

Interviewee: Valerie Cohen
Interviewer: Lilly Cabral
Date of Interview: October 5, 2018
Transcribers: Lilly Cabral and Emily Ramos



Overseen by Dr. Carl Robert Keyes and Dr. Lucia Knoles, Assumption College

Abstract: Valerie Cohen was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1971 and currently lives in Holden Ma with her husband, daughter and son. In this interview she reflects on being a rabbi at the Temple Emanuel Sinai as well as a mother and wife. Valerie explains moving from state to state due to the extreme demands of her job as a rabbi. Valerie is the Senior Rabbi overseeing much of what the synagogue does. She explains working 60-80 hours a week just to cover the demands of the job. Valerie elaborates on her education at the University of Florida and the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. She also shares the challenges of balancing her personal life and work life. Valerie is a strong woman who serves as an inspiration to women and Jews across the greater Worcester area.

LC: Okay so, we're going to ask some questions about your general family life and Worcester. What is your full name including both your maiden name and your married name?

VC: Okay, interesting. Valerie which is V-A-L-E-R-I-E, my last name is Cohen which is C-O-H-E-N, and my maiden is Mittleman, M-I-T-T-L-E-M-A-N.

LC: And where were you born?

VC: Cleveland,,Ohio.

LC: Cleveland Ohio, okay. What made you move here?

VC: This job.

LC: This job, okay and have you ever been married?

VC: Yes.

LC: What's your husband's name?

VC: Jonathan J-O-N-A-T-H-A-N, also Cohen.

LC: Do you have any children?

VC: I do, I have an 8th grader, Marisa, M-A-R-I-S-A, and a son who is 17 and a senior, god help me—college as you know—Gabriel, G-A-B-R-I-E-L.

LC: And what cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

VC: Culturally and religiously, we're Jewish, American, that's it.

LC: So tell me about your parents.

VC: What do you want to know?

LC: Are they still around?

VC: They are still living and they are in their 70's. My dad was born in I think either Brooklyn or the Bronx, and my mom in Indiana. Both of them, their parents were born in the United States which is unusual but after that, their grandparents were not born here. They are both retired, they live in Florida now. But I grew up in Florida.

LC: How did they meet? Do you know?

VC: I believe they met at a temple event when they were young. When they got married my dad was 25 and my mom was almost 22. And I think they got married after 6 months. So it was some kind of temple singles event in Cleveland.

LC: Where did you grow up?

VC: So I grew up mostly in Florida. We moved out of Cleveland when I was 8, and so Jacksonville, Florida for part of the time, and Merritt Island, Florida which is central on the east coast.

LC: And what made you guys move from Cleveland to Florida?

VC: Again my dad's job.

LC: And how was the neighborhood like that you grew up in?

VC: So I had two different neighborhoods because I was in Jacksonville from second to seventh grade and Merritt Island from seventh to twelfth grade so you can see almost equivalent chunks of time. So I'm going to go back to the neighborhood in Cleveland and when I left when I was 8 it was very diverse, very integrated. Not only was there Jews, but there was Orthodox Jews, African American, Hispanic, I mean really that was one of the most integrated places I've ever lived. Then we moved when I was 8, I maybe just turned 8. What was the Jacksonville neighborhood like? There was a lot of kids and we use to play together and I remember going to the bus stop—it was a long time ago people—I remember going to the bus stop right across the street from my house and there was a lot of kids there and we rode our bikes and everything.

When I moved to Merritt Island it was also older, so I just lived on a street it wasn't really a neighborhood, and there weren't any other kids in the neighborhood so yeah.

LC: So you've moved around multiple times. Were those all because of your dad's job?

VC: Yes definitely from my dad's job when I was younger and then I left for school and went to graduate school and then all the places that I moved after was that I changed campuses of my school when I got engaged and then afterwards we've pretty much been following once my job, and once my husband's job, this second time my job.

LC: Okay so how many times would you say you've moved?

VC: Cleveland to Jacksonville, Jacksonville to Merritt Island, then I went to college in Gainesville, then I went to Israel for a year, I don't know if that counts, because it was part of school, then Cincinnati,—God why did you ask me this question—then New York, then Memphis, then Jackson and now here Worcester. Nine times.

LC: That's a lot.

VC: Yeah, what a horrible question.

LC: How is moving for you? Moving around a lot?

VC: I don't think of it that way which is interesting. The move to Cleveland to Jacksonville was hard hard hard, because there was some culture change and I was young. Moving from Jacksonville to Merritt Island was differently hard but not as hard, all the rest of it has been pretty easy. The move here has been challenging, certainly for my kids it was challenging because we came from the south, and they were born in the south and grew up in the south, to New England and I joke that we're still in culture shock, and it's really cold here.

LC: Is this the first place, Cleveland gets cold right?

VC: Yeah, but I was so little. And then I was in New York for a little bit, but I wasn't responsible for our own snow removal.

LC: What age were you when you arrived into Worcester?

VC: I'm 47 now so that was a little over 4 years ago, so I was about to turn 43.

LC: Where in the city do you live?

VC: Holden.

LC: Holden, okay. Have you lived in multiple areas of the city or just Holden?

VC: Just Holden.

LC: Do you have any other family members that live in the area?

VC: Not at all.

LC: No? Just your family of 4?

VC: Yup, and our dog and two cats.

LC: I

Where does your family live?

VC: As I mentioned, my parents are in Florida, and my husband's mother is—his father died—in Tupelo, Mississippi because he grew up in Mississippi. My sister is in Austin, and his sister just moved to Canada on the west coast. Why am I forgetting the name. If I said it you would know. Big fun city on the other side. Vancouver. I mean I have some family in Long Island and I have some family in Minneapolis.

LC: What challenges do you think the city faces?

VC: Public school. I think that's the biggest challenge. There's been such great development and I think we're continuing to move in that area. I think we've gone over the tipping point and we're in a good place, but until they solve the challenge in the public schools... I also think one of the great wonderful advantages of Worcester is the diversity and the immigration and that of course lends to different challenges. You know the - I think I heard the number of languages in the public schools could have been like 90. It was a huge number of different languages and I think it is great and I think it's wonderful for the city and I think it creates lots of challenges.

LC: What changes have you seen in Worcester in the time that you've been here?

VC: Even in the short time, the development has been crazy and good. When I first got to Worcester my impression was, this city has very low self esteem. I feel like that's changed although some of the folks who have been here for quite a long time, when I talk about the development and the exciting things that happen, they say, "Oh we've done that before and it never works." So there's this kind of looking back to the golden years that apparently weren't so golden, but that's the impression. I do see overall the attitude has changed and the excitement and the value of living in Worcester.

LC: What kind of distinct characteristics do you think make Worcester the kind of place that it is?

VC: The immigration for sure, that's just fabulous. It is and probably will always remain a small town even though it's a city. It's a small city, but feels like a small town. I think some of that is good, access to public officials is very easy. It's New England so even though our city is very diverse, I think it's in many ways very segregated and being in the community that I'm in, no matter how hard that I try I'm very much in a white area. If I had known what Holden was like I don't know that I would have moved there. I joke that here's a southerner coming to liberal Massachusetts, I never checked for diversity. But I really think that that is a challenge, people say all the time that racism doesn't exist in this area and that's not true, so I think that there's denial and I think that's a challenge. The art museum, I mean there is so much culture here but people don't realize it. Art museums, historical society, there's so much stuff that happens here I always talk about, when I talk to people that don't live here because I have friends from all over the country, all roads lead to Worcester, everybody has a Worcester connection. And then there's also the universities, I mean I think that that's a great part of Worcester. Does that answer the question?

LC: Yeah. What do you think women's experiences have been in Worcester generally?

VC: I think good. But again, I think depending on race and ethnicity that changes dramatically. It just feels like the leadership in this town is still very white old male. I went to the Worcester Historical Society event, the Harvey Ball it's called, and there was no diversity there. I mean very very little. I think in terms of the leadership of the city and the power in control is mostly white men, white women are making their way in, not a lot of ethnicity at least that I've seen. Maybe more in the nonprofit sector, and maybe more in the schools. So I've done really well. I have been welcomed in the congregation, I haven't had a lot of difficulty being a woman like I did in the south and the leadership position, but I still think there is a challenge.

LC: Now some questions about your education. Where did you attend school?

VC: University Of Florida for undergraduate and then Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion where I got a master's for Jewish Literature and Rabbinic Ordination to become a rabbi.

LC: What were your challenges in education?

VC: Personal or?

LC: Personal.

VC: I did not have a good study ethic at all because in some ways things were easy for me and so when I got into college it kind of hit me a little bit in rabbinical school as well. I mean I did fine, but I went to a big school where I was a number, but I still managed. In rabbinical school, I don't know if you can imagine, you have part-time jobs as serving small communities as a rabbi but you're still a student. So there was some identity crisis in terms of we were so young, were we ready? There's a lot of competition in rabbinical school that I did not like buying into and the professors could be hard. I transferred in the middle to a different campus—the school has four campuses—when I got engaged and that was a little challenging. I never wanted to live in New York City ever in my life and I lived outside the city, but commuted to the city. Let's see, other challenges, I mean are you talking about graduate or kid too?

LC: Whatever you want to talk about.

VC: I mean I think that was most of it.

LC: Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

VC: To become a rabbi. Rabbis do a lot of other things, they're not always just in congregations, but I always wanted to do a congregation job. There aren't a tremendous number of jobs, that's why the moving because if you've been at a job for a while and it's not your match anymore, it's not like you can go to another synagogue in town because there often isn't one and you have to do a search nationwide.

LC: What support networks and mentors have been important to you?

VC: That's a great question. My family for sure. I have people I went to rabbinical school with, again all over the country, and we talk to each other and call and it's a huge support. I have a rabbinic couch which is really important. It's like a professional coach. I have friends here, close friends, which I can't say I've had at my other jobs. Again, it's about that position, the challenge of making friends. And in terms of my work there are congregates who can serve as advisors and that's been supportive as well.

LC: What is your job right now? What do you do?

VC: I lead worship services, I do all of the holiday programming, I officiate life cycle events, weddings, bar/bat mitzvahs, funerals, I do pastoral care, I teach, I supervise the staff members, I'm involved in the religion school.

LC: How did you come to do this work?

VC: When I was 14, or 13, for some reason my mom and my rabbi at the time were having a conversation about what I wanted to do when I grew up and I knew I liked working with people and I liked writing and teaching, and I liked learning and a few other things and the rabbi said,

“Oh, you should be a rabbi, we do everything.” I thought it was the funniest joke because it was the mid 80s and there were not a lot of women rabbis and my mom came home and told me and I said, “Well, what’s so funny, it’s possible.” Then when I was in high school I was involved in youth group and through that experience I discovered Jewish identity and what it means and how could I help other people figure out how they fit into Judaism and the Jewish world.

LC: What has this work meant to you?

VC: I am, in a one-liner my friend wrote an article about, which is the best line I ever heard, “I am, it is an honor and it is humbling to be invited into people’s lives at the highest moments, the most joyful moments, and the lowest moments.” And I get to do that. People invite me in because of my position and it’s really an honor and humbling.

LC: How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities and roles and interests in your life?

VC: Very poorly. I mean that’s really the answer. Work takes over everything. I know it’s sad but I would say just recently I found an outlet, like a hobby that I had not had before so I have been able to do some of those things.

LC: What are your hours? Do you have set hours here?

VC: I do not. I have Tuesdays off when there is not something that comes up, and I pretty much work every other day, sometimes Saturdays will only be a half day and Sunday will only be a half day sometimes. 60-80 hours a week.

LC: What do you think are the pros and cons of the path that you have chosen?

VC: Oh it’s awful! It’s awful. I mean I’m trying to work on it all the time and make it better. It’s unhealthy physically and emotionally and mentally. It is spiritually rewarding. I mean I love helping people and doing the work I do. But I have to figure out a better way to do it.

LC: How do you feel about the choices you made in your life? Do you have any regrets?

VC: Who doesn’t have regrets? I mean I picked the best husband ever, I have great kids, I love my work. I think choices around health and wellness and balance those have been bad choices, but I don’t know how to get out of those patterns. I’m pleased with my job choices, my school choices, I mean those are kind of the big things.

LC: Do you consider yourself politically active?

VC: On issues, yes and no. Certainly with the congregation I speak on issues more than I did in the south, but I definitely speak on issues. I’d like to be more involved personally and physically

sort of speak whether it's nonprofit organization or volunteering, but again working that balance is hard for me. But I have been outspoken on issues not candidates because that is not appropriate for a leader of a non-profit organization.

LC: Have you ever been involved in volunteer or community work?

VC: Outside of my job, absolutely. Throughout my life, Planned Parenthood, I was on the ethics committee of a hospital. My most meaningful experience was called the McLean Fletcher Center where I worked with families where the children had lost somebody in their lives, so whether it was a parent who died or a grandparent or a sibling, and I volunteered there a lot and worked with the parents. I was in Junior League in Mississippi not here which is unheard of around here. It's a women's service organization. Do you know the book *The Help*? That's the Junior League. I've always been involved in interfaith work and clergy associations. They're is not really one here. I kind of got involved in Worcester Interfaith but not so much and I speak at rallies.

LC: What role has religion played in your life?

VC: Obviously it has guided everything that I do. I have a strong belief in God but not traditional belief. I'm really liberal as well, and probably more liberal than the congregation, but they may have needed that, and in terms of religious beliefs as well.

LC: What are your experiences in assessing quality affordable healthcare?

VC: In Massachusetts—because I have a different answer for Mississippi and you would be shocked—I find healthcare in Massachusetts unavailable. I mean there just aren't enough medical professionals out there. There just aren't a lot. I think the benefit for Massachusetts is that they are trying to make the healthcare financially accessible to everyone, which means it's not accessible to almost anyone because there's too much need and not enough providers. Should they change? No, I mean yes they should change and get more providers, but should they change in terms of accessibilities. I think that's a great value. The contrast is in Mississippi and Memphis, it was not accessible to everybody financially so if you have the financial means the accessibility was very easy. Another difference is in the south people are recommended to you like, “this is a good person to go to.” Here I just get a list of all the people. It's like people are nervous to give recommendations. Not happy with medical care.

LC: How were girls treated when you were in school?

VC: I don't remember anything different. The schools I was in, the ones who were smart were good, and there were athletes, and there was the garbage peer pressure stuff. I'm sure there were mean girls. I didn't notice from the teachers any different treatment.

LC: What memories do you have of significant historical events that took place when you were growing up?

VC: So the one I remember the most was, I was in Merritt Island, Florida which is right near the space center, so when I was in ninth grade was when the Challenger exploded and it was vivid. I was in my biology class. In Merritt Island you can feel it go through the sound barrier. Like everything shook, the windows shook, and someone was like, “Oh, I didn't know the shuttle was going off today because we kind of took it for granted it happened all the time. And then we looked out the window and someone said, “something's wrong” because you could see out the window, two different strands of smoke and someone said, “oh maybe it exploded” and everyone's said, “no no that couldn't happen.” We were really really close. I do remember when [President Ronald] Reagan was shot, but I was really young and didn't understand it. I was in college when the Berlin Wall came down. The First Gulf War happened I was in Israel. And when I was a sophomore at the University of Florida, there was a serial killer. There's information about it. I remember being at my sorority house and we got security. And I had friends in one of the apartments close to where he was caught.

LC: How do you get through tough times and what kinds of thoughts keep you going?

VC: Such a good question, so hard to answer. I am an extrovert, so when things happen I sit with friends and family and I talk a lot. I think my faith helps me. When I can handle the discipline of it meditation kind of is centering but I don't do it enough. So I might be a stress eater, but never admit to it. So what gets me up in the morning? I mean that's the best way to ask that question. My family for sure, the positive work I can do here, and sometimes it's as simple as “the other option isn't good enough” and what's the other option to not getting up in the morning, it's not getting up in the morning, and that's not a good option.

LC: How do you define success in your life and how has the definition changes over time?

VC: I'm especially hard on myself so I'm not good at defining success because I never think I'm successful, sometimes outside influences like other people saying I'm successful is helpful and it's not about caring what other people think it's about trust. I would like to say that the definition of success is making an impact on the world whether it's on an individual person or a community or on the greater world, a positive impact. And probably the greatest definition of success which obviously changed when I had children is that they are successful and happy. If I have done that, then nothing else matters.

LC: Based on your experience what advice would you give to a woman of today and of future generations?

VC: You can do anything, no question, you can do anything. And you have to balance where you pick your fights so there is a balance of how do I make myself fit into this world so I can get things done, and when are the times that I need to shout out and rebel. So it's got to be a balance

because sometimes you can get more done by working through the system and other times you can't stomach it if you can't out. If it feels right, then it usually is and if it feels wrong, then it usually is. To trust yourself. And sexism is not going away. Especially now it's getting much worse. We have a long way to go and the last thing I would say is whatever your plan for your future is, enjoy it. It should be something that makes you happy.

LC: I think that's about it, thank you so much.

VC: You're welcome I hope it's helpful.