashrut: the premise of all of the kosher laws is that life is sacred. The life of the animal is sacred, too. That's why it's important, how it's been slaughtered. It isn't just a matter of our convenience, right; instead, that it's been slaughtered properly, that a blessing's been said to God over its life. And that slaughter is supposed to keep it from being excessively painful. Normally, its life ends in about a minute. Interestingly, also, this goes back to the temple theme—it isn't supposed to be harmed in any way, the animal isn't supposed to be, or maimed. If there's any defect, we don't eat it; we can sell them to the market for someone else who really needs that meat to eat it, but we don't eat, same as you wouldn't bring a maimed animal to the temple, which you probably remember from reading your Bible. But the whole thing is premised around the sacredness of life, and I think that's something that's very often lost about our eating, is that both our lives are sacred and the thing that we eat is sacred. It doesn't just make it possible to live; it was alive, and it participates in that. This is sort of sacred fuel, I guess. That's the whole premise of the thing, with the kosher keeping. It wasn't there just to make peoples' lives different or just to be a boundary in community, and I think that

concept is increasingly important, but it's also super, super ancient. It's there in the story of Noah; that's the big takeaway for Noah, is now you can eat the animals, but it's sacred, and you're going to give an accounting. It's a really powerful concept. So, that one was something that came to me through becoming Jewish. I don't think I would have longed for kosher-keeping if I just had it to make up myself, but there's a lot there, too.

[01:12:02.27]

**Michelle L.:** Yeah. Mm. Well, thank you for sharing.

[01:12:07.01]

**Stephen S.** You're welcome. Thank you for your great questions. I appreciate it.

[*End of interview*]