

Gayle Weber Rakita

Narrator

Elaina Nelson

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Interviewer

Gayle Weber Rakita: GWR

Elaina Nelson: EN

Interviewed June 10, 2022

Abstract: Gayle Weber Rakita is a member of the Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid and is an active member in her synagogue. Gayle joined CBINT after moving to Wisconsin from Pennsylvania in 1975. She has filled a variety of roles in her congregation since 1977, including being the president of the board on two occasions. She was the second woman to be president of her synagogue's board. This oral history took place at Gayle's home and lasted for approximately 45 minutes. The conversation discusses issues of how gender roles in Congregation Beth Israel have changed since the 1970's, the importance of evolution in leadership, and Gayle's connections to her synagogue and Judaism. There is also a discussion on the impact of Judaism on Gayle's life growing up in Pennsylvania. The interview took place as part of the Gathering Places project at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. For more information, see <https://uwm.edu/gatheringplace>

Elaina Nelson (EN): Alright my name is Elaina (coughs) sorry, Elaina Nelson and I'm doing an oral history for the UWM Gathering Places Project, and it is June 10th at 11?

Gayle Weber Rakita (GWR): 11: 17

EN: 11:17 am. And I'm interviewing Gayle, and can you state your name?

GWR: Sure, my name is Gayle Weber Rakita and I am a member at Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid, and I am participating in this oral history program.

EN: Alright thank you very much. And so, I guess my first question is how long have you been involved in Beth Israel Ner Tamid?

GWR: Okay, so I have to calculate now. I started going to Beth Israel in 1974, no 77, 1977.

EN: Alright.

GWR: So, until now, whatever that calculates out to be. (laughs)

EN: The math in my head is not wanting to work so

GWR: So, I started going in 1977, got very involved starting in 80 or 81

EN: Okay, so how did you get involved in the congregation?

GWR: How did I join or how did I get involved?

EN: Well, I guess both. How did you initially join?

GWR: Okay well I'm not from Milwaukee. So, when I moved out to Milwaukee, I was looking for a congregation to join. And I toured various congregations, various denominations, to see which one fit best with me. And I felt that Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid, which at that time was only Congregation Beth Israel, was the best fit and where I felt most comfortable.

EN: Great and then you had mentioned that a few years later that you had got more involved. What spurred that increased involvement?

GWR: I come from a family of volunteers, synagogue volunteers, doing a lot of that type of work. Uncles, grandparents, parents, so it was sort of was natural that I wanted to be a part of it and so I started just doing odds and ends of little volunteer projects. You know, sit on a committee here, sit on a committee there. But the one that really, I think, that pushed me into it. We used to have a blood drive.

EN: okay

GWR: An annual blood drive at Beth Israel. I helped with it and one year I had been elected to the board. And they asked me, they came up to me and said would you chair it? And that's sort of what started me going on committees, chairing committees, and eventually becoming president twice.

EN: Oh wow! I did not realize that you had been president twice.

GWR: Twice (laughs)

EN: That is quite the accomplishment.

GWR: I'm not sure how much of an accomplishment that is (laughs)

EN: Are you still involved?

GWR: Yes, I am. Beth Israel is my home basically, second home. I'm not quite as involved as I was. There is a new generation of people coming in. But I do still sit on committees, sit on the board. As a past president, you're just automatically on it but I still participate a lot. I try not to chair as many committees anymore, but I do chair every once and a while. There is a whole new crop of people coming in. They need to be trained into this so that they can take over.

EN: So, would you say that developing those leadership skills in younger generation is also very important in the work?

GWR: Oh yes. You don't think of this when you're younger yourself, but you reach a point when you stop innovating and its 'well this is the way that we used to do it'. So, you need to have new people coming in, new thoughts, up to date with what is going on. So, it's very important to bring in new people and getting them involved with the synagogue work and volunteerism. So that you can pass the scepter on so to speak.

EN: I find that really nice to hear. Sometimes when you hear people talk about those leadership roles and those kinds of things. I feel like the popular narrative is more of a focus on continuity and not

GWR: Well continuity is important. You can have continuity with a new group of people.

EN: Yeah.

GWR: They're going to add their own little stuff. As the leadership gets older, the congregation gets older. So, you're bringing in new people and maybe what worked in 90's isn't going to work now because people live different lives.

EN: Yeah

GWR: You need to have those new idea brought in. And as people get older their lives change and they have other things they need to do; they have to do. They go away, they're not around as much. So, you need to have that next level of people who are younger and have energy and can do what needs to be done.

EN: Well, when you were.

I guess through your experience of volunteering with Beth Israel, what would you say is your most, the accomplishment you are most proud of or something that you did that you go, 'That really sticks out in my memory'.

GWR: Well, I guess that was being president.

EN: Yeah

GWR: it was very interesting the first time that they asked me to be president. I just really was not sure that I wanted to do this. I had been vice president on the board. Like I said, I had some from a family of presidents and vice presidents and board members in synagogues. Not this one, but out east. And so, I had to think about and talk about. And they did an article, of course, on me. They did it on anyone coming in and they asked my husband whatever questions that they asked him. And the comment that really stuck in my mind was when he said, "Gayle was the only one who did not realize that she would be president" (laughs). So, it was just this progression. I had been being schooled without knowing that was really happening. Yeah, and he was right. That for me was a big accomplishment. I felt that I was able to do quite a bit about the synagogue.

EN: That's really awesome. That shock that turns into a kind of 'Yeah, I'm really proud of that'. Outside of the volunteering work, what kind of role does Congregation Beth Israel play in your life now?

GWR: Just the fact that it's there. I am a synagogue goer. We go often on the Sabbath, on holidays. I take classes there. I've always, always taken classes as does my husband, well did. It is like I said, a second family. This is where a lot of our friends are. Congregation Beth Israel, as with many other congregations. And I should remember to say Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid. But they were much bigger at one time, and you couldn't get to know everybody. So, there were small little groups formed called *haverot* which means groups of friends. We were in one. That also forms a family. Its people who have a lot of your same values and they're going to the synagogue and you're the same age range and maybe have the kids in the same age range. The bonding and the closeness that you have formed with those people is still there. That has not gone away. They're family. In my case, almost everyone in my

group were not original Milwaukeeans. There were a few, but very few of them were. We were all looking for family and Beth Israel provided that for us. Classes are always great. There's one class that I have been taking now, a woman's Torah study group, for ten years. Then various rabbis have taught other classes and other people have taught classes. It's just a real strong focal point if you need something, you need someone, they're there.

EN: I really like how you described that; it's really touching. My brain was like, 'oops'. (pause) So now, I should say, over the past few years with covid and the lockdowns I understand that you had to adjust how everything operated. How would you say, kind of retrospectively, that covid impacted how you interact with the congregation and your community?

GWR: I think covid hurt the congregation. Not just our congregation, all congregations. So, I don't want it to sound like it was just our congregation. I believe religiously that people need contact with other people. And its face-to-face contact. Now zoom has had its place. There is no question. When we absolutely could not go out, we couldn't, and the synagogues were closed, ours included, Zoom gave you a contact point. You could see,

It was wonderful to be having services with other people and see them and get caught up because everyone would chat a little bit first. But I think that we lost something also. We lost a closeness. A lot of the younger generation, and I don't want to say this negatively because the younger generation again as I said earlier, they do things differently. They're much more into technology and that type of thing. But I think for those of us who are beyond a certain age, the one-on-one contact, the individual contact is much more important. And I think that our synagogue tried very hard to keep that up. They still did little things like for certain holidays they would have goody bags put out. And one of the things some of us would go in and people would just drive up with their car and you'd hand them the little goody bag for the holiday. So, there was still that contact. Our clergy, they did this anyhow, but I think they stepped it up more. There were many phone calls to congregants to find out how they're doing. I mean they call us all the time on a regular basis. But I think that covid pushed it more because they knew that people were really in need of that contact. Whether it was through the clergy or the education or anyone who was very involved. But I think,

Covid now is changing a lot of what we do, and people trying to adjust how to get back into being in person or do we blend it with the technology. And some things were blending, and some things were not, and everybody is still trying to figure that out.

EN: Yeah, I would say that that sounds pretty consistent with just kind of most people's interactions with a lot of group stuff.

GWR: Yeah, I mean it's kind of hard. Like I mentioned, I take this class that is being taught by this wonderful, wonderful educator. A member of our congregation. She's like one of those people you'd say, 'when I grow up, I want to be her'. (laughs) We were doing our classes on zoom which then was good for people who went away because if they went and wintered somewhere they could still tune into the class which was very, very nice. Then we came back. Then we had to shut down again and then back to zoom. Now we're back in person but we still have that zoom option. It doesn't always work because right now there's only one or two people who still use the zoom option. Most of us still wear our masks because there's still a few people who are uncomfortable with it and the rest of us are fine. But sometimes it's not as easy to get the people who can't come in onto the zoom because when

everybody's on zoom you can hear everybody else, and you can see everybody else. But if you're the only one or two the only person you're seeing is the instructor, you have a really hard time hearing what other people are saying. So, the blend makes it sometimes a problem and that I think everybody is trying to work out. That's not particular to our synagogue by a long shot, you know with that. But I think that it really has affected people. I think people really were anxious to get back. Again, in our class, one of the things that the instructor and I came up with was when we first started opening up again,

It was late spring, early summer. So, I said, well why can't we have our class outside? The book clubs were having them outside. So, we set up our, they set up long tables. We have an overhang that you drive, an underpass that you drive through when you drop people off. We set up the tables there, so we didn't have the sun hitting us and we were outside. But [we were] right outside the doors so you had a bathroom if you needed it. That's how we had class. Then little by little we started moving back in. Now we still have it indoors, but not in our original classroom which is very small. We're still kind of spread out that way. But you adapt. Covid has made you adapt. I think any situation over the years, with whether it be synagogues, schools, everybody adapts at some point to new experiences.

EN: so, in the recovery since do you think that sense of community and closeness has returned more or is it still, do you think, more of a struggle?

GWR: I think it's still a struggle. For me, I push it because this is my community. I want to be involved and I want to be there. But it's hard sometimes.

[52 seconds were cut from the oral history at the narrator's request]

I think with any relationship you need to work at it. So, if you're just going to sit back and say 'well, you know. I stopped going so therefore I'm not going to go back. I'm out of the habit.' You're going to lose some of your community. But you have to work at it. You have to go back. And it was a struggle when you haven't done it for a year. It is a struggle, but you start going back. We have, I don't know what your background is, how much know about what goes on. Normally after a Saturday morning service or a holiday we always have what is called a *kiddish* which is a little meal. And of course, that had to stop, even once they opened up. Then again, we started having it outside, but it was only just maybe a little something to drink and a snack. Now we started having the sit down, indoors type of thing. Especially for my generation, a little older, a little younger, that's a really important social time. A really major time where they can sit with people they may not see otherwise and talk to them. Just enjoy life at that point. So, I think that's something with covid that was very hard for people. They lost the contact of the synagogue. But I see them starting to come back. I mean we're having,

The lunches may not be as big right now yet as they used to be, but more and more people are coming back.

EN: (coughs) sorry.

GWR: Do you want something to drink?

EN: No, I'm good.

GWR: Okay

EN: A little bit of allergies

GWR: I know how that goes but if you want some water, I have bottled water, so you're welcome to some

EN: Actually, I might take you up on that, it's still kind of tickling in there

GWR: Let me go get one. (footsteps) I keep lots of bottled water around

EN: (coughs) goodness

GWR: I learned a long time ago. I don't drink the bottled water that much, but I keep it around. I'll get you a coaster

EN: thank you

GWR: For people like you and contractors and if I've got a landscaper outside working in the heat, I'm going to give him a bottle of water to drink. Even though they may carry it, it's never as good and fresh as cold.

EN: I apologize for that.

GWR: Oh, you don't have to apologize. I have bad allergies too. If you had been here like three days ago, my throat was totally scratchy. I would have sounded like that really hoarse, throaty kind of thing

EN: Uh huh, it's like three of the year that I have allergies

GWR: I wish I only had them for three days out of the year.

EN: Thankfully cottonwood doesn't bloom too long. Anyways, I guess. (Trails off)

GWR: I think that community, going back to the meals again, the community of meals I think is very important at a synagogue because it means that you're not just going there, sitting in a seat. Because you're not really communicating that much. But afterwards you don't have to rush out. You can sit, you can talk, you can find out what's going on with someone. It's just a very, very important part of what happens in part of that community of the synagogue, of any synagogue, or I'm sure of churches too.

EN: Yeah, when we had talked with some other people and just looked at the history of the synagogue, especially at your location in Glendale, it really seemed that having a space for community, to me, outside of service was very important. In just looking how the building evolved, there was always that social space.

GWR: Oh yeah, that social hall it will always be there. And I know years ago, they, (cough) oh now it's me. All they really had was something very light. Little wine. They'd have some bread. They'd have the challah that'd we have. They'd have some sweets. Then they started adding a few other finger things and eventually we got to major lunches, so that you'd have a really nice sit-down lunch. It's really good for people. Little kids get to be with other little kids. Older people get to socialize with people they may not ever see otherwise. It serves a lot of purposes. And it's a safe place. There's always food whenever there's a function. Even when we have our class there is the coffee pot is going and the hot water and there's usually some cookies out. Meetings often have something there, even if it's just coffee and tea. You serve food, people come (laughs).

EN: Yeah (laughs) that seems very true about people. So, over your involvement with Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid, how do you feel,

Do you feel that the community has changed over the years from your early days in the seventies?

GWR: Oh yeah. It really has. But that again I think normal progression.

EN: Yeah

GWR: I've been through five rabbis. The first rabbi that was there was, of course, very traditional. The synagogue was much bigger. A lot more people. Services were held differently. I mean it's the same service but there were different things about how it was run. That rabbi had been a wonderful, wonderful man but he ran it more like he was the CEO of the place and was involved with everything. Rabbis that are coming out now are still involved but they are learning that.

They are being trained a little bit differently than that timeframe was. Again, people change, times change. It's no different than your parents saying in my day. That's going back to what we said in the beginning its important to bring in new leadership. Because that all is going to change. It isn't going to sit static. You have to find newer ways and different ways. Not necessarily better, but newer and different to keep people involved, to keep them active. You have to take,

When I first started at that point, yes women were working, but not like they are now. Or the generation that was just above me. Not coming in ahead of me but had just,

These were the women who did all the cooking and the baking and were super involved in the kitchen and there was a big catering service at the synagogue. But that changes over time. People are busier. Kids are more involved. The days are gone when kids just run out in the backyard and play. Now they're all scheduled for everything. So having to do something at the synagogue, Hebrew classes or Sunday school classes, has to be worked around everything else they are doing. So that kind of thing has to change. So, you have to evolve. Judaism is a very evolving religion. Your synagogue has to evolve, it has to. And even though there's many of us who say, I don't want it to change. I want it to be the way I remember it. But if you really think hard, the memories you have, yeah there's certain good memories but there was a lot of things you didn't like either (laughs) So I think that it's really important that you have to step back. I think that's what some of the older generation realizes at some point, especially if you were a leader, you need to,

You fight stepping back at a certain point, but then you realize it's time to let someone else [take over]. That you're there to help, that you're there to do what they need. If I get a call now and it's something I can do, if it's something that I can fit into my schedule [I will help]. You know I sat on one of the review committees just recently. I can do what I can do, and I'll accept it if I can but I'm always there if they ask me for something.

EN: Speaking of how things have changed. We ran across a few things discussing just how the role of women had changed in your congregation. Was it in the nineties if I'm remembering correctly? The mid-nineties?

GWR: I'm trying to think if it was the mid-nineties or further back even.

EN: Well, I'm sure that it had evolved over time.

GWR: It evolved. I'm just trying to,

I know it was either the late eighties or the early nineties when things started to change. Yeah, because my first presidency, I wasn't president with the original rabbi that was there. I started with the next rabbi. And at that point women could still partake in the ser,

Women were partaking in the service, but they weren't being counted in the number, in the *minyan*. I don't know how, again I don't know how much Mark may have explained in his thing. But the minyan is ten people. Well, it just used to be ten men. If you are in the conservative or the reform movement, we now count women as part of that ten. And that goes back to ancient times in the Bible where there's a mention of ten people. (Clears throat) Nobodies positive of when it is, but there was one where the ten men came back and gave a bad report and so they said that you need to have at least ten people to agree on something. And don't want to go there because that's not my field. But now women are counted. And it used to be they weren't. and it started out very slowly with the rabbi that was the first rabbi there when I became president. They were discussing the women's role. There's a prayer that we say after someone passes away. And if it's a parent you say it for eleven months. So, when I first started, I wasn't counted. I needed make sure for me,

I could say the prayer, but I wasn't counted as one of the ten, there had to be ten people there, ten men. And so, there was a big push. And so little by little it changed. So, the first change was,

Well, the first change was women were allowed to read from the Torah. But then the next change was women could be counted for the kaddish. And eventually that just filtered away. The same thing with women's role. There are on the sabbath, there are seven, seven verses read from the Torah every week. Seven portions. And in the beginning, the first seven would be read, they would always be read by men. When the women started the men read the first seven and then they added three more. So, they said it didn't matter because the main seven were done already and the women could read the next three. And just little by little those three just went away. No big fuss, no big deal, they just simply went away. And the women started doing as much. And now the women are presidents. I was the second woman president. There was one other one right before me who also would have been a wonderful person to interview, except that they moved away just recently for health reasons. And she also was president twice.

EN: Wow!

GWR: Seems like us women do that. (laughs) We seem to be the ones who keep doing that. So that's a big role, that's a big change too. We're the ones that when they needed someone and they couldn't find someone, we're the ones that stepped up. So yes, the woman's role has evolved from being counted, from reading, reading from the torah, from having these special Aliya prayers that you say when you're called up. We call it being called up to the Torah because you walk up to the Torah. It's an elevation to be able to read from the Torah or to say the blessings over the Torah. It's an honor. And now, I mean women do, there's women rabbis, again for years there wasn't. I can't address the Orthodox to you very much. I grew up Orthodox before I came out here. But the Orthodox I grew up is very different from some of the Orthodox now. I grew up where women didn't do anything. They had more like separate but equal kind of thing. They did their own thing. And they still have not,

The woman's role in Orthodox Judaism has changed greatly but I am so far removed from that, I would not feel comfortable saying anything about that.

EN: That's completely fine because we're

GWR: I would say, especially something that is going to be going and being documented, I just don't know enough about it. I know they are much more involved. But now in the conservative, the reform, reconstructionist, women are rabbis. Women are hazans, cantors. I do believe there have been some Orthodox women ordained as rabbis, but it's not something I know something well enough. You'd have to find that out somewhere else.

EN: Oh yeah, that's completely fine.

GWR: But yeah, women do just about everything now. Just like they do anywhere else. And since we do it all as volunteers, we don't have to worry about the glass ceiling and getting paid for it (laughs)

EN: That's an advantage. (laughs) So we talked a lot about how your community interacts with itself. But do you think the congregation as a whole has a lot of interaction with the broader city of Glendale or Milwaukee?

GWR: Ours does.

EN: Yeah?

GWR: There is a phrase that we use, it called tikkun olam and it's repairing the world. And it's social action. And that's always been a part of Judaism. Not always a part of synagogues in general, the synagogues. We want to be a part of the community. We are part of the community. And a lot of times, And that's evolved over the years too. But it wasn't just us. I mean it could've been churches. Everybody kind of just stayed in their own little conclave and that was it. Or enclave. But now synagogues and churches will do things together. We have supported each other when there have been disasters like shooting or defacing synagogues. Different members have been, you know, supported them in their congregation when they needed support. The rabbis and priests and the reverends have done things together. Our tikkun olam, like I said, repairing the world, is usually out there as well as our social action committee. They're raising funds, they're doing actions that are for the environment. We're very involved in the environment and have a group that work on that. We're involved in communities that need help. Where they raise funds. We donate to, I think Ronald McDonald, we donate to a women's shelter, we donate to some Native American tribe. There's always collecting things. They pick out, You can't donate to everybody, but they pick out a wide variety of things. The Glendale police have been fantastic for us with various things that have obviously happened over the years. And we give back to them as much as we can. Not financially, but other ways that we can. So yeah. The synagogue life is very involved. That's part of what Judaism is, to be involved.

EN: That's really nice. (laughs) I know I keep saying that but just hearing you talk about your experiences and your community, it makes me feel very (inaudible)

GWR: Okay

EN: (Long pause, reading) I apologize.

GWR: It's alright.

EN: For the pause. My brain is just. So, in being involved with the congregation, has there been. Has that experience, you've talked a lot about how you really enjoy the community, has there been any other way that it has had an impact on your life? I guess.

GWR: Well, my life is so tied up in Judaism.

EN: Yeah.

GWR: and the congregation so it's hard to separate that out for me.

EN: Yeah.

GWR: It's just part of who I am. I was raised on a farm where there was not a lot of Jewish people around. I mean it was all my family. I mean I came from a very large, large family. And the city was not too far away. But where I grew up and I always knew who I was. Judaism was always who I was. It didn't overtake my life. I always went to public schools and things like that. But it's just part of what made me. So, it's sort of hard to, you know. This synagogue particularly? Well, I mean I've been going there, like I said, since 1977 with getting more involved in 80, 81 or whatever it was. It was so long ago, you kind of forget sometimes the exact timelines. It's just in who I am.

EN: Oh yeah.

GWR: I can't separate the two.

EN: Okay. (Reading pause) So I guess going back to interaction with Milwaukee, I had heard mentioned and we didn't really see anything about it, but to your knowledge was the synagogue involved in the civil rights movements?

GWR: The what?

EN: The civil rights movement in Milwaukee.

GWR: You know that's before my time.

EN: I thought that might have been the case.

GWR: Because that was sixties, and I didn't move out here until 75. I didn't get involved,

EN: Oh okay.

GWR: I started going to synagogue in 77 but it was 75 when I actually moved out here. So that was, I cannot tell you honestly on that.

EN: Oh, that's perfectly fine, I was kind of just reaching there.

GWR: Yeah, I mean I'm sure that are some people, and you don't even have their,

Even the rabbi is so far removed from the one. I'm sure there's history. I'm sure there are people who could answer that question for you that were here in the sixties. Cause my,

Well even then, people that are my age, I mean we were elementary age in the sixties, early teens at that point. So, they might remember. But my guess is that they probably were. But I'm only guessing.

EN: That's fine.

GWR: I know our synagogue was very involved when the first set of, with the Russians and the Ethiopians and they were all leaving their countries. And I know the rabbi at that point, they were all really involved with that. But the civil rights here, I honestly don't know. My guess is they were, but I can't. It's just not something I have any familiarity with.

EN: Yeah, that's fine. I guess. Well, it's almost noon and I told you this would take about an hour. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about your experiences? Or?

GWR: I'm trying to think. It's easier when you ask questions.

EN: Yeah, yeah.

GWR: Did we cover everything that was on there?

EN: Well

GWR: Can I take a look at what's on there?

EN: Yeah, you can take a look

GWR: Then I can take a quick look at this again

EN: (inaudible)

GWR: Let me take a quick look. (Pause, reading) I just, again, this made me laugh but I'm not sure it's (laughs) what we want to have in there. It says here, tell me about one of your favorite moments. And this really doesn't have anything to do specifically with the synagogue. But when I was first elected to the first presidency, you have to be voted on at the board. And they just do it verb of mouth or whatever. And everyone in favor of Gayle Weber Rakita becoming president. And everyone went 'Aye'. Anyone opposed? And all of the sudden one hand goes up and goes 'No'. My husband. He was doing it as a joke. The joke around this is still, I was the only president that was not unanimously. (Laughs) But that's not something that I think I want in there. But just think that's a funny. When I read this, "Talk about one of your favorite moments" Everybody just cracked up. It was just so funny.

EN: It's those little moments, you know, that come to together and make something really meaningful.

GWR: You know I think this question here, where would you like your community to go in ten years? And what is the greatest opportunity? And the greatest challenge? I think we talked about it, but to stress it, I think the greatest challenge is bringing people back after Covid. And that people are willing to come back for a program, a project, an activity, but getting that community again of this is your, on Saturday morning services is a part of this. This is part of it. It is getting people to feel that again. To feel the desire to come back and be part of it. And I think that's a really big challenge. And I know that it's not just for us, but for all communities that way. And I guess where I'd like to see it in ten years, I'd like to see it keep evolving. I want to see our synagogue grow. I want to see the young children that are there now continue to be involved. That's also something very important is watching the young children be involved. We have camp scholarships that we are specifically for children to go to camp.

