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Oral History Interview with Yocheved Sidof

Voices of Crown Heights oral histories: Brooklyn Movement Center, 2016.027.2.06

Interview conducted by Walis Johnson at the narrator's home on March 27, 2017 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

JOHNSON: OK. So today is Monday, March 27th, 2017, and I am Walis Johnson, representing the Brooklyn Movement Center for the Brooklyn Historical Society's Voices of Crown Heights Oral History Project. I am in the home of Yocheved Sidof --

SIDOF: Sidof.

JOHNSON: -- Sidof, at sev-- 18 Balfour Place, in Brooklyn -- in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York. So, welcome to the interview. Can you introduce yourself, giving your full name, your birthdate, and where you were born?

SIDOF: Sure. My name is Yocheved Sidof. My birthday is [date redacted for privacy], 1979. And I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota.

JOHNSON: So can you tell me a little bit about your early childhood, your -- your life in Minnesota? Like, where you were born, the kind of place it was?

SIDOF: Sure. I always start my story with my parents, and I kind of feel like my parents being immigrants kind of color my own personal journey of feeling like I belong but simultaneously an outsider in some way. And they came -- they immigrated to the United States in the '70s. And my father went to the University of Minnesota and settled in Highland Park, St. Paul, which is a super suburban, very wholesome neighborhood to be raised in; very cold in the winters, lots and lots of snow. And I was raised in a very insular Hasidic community. I went to a small cheder, small school, where there was 10 girls in my class; across three age -- three ages, grades. And my family was the only really immigrant family, Middle Eastern family. Most of the -- most of the students in my class were either from the local area or had some Eastern European background. So it was interesting just to, sort of, be raised in an environment where I felt very different and had to understand from a very young age

how I could navigate my own identity within that community. But St. Paul is a nice place to do that because it was just -- it's almost like a blank slate in a certain way. It's -- it's not racially charged, it's not -- it's not grimy, it's not busy, it's not -- it's just kind of peaceful, in a certain sense. And so it was a nice space to sort of figure myself out.

JOHNSON: So there weren't very many people from the Middle East from -- in your town or in St. Paul that you were able to meet?

SIDOF: Very few people from the same ethnic background as me, very few.

JOHNSON: Was there a -- a large Jewish community there, or—?

SIDOF: There was a larger Jewish community there, but a very small Hasidic community. And that's -- that's the community that my parents aligned themselves with when they lived there. So even though they went on their own personal journey where they weren't observant off the bat and they weren't Hasidic in many ways, they still chose to live within that community. So all my friends were Hasidic. Except for this non-Jewish girl who lived across the street from me that I became very close to, that my teachers were very confounded with. [laughter] "How does this work?" [laughter] Her father was actually Jewish. Her father was a Jew-Bu; he was like a Buddhist Jew. And he had, like, all these statues and incense and, like, burning candles. And every time -- her, her name was Christina. And every time I'd go to visit her, I'd -- I -- I -- I'd see the menorah of her grandmother and, like, the mezuzah of, you know, her, her paternal grandmother and then this shrine that her father had. And I -- I remember being very confused [laughter], as far as, like, "Where does -- where does Christina belong?" But she was a close friend of mine.

JOHNSON: And -- so the -- the little community that you lived in was primarily Hasidic, or—?

SIDOF: Yes. Yes. So the -- the little community they lived in in Highland Park was primarily Hasidic. And like I mentioned, we were the only Middle Eastern family in that Hasidic community. Besides my cousin -- our fathers are brothers -- but her mom was Norwegian. So [laughter] it wasn't exactly the same.

JOHNSON: And was she Hasidic too?

SIDOF: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: OK. Did she convert, or was she -- is there a Hasidic community in Norway, or—?

SIDOF: My aunt actually did convert, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes. I see.

SIDOF: She was from Minnesota, yes.

JOHNSON: So -- so it -- it sounds like it was a happy experience growing up in St. Paul.

SIDOF: Yeah, it was happy and -- like I said, I mean, on some level it was very simplistic and wholesome. But I think that just the aspect of having to define myself and questions around belonging and identity and who are my people, ultimately, these are questions that I've been facing since I was very young. Because most people around me didn't -- didn't look like me or didn't have the same family background as me or the same customs as me in the -- in the home. And that wasn't always an easy space to navigate.

JOHNSON: When did you leave that community or leave Minnesota?

SIDOF: So when I was 14 years old I went to boarding school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And that was -- there was no Hasidic girls' high school in St. Paul. And so my parents were faced with a choice, as far as; would they keep me for ninth grade in my current elementary school and eventually have to send me away, or would they send me away for ninth grade? And they actually wrote in a letter to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and then -- at the time the Lubavitcher Rebbe had had a -- had had a stroke, so he was only answering with, like, nodding his head. You had to ask a question. So they posed a question, "Should we keep our daughter in Minnesota for another year or send her away?" And he nodded yes to send her -- send me -- away. So I remember it was a Sunday morning, and my dad knocked on my door, and he said, "Al-Hom?" He called me Al-Hom, which is my Persian name. "Al-Hom, we got a -- a blessing from the Rebbe. You're going away next year to Pittsburgh." I was like, "OK." [laughter] It -- it's relatively accepted in our community that people go away to boarding school or to yeshiva, away from home. So it wasn't such a foreign concept to me. I think for my parents it was a big adjustment because coming from Iran, you know, they thought,

"We're in America." You know, "Why would we have to send our daughter further away from us? We're already away from home in a sense." But that was a relatively easy transition. I mean, Pittsburgh was a really warm community, and I -- I adjusted fairly easily to being away from home. I had a great roommate who was from London. I lived with a really nice family with three young kids. I -- they were 27 years old at the time. They took teenage boarders. And now when I think about it, I was like -- like, they're -- they were so young. [laughter] But it was a good experience.

JOHNSON: So -- so it wasn't a traditional boarding school. Like, I always have this vision of a boarding school where you are in the dorms, and you're, you know, with the same kids all the time, and teachers are in charge.

SIDOF: This was a boarding school where we stayed in people's homes. So there was a bit of a familial aspect to it. And in our classes I would say half of the girls were local, like from the Pittsburgh area -- also a Hasidic community -- and half of us were from across the country. So I had classmates from Connecticut, Detroit, Winnipeg. So there was a nice diversity, even at a young age.

JOHNSON: And was this Rabbi Schneerson who gave his blessing, or—?

SIDOF: Yes.

JOHNSON: It was?

SIDOF: Yes.

JOHNSON: OK.

SIDOF: Yes. Yes.

JOHNSON: This, so this was in 1990—?

SIDOF: Three.

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm.

SIDOF: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: And so you graduated from there, and then what happened?

SIDOF: So I -- I actually took early admissions. In eleventh grade I had a bit of a rough year. I was exceptionally bored in school. I was director of the high school production. I was volunteering in a home for disabled youth. I was working in a bookstore. I was trying

to find all these ways to sort of fill up my -- my headspace, my time and my headspace. And someone suggested going to college the year after, Stern College, in early admissions program. Which was a little bit different from what my peers were doing. Many of my peers were choosing to stay in high school and -- and to extend their Jewish learning in seminary, which is like a post-high school learning program. But I felt like it was the right time for me to sort of transition out. So I went to Yeshiva University, Stern College, in Manhattan when I was 17 years old. So I -- that was my early admissions year. So I was in twelfth grade officially. And I actually never got my high school diploma. [laughter] I had come back a year later and requested it from my principal, but she wasn't so eager to give it to me because I had decided to go a non-traditional route. But that was OK, because I was already in college. [laughter] So -- but I'm technically a high school dropout. And college was a very interesting experience for me. Because I was 17 years old, had led a particularly sheltered life with very strict Middle Eastern parents, coming from a very strict Hasidic community, and suddenly I was 17 years old, living on 34th Street in Manhattan, going to a college with very little supervision. I remember my first day there I got into a cab with my roommate who I just met, and the cabbie asked us where we wanted to go, and we said, "Take us to the Village," because, you know, you hear about the Village in the movies, right? And he's like, "Where in the Village?" And we're like, "Uh, we don't know! [laughter] The Village. Just take us to the Village." And he took us to Houston. And that was -- that was actually a -- a monumental night for us, because -- for me -- because it was my first time with that kind of freedom, exploring Manhattan, 17 years old and really getting a -- a taste of having just suddenly to find myself in this whole new way. So that began, like, a different chapter in my life, where I suddenly met a lot of Hasidic kids who were -- who had left the community, who were no longer practicing or Orthodox, and having to sort of encounter that. I'd never seen that before. I didn't even know it existed. And also just becoming more of an adult myself, making choices about my career, having to think deeply about -- again, how I fit into the world around me. So that was a pivotal experience. And after one year of college I went for my sophomore year to Israel for

the year. Which is, like, standard practice, to go to Israel to learn for a year for -- for Orthodox kids. Mostly they go in fresh-- the freshman year of college. But because I had that overlap of my senior year of high school being my freshman year of college in a sense, I went for my sophomore year. And I spent a year in Israel. I went to a pretty liberal, open-minded yeshiva for girls that had, actually, women from around the world. And I lived in Israel for a year. And I came back to New York as a junior in college, went back to Stern College. And I was very, very focused on becoming a psychologist. Like, this was my thing. When I was 11 years old I discovered this developmental psychology book in my grandmother's house. My uncle as an immigrant had gone to a public high school, and I guess -- I think he had done a year or two of community college, and he had this old psychology textbook. And, like, I rarely found English books in my grandparents' home. And I remember very clearly, like, opening up the textbook and -- it was a psychology textbook -- and encountering this whole list of definitions, as far as just different branches of psychology, and reading the definition for developmental psychology and the -- the study of how people become who they are or how people develop in -- through their stages of life. And I was 11 years old, and I -- I read that definition, and I was like, "Wow." Like, "This is it." Like, "This is what I want to learn. This is -- this is what I want to understand. How do we become who we are?" So throughout my schooling, throughout my high schooling -- high school years, this was, like, my focus. Here I am, this person who from, like, day one in my own psyche has been trying to figure out how my identity sort of fits in with my broader community. I want to understand how people become who they are. And as a Hasidic woman, I think I have -- would have an advantage as a psychologist, because so much about Hasidic life and teachings is understanding the soul and the psyche and how -- how and why we do what we do. So I came to college at age 17, like, very focused on this path of "I'm going to be a psychologist, I'm going to be a psychologist, I'm going to be a psychologist." And when I came back from Israel, I was still "I'm going to be a psychologist, [laughter] I'm going to be a psychologist." And -- and I did. I applied for graduate schools, and I -- I got into a PhD program straight out of college.

JOHNSON: Where was that?

SIDOF: That was at St. John's University.

JOHNSON: Oh.

SIDOF: And when I graduated college, in my senior year of college, my, my really close friend— who was that one, that girl that I had traveled to the Village with that first night in Manhattan, now, you know, four years later— she said to me, "You know, why don't -- why don't you move in with me?" Like, "I'm moving to Washington Heights when we graduate. Let's live together in Washington Heights." I knew nothing, really, about Washington Heights. I'd been there a few times. Sounded like fun. You know, I was ready to sort of move on. So I was totally set to -- to move to Washington Heights. And then something fell through last minute, and I had to find a place to live. And my friend told me about an opening in a basement in Crown Heights. And at that point, I had lived in Crown Heights, I think, the summer of my freshman year in college. I lived in a basement with some girls. It was a really wild summer. [laughter] It was a fun summer; a lot of friends. It was my first time living in Crown Heights, and there's a lot of layers of Crown Heights living. You know, there's the -- there's the layer of, you know, you live in this neighborhood that's really charged. It's really -- as a Hasidic Jew, it's very spiritually charged. This is the place where our leader— Rabbi Schneerson, the Rebbe— was; his headquarters. This is, like, where people are constantly, sort of, flocking to; for family events, for -- for holidays, for conferences, for everything. It's like a mecca, in a certain sense. And so, you know, the first time I lived here, at age 18, it was, you know, how do I -- again, this insider/outsider -- how do I navigate being in this neighborhood where it almost feels like this big boys' club of all these people who are, like, very connected through family and through history with this Hasidic sect of Chabad Jews, with Crown Heights, with the -- the Rebbe, with 770? How do I navigate this space? Like, can I find a home here? Like, can -- do I belong here? And then all the social mores that are connected with living in this space. So, walking a certain way in the street, you know, looking a certain way in the street. Not walking with -- you know, I remember I was 18, and I was just starting to explore, you know, having friends

of the opposite gender and, like, meeting -- meeting guys. And all these rules, around; we don't walk with guys in the street, or we're not -- we're not meant to be seen with people of the opposite gender, or we're not meant to be seen dressed a certain way, we're not meant to be seen acting a certain way. If we're coming home late at night we have to be careful that people [laughter] don't see us coming. So fi-- finding a way to sort of live in Crown Heights and feel like I belonged while learning all these, like, subtleties of, like, the rules we don't break and the rules that we play by and -- I remember one time walking down the street, and a yeshiva bocher, like, a Hasidic man, made a pass at me. And it was a -- kind of a vulgar [laughter] pass. And I remember feeling so confused, because I felt -- I was like, "Wow, he really [laughter] broke the rules!" Like, "This is, like -- doesn't he know how you're supposed to play here? Like, this is so not in line with how we're supposed to be." And it was almost like I was assuming that everybody knew the rules and that everyone was working as hard as I was working to play by the rules, in a sense. But I was still pushing the boundaries quite a bit. And so Crown Heights, for me, was about the space of -- this, like, meta -- [laughter] meta rules and meta -- meta structure of being, but still playing and trying to poke holes in it and see, like, how much could this withstand? How much of my own personal identity and questioning could this structure withstand? So that was my experience with Crown Heights before I graduated college. And now I'm graduating college, I was about to move to Washington Heights and to -- you know, to pursue my degree -- my degree in St. John's. And then that fell through. So I was like, "OK, do I actually move back to Crown Heights?" And this time, it's not just a summer where I'm 18 years old and it's a couple months and I'm just in-and-out. This is, like, actually moving to Crown Heights. And I decided to just -- to take a stab at it. You know, there was -- I had many friends who were living here. And there -- I definitely was drawn to this space, to this neighborhood. And so I moved here. I was 21 years old. I had a beat-up Toyota Camry that my parents bought for me so I could drive to Queens every day on the Jackie Robinson. [laughter] And -- and I was living here. I had two amazing roommates. We lived in a basement apartment on President Street between Albany

and Troy. And this is about 16, 17 years ago. And, again, there was -- I was still playing within -- within these rules, like the -- the sort of -- the social construct of how much could I be myself, but still respect my environment? And it was, like, little things. Like, I was smoking at the time. So it's like, could I light my cigarette while I was walking down the street, or do I have to wait till I drive away, you know? Or -- or how would I dress, or -- and it's just interesting to live in a place where you have to think very -- you have to be very cognizant about all these choices that you make and sort of thinking, like, "What am I fitting into," you know? And who's watching me, and -- and is it worth it? And I was living here for about six or seven months in graduate school, and we were in a unit on personality testing. And the test was in this, like, black box, like -- looked like a briefcase. And our professor said to us, "Don't ever leave it on your -- in your car, because people will think it's a -- it's a suitcase [laughter] full of money, and they will steal it." And I'm very trusting and naïve. So one night, you know, parking my car outside on the street, I wake up the next morning, and someone had broken into my car and stolen the -- the suitcase. That was my first sort of, like, brush with, oh, I'm so cognizant about stuff in Crown Heights that revolves around identity and belonging and rules, but there's a whole other set of rules and, and things happening here as far as how do I protect myself, and safety and— And then a little bit after that, my car got stolen. And that was a huge blow to me, because I needed my car to drive to Queens every day for school. And I had Minnesota plates, and I actually put in a call to the police. And three days later they found my car. This 14-year-old kid was driving it on Utica, in Eastern Parkway. Like, at least change the plates! Like, it's Minnesota plates. Like, it's -- [laughter] you're not, like -- you're not blending in, OK? And -- but the kid was 14. And I had to choose whether or not I was going to press charges. And, the way it was presented to me was, "You could press charges now, and we don't know if we'll actually be successful in rehabilitating this person or not, and he comes from a tough background," etc., etc. "Or don't press charges now, and we'll kind of let this slide, but if he gets caught again, we'll treat it worse." And I decide to not press charges, because I felt like, "He's 14, and he'll probably end up OK." And I didn't really feel like I wanted

to be that person. But I did find out that he was arrested again a little bit later and that they did kind of treat him with a bit of a heavier hand. So I still kind of think back to that and wonder if I made the right choice about -- I mean, what does rehabilitation look like for, you know, a 14-year-old Black kid living in Brooklyn who's stealing a car? And what would have been the right thing for me to do in that sense? Like, I felt like I was showing empathy. Maybe it was, like, false empathy. I don't know. So that was my second, sort of, brush with, "Do I live in a safe neighborhood? And can I trust my neighbors?" And I'm just a small-town Minnesota girl. [laughter] Like, we never dealt with this kind of stuff, you know? And then at the end of one year of living in Crown Heights and being in graduate school, I met a young man who grew up in Crown Heights and was living, actually, in California at the time. And I thought I met my soulmate. And, you know, he had a lot of feelings about Crown Heights; a lot of negative feelings about Crown Heights. He felt -- you know, we had similar stories about having, like, a different ethnic background than -- than the people of our communities. And he had a -- he had a -- a sadder story, where he really felt a lot of anger toward the Crown Heights community. And he was like, "I'm not living there." So I did something, I think, very stupid, where I said, "OK, you know, I -- I feel very deeply for this guy, and he doesn't want to live here and, you know, I'm 21 years old, in a PhD program, and maybe I'll take a year off, and I'll probably end up moving to Los Angeles to be with him," and etc., etc. So I called up my graduate school professor, and I said, "This is what I think I'm doing," and he's like, "Are you sure you want to do that? You're -- you're doing really, really well in the program. I think you have a real knack for this." And I said, "Yeah, I -- I'm pretty sure, actually." So [laughter] I -- so I decided to take a year off, and I thought that I would be moving. But he ended up coming to Crown Heights and spending about a month at his parents' house, and we had a -- a long time together, like, sort of intensely together, and we realized that it wasn't going to work. So here I was, like, October time of what would have been my second year of graduate school and heartbroken, and I'm not leaving Crown Heights now. [laughter] And I don't have a job. I mean, I had -- I had a job working at a clinic, but not a fulltime

job. And so that was a very tough place to be in, and I kind of had to reassess, like, what my hopes and dreams were, and -- and at that point I -- I was walking in the city one day, and I saw -- you know those, like, big billboards that like -- those, like, filmmaking billboards; "Learn screenwriting" or "Learn filmmaking?" So I saw one of those, and I was like, "Oh! Film!" I had taken over -- I -- once I left graduate school -- you know, I -- I was so über-focused on this "I'm going to be this Hasidic, you know, psychologist and understand what makes people tick" -- I -- once I left graduate school, took that one year off, I was like -- I was going to do things I never allowed myself to do in college because I was so focused. And I -- one of those things was to take a photography course. So I took a photography course at Queens College, and I loved it. And so I was already in this space a little bit of, like, of visual media and capturing people, and so when I saw that billboard for filmmaking, I was like, "Yes, this is what I want to be doing." And I ended up taking a six-week intensive filmmaking course on the Bowery, in the city. And I did some projects of flophouses over there that were really quite fascinating. Concurrently, I did some video work in Crown Heights of young people who had really, really tough family -- family backgrounds. It's like, again, that -- that part of the community of; you don't really know what's lurking behind closed doors because there's such an investment in sort of playing by certain rules and reputation, and there's a lot of pain that's lurking behind the surface here, for many, many people. And I started working with at-risk youth in Crown Heights; Hasidic kids who were just really on the edge. And so as I was sort of developing these filmmaking muscles and, you know, working with this one flophouse, I was also working with these at-risk youth in Crown Heights and also using my video camera to document them and their stories and also to use filmmaking as a tool in -- in Torah learning, in Jewish learning. So we'd have, like, gatherings and get-togethers as -- there was this place called YAM, on the corner of Albany and Empire Boulevard. And it was, like, this rec center for at-risk kids. So I did this -- I did this six-week, like, Torah learning / filmmaking intensive. And it was -- it was amazing because it essentially became, like, group therapy where people kind of had permission through the camera to talk about

their life. And again, I think because I held this outsider/insider space so well -- like, I became, like, a chameleon in a sense -- I think that unlocked something for other people in feeling like they could either trust me or that I could relate to them or I wouldn't rat them out or whatever it was. So at that point I was privy to quite a few stories of people who were raised in the neighborhood, who were carrying around a lot of pain. And -- pain of not fitting into the school system, pain of feeling that they didn't get the right education they needed, sexual abuse, child sexual abuse, witnessing intimate-partner violence. And some of the -- some of them allowed me to -- to film them, and I still have those videos to this day of being in people's homes and, sort of, this doesn't look like a typical Crown Heights family, but yet they live in Crown Heights, and there's extreme poverty, or there's extreme dysfunction. And some of them were just stories that they shared with me orally that -- that I kept very dear to me. And so during that year that I took off of graduate school, I was still living in Crown Heights, and I was sort of encountering this creative side of me, like; the photography, the film, collecting stories, encountering the rawness of people who were in pain. I decided that I wasn't going to go back to graduate school. At that point, the paradigm of a therapist-patient seemed very artificial to me. It was like, I want to do something in the arts and storytelling. And I still -- I want to work in the Hasidic community, because there's a lot of pain here. And there's beauty, too. There's a lot of beauty. So that's kind of where I was at. Still living in Crown Heights and making this commitment now that I was going to somehow work within the community through the arts and through storytelling. And that kind of began a new chapter for me, and I worked in -- in photography and in film for many years. I was one of the first female photographers in the neighborhood that was, like, more modern and represented, like, a sort of photojournalistic style. So I was this young gir-- young woman who was photographing circumcisions, brisses, like, in the men's side— like, close to the baby— and some people would look at me strangely or, like, wondering, you know, "What are you doing on the men's side?" Or -- or photographing weddings where I'd be on the men's side. And that was totally taboo. I mean, now there's many, many female

photographers [laughter] in the -- in the community, but I think on some level I was a trailblazer in that way. And, you know, watching Crown Heights shift a little bit, you know, and being part of it, that k— that shift, on some level, of; the lines are getting a little blurrier. You know, there is this undercurrent of modernity that's kind of coming up to the surface. There's people questioning their identity and how they express their Hasidic values. And they don't have to be outsiders to express this. They're not necessarily on the fringe. But they're still sort of challenging the status quo. And I, more and more, became comfortable in that space of "How can we challenge the status quo and still show adherence to community values and Hasidic values?" And that's a space that's very interesting to me because I saw many people try to sort of throw their identity away or throw their connection to Crown Heights away while exploring the world. But somehow they couldn't. Like, it was almost like this -- this -- this thing on their back that they were schlepping along with them. They couldn't fully let go of Crown Heights, couldn't fully let go of the Hasidic identity. Why? Even though they tried. And I think that that kind of speaks to the power of it. Like, there's a real power in living in this neighborhood; growing up in this neighborhood, growing up within a Hasidic community with Hasidic ideals that in many ways sort of really get inside of a person. You know? So I was witnessing that. I was witnessing that push/pull in others but also in myself. And so -- [Interview interrupted.]

Sorry, just one second, is that OK? Mayan, it's really time for you to go upstairs. And I -- I'm try-- I'm in a zone, so I don't want to deal with bedtime. Thank you! Good night.

So I was in this space of sort of dealing with that push/pull and challenging the status quo and -- and recognizing that still this -- this identity, this lifestyle, this neighborhood was very compelling, for people around me and -- and for myself. And I started -- I continued to live here. I lived in the same basement apartment on President Street for three years.

JOHNSON: Can you say what year that is -- that was?

SIDOF: That was -- the three -- I lived in a basement on President Street between Albany and Troy from 2000 until 2003, 2004.

JOHNSON: And that was the first time?

SIDOF: No, the first time was when I -- the summer when I was 18 --

JOHNSON: Right.

SIDOF: -- so that was '98 -- '97?

JOHNSON: Ninety-seven to eight.

SIDOF: Ninety-seven, ninety-eight. Actually, it was two summers I lived in Crown Heights. One summer I was -- the one summer I was 18, and then the summer, I think, I was 19 or 20, and I was -- I was doing research at the Bronx Psychiatric Center and taking the train [laughter] from Crown Heights to the Bronx every day, [laughter] back and forth, which is really hard. But yeah, but I moved to Crown Heights when I graduated college, in the year 2000. And I lived in the same -- [Interview interrupted.]

Are you hearing all this? Yeah. OK. We'll wait for them to— Sorry.

JOHNSON: That's OK.

SIDOF: Good night. Good night, Uriyah.

JOHNSON: That's your 11-year-old?

SIDOF: Yeah.

And then when I -- and then in the year 2003, I moved to the corner of Carroll and Albany. At that point I was working as, like, a photographer and filmmaker, like I said. I was working for this production company in The Five Towns that was -- that gave me a chance with, like, very little editing experience, and I was working for them. And I came to this point -- I was 24, living in Crown Heights now for three years. Didn't really -- wasn't really meeting any guys that had potential for, like, long-term relationships, right? And I was like, "I've -- I'm done with this place." Like, "Been there, done that. I know Crown Heights, I know New York." You know, I really, really wanted to move to Israel. I really wanted to move to Jerusalem. I felt like people who were more my speed, or guys that are more my speed, would be living there. So I -- I left my job, my filmmaking job. I -- I left my -- my basement apartment. I told my roommates that I'm moving out. And I got a ticket to Israel. Then last minute, I got cold feet. Which was, like, I was really shocked at myself, because I -- [laughter] I was so

motivated to -- to want to move to Israel. And I got cold feet. And I realized that it just probably wasn't the right time for me. So my friend, who was living on the corner of Carroll and Kingston, which is, like, right in the center of, you know, Chasidic Crown Heights, said, "Why don't you move in with me?" So I was like, "OK." [laughter] It was a highly visible part of the neighborhood. And within, like, a week of living there, I had, like, all these matchmaking offers. Suddenly it was, like, all these -- and actually, I met my husband in that apartment building that I moved to. And, we got married in March 2004. My husband is -- is Israeli, moved to Crown Heights when he was 18 years old for yeshiva, and stayed. And so, you know, we were from very different parts of the world and had very different upbringings, but we had a lot in common. And there was never really a question of where we were going to settle. Like, we were -- we were in Crown Heights. You know, many of our friends would get married and live in Crown Heights when they first got married, and that -- that's what we wanted to do. And we -- I remember we rented an apartment on the corner of Union and Albany, and you could see Manhattan from our bathroom window. [laughter] So every time we took a shower we could see a little bit of the Manhattan skyline, so we felt, like, very special. And it was $950 for a two-and-a-half -- or a two-bedroom, which now is -- you know, that's -- yeah, exactly. And -- and, you know, we felt like -- there was a lot of old detail. You know, there was this, like -- these little china closets that were, like, in the corner with beautiful molding and the parquet floors, and it felt like just like cool, old Brooklyn. And it was a great way to start our marriage. And -- and we -- you know, and it was this next stage of meeting young couples who were living in Crown Heights and what that -- what that was like. And then, again, the community was -- was starting to shift again, where there were more -- it was beginning to feel like more diversity, more color in certain senses, more choices as far as how to express our Hasidic lifestyles. And we were married for two years before we had our first child. I was still working in film at the time. My husband was selling costume jewelry. And when it came time to send him to school— like, to start thinking about school— I started getting very, very anxious. I was like, "I can't live here anymore. Like, I can't live in Crown Heights. I

can't live in a neighborhood where I don't have green grass or backyards." I mean, I grew up in Minnesota, where I had tons of green grass and backyards. And -- and I could sense that my child was a very vivacious, creative, energetic child, and I felt like, "That's it. Like, if I stay in Brooklyn, if I stay in this neighborhood, I'm going to be cheating my child." I remember, like, looking up online schools in California— Hasidic schools in California— and calling them and trying to, like, understand or imagine, like, could this be a space that our family could move to; could this be a place that I could raise my son? And one -- one Rosh Hashanah we had many friends over. We tend to like to have guests. We have many, many guests. And we had a whole room full of -- full of friends, some from Crown Heights, some not from Crown Heights -- most of them living in Crown Heights. And I remember having this moment where -- you know, people complain about the neighborhood and -- people always complain about this neighborhood. I feel like even the people who are happy here, it's like this thing that you complain about Crown Heights, whether it's expensive or you don't have -- there -- there's not enough land, or it's dirty, or there's no good schools or synago-- whatever it is, people are always complaining about Crown Heights. I remember having this moment -- we're all sitting around the table. You know, it's the -- the Jewish New Year -- and saying, "You know what? Let's just stop it. Let's, like, all make a commitment right now that we're going to love Crown Heights, and we're going to stay in Crown Heights, and we're going to make Crown Heights be what it needs to be for us, and we're going to build Crown Heights." And it was -- I don't know, it was this powerful moment. And I -- and I still remember who was at our table. And whenever anybody talks about wanting to leave, I remind them that they were sitting at that table. [laughter] And they made that commitment. But it was this moment of, you know, you can live in a -- you can live in a place and not really live in a place without making that commitment that this is going to be my home, and I'm going to make the best of it that I can be -- that I can. And that was a turning point for me -- for us, I would say, in allowing ourselves to feel more rooted here, allowing ourselves to flirt with the idea of what it would look like to -- to build a life here. And when my son was

three years old, he was going to one of the local yeshivas here; grade school, sweet school, the smaller of the two bigger -- the two bigger communal schools. And many different things sort of collided at once. He was in an after-school program that was really hands-on and more child-centered. Many things collided at once, and basically I had this moment where I said, "You know what? I don't want my child's schooling to be a factory. You know, he is not a widget, and no child is a widget. And really I want the opportunity to give my child a real education that's focused on him." And I felt frustrated because I had grown up in a small town; my parents were very involved in my schooling and very involved in -- in -- in making a difference for me. And I felt no real opportunity to do that in a big-box school -- although they tried. So I was like, "Why don't we start a school? Why don't we start a school?" So I was working with a local educator, and we tracked, like, three other families that I sort of knew and I met in really interesting ways, like at the grocery store or [laughter] through another friend or whatever it was, and we -- we sort of said, like, "Let's start a school. What would it take to start a school?" And I think that -- first of all, I was very naïve, as far as [laughter] what it would take to start a school, in many, many ways. Like, I could -- I could -- [Interview interrupted.]

Eleven-year old boys. Oh, shoot. One second.

JOHNSON: So you had those two or three families?

SIDOF: [Interview interrupted.] Hold on. I just have to, like -- just get this -- make sure they're OK.

So we tracked with three families, and I had no sense at all of what it meant to start a school. Like, now, eight years later, I'm -- I'm blessed and bombarded with phone calls from people who are interested in -- in trying to do what we did, and I can talk for hours about what it takes to start a school and what -- and what not to do, and the mistakes that I made. At the time I was incredibly naïve, and I think that the na-- the naïveté served me well, because I don't think I would have really tried to do what we did if I was really cognizant of what it would take. And again, I think because I was this out-- outsider/insider I -- I had the gumption, the audacity, to try to build something new in

this neighborhood. Because so much of this neighborhood and the community here is "This is how things are done, and there's a way that we do things, and there's a way --" -- and there's certain rabbis or people that have to be in place for things to happen, and there's a real way things are done. And I really challenged that -- from a very wholesome, respectful place, but I really challenged that. I said, like, "What would it look like if we started from scratch? Why do schools have to look like this? Why -- why can't schools really be focused on our children? Why can't they really be about celebrating the uniqueness of every child? If we truly believe that each person has their own mission, then why aren't schools supporting that individuality?" And at first nobody really took it seriously, in a sense. And -- but yet at the same time it was -- it was really welcomed by people who wanted something different for their children. And so for -- in the first year we had 12 students, and the second year we doubled in size. And at that point I took on the position of executive director. I was working on this documentary for three years on premarital sexuality in Judai-- Jewish law. And at that point I sort of put my film on the side to really focus on the school. And we named our school Lamplighters, and the idea of -- it's, like, this Hasidic metaphor of each person is here in this world to light the lamps of -- of the world and light the lamps around us, sort of spread light. But you can only do that if you're lit yourself, if you're -- if you're wholly developed yourself. So we felt like that was really the -- the mission of our school, was to create lamplighters, inspire lamplighters. And also to sort of elevate the space of education in Crown Heights. How could we serve as a lighthouse? And sort of thinking back to all those kids that I encountered in my early years living here who were in so much pain and who were so marginalized and who felt so failed by the education system, sort of harkening back to that, and saying, "I want to -- I want to do something so that our kids don't have the same path. Like, if I'm not going to -- if I'm going to stay in Crown Heights, I'm going to raise my family here, they're not going to have the same experience that so many other kids have had here. I'm not going to let that happen." So I was laser, laser-focused on what it would take to get the school off the ground, and it not just being a school, but really being a movement towards putting

people at the center and really looking at people as fully dynamic, colorful, and nuanced individuals, and not trying to stuff them into a box and not trying to force them to play by rules that don't necessarily speak to them. And I don't mean rules like, you know, we're -- we're Hasidic Jews, and we have lots of rules, and there's so much beauty and depth to the rules of living with halakhah, with the Jewish law. I mean those rules that are just community's way of shutting people in with fear, you know. I mean those kinds of rules. And what would it look like if we didn't educate our youth with -- through fear? And -- and now, you know, in 2017, we're in the seventh year of our school. We have 132 students, with a waiting list about half the size of that. We have a training arm, a consulting arm. We have a revolving door, about 40 educators a month coming to visit our school from across the spectrum of Jewish community. We most recently started renting space from the local Black church down the block from us, and in many ways sort of, I think, healing a rift there. I never thought that we'd be at that -- at this point, where so many people -- and I mean, so many people -- tell me, "The only reason why we're still in Crown Heights is because of Lamplighters. The only reason why we're staying here and we haven't moved because it's so expensive or because we feel boxed in or because we -- whatever it is, is because of Lamplighters, because of this school." And that's huge. It's -- it's a really huge responsibility to bear, in a sense, and I feel in some way that if we kind of have the merit to keep people tied to this neighborhood, we're a positive space. Then that's an amazing thing. So being part of that renaissance of Crown Heights, of, you know, people -- there's lots of people here who are sort of reexamining Hasidic life, Jewish life, and saying, "How can we do this differently?" Again, how can we maintain adherence to our traditional values, but do it in a way that really fits who we are as individuals? You know, how do we push the boundaries while remaining true to our -- to our history? And there's a lot of people in the neighborhood now who are asking those questions. And we belong to a synagogue that asks those kinds of questions and in certain ways is willing to push boundaries. And, the people who are moving here now are far more diverse and colorful and different, in many ways. Not everyone is black and white or -- wear-- wearing black and

white clothes or looking a certain way, and -- and I think that there's a shift towards -- there's a lot of creative energy here, and how do we harness that and how do we make it something that is palatable for our kids? How do we make it a positive thing? You know, how do we make it feel inspirational and uplifting and not oppressive?

JOHNSON: That's amazing. [laughter] That's like your whole -- your whole journey. I -- I wanted to, kind of sort of, build off of this kind of insider/outsider. I mean, you talked about where your church is now. It sort of -- you said it was something like healing a rift, you know? It's sort of like your community is also part of a larger community, and, like, what -- how does that play into sort of your vision of Hasidic life or life in Crown Heights or -- what does that mean to you?

SIDOF: That in some way, like, our -- the -- the Lamplighters, the school community's almost like this bubble within a larger community?

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm. And -- and your family --

SIDOF: Yeah.

JOHNSON: -- and, you know, just the -- the Chabad community --

SIDOF: Yeah.

JOHNSON: -- and -- and how does that -- how does that play into sort of your whole vision? Or does it? It doesn't have to.

SIDOF: Oh, it absolutely does. Let me think about how to articulate it. Hmm. [Interview interrupted.] Are you getting that?

JOHNSON: It's OK.

SIDOF: Hmm. I think when you live in a large community with lots of people, I think human nature is to sort of figure -- figure out, like, how do I build my home? Like, how do I actually find a way where I matter here? And I think that for many -- for many people that's a struggle. [Interview interrupted.]

Is everything OK?

UNIDENTIFIED: Yeah, [inaudible], situation.

SIDOF: What is it, he's bored?

UNIDENTIFIED: No, he's not bored. [inaudible]

SIDOF: OK.

UNIDENTIFIED: We're going upstairs.

SIDOF: OK.

UNIDENTIFIED: He's downstairs.

SIDOF: OK.

So, I think when we live in larger neighborhoods -- especially now in Chabad, where there's no -- you know, Rabbi Schneerson is no longer physically alive, and so that central point of leadership in -- is not here in the same way. So you -- you -- you'll meet people who've been living in Crown Heights for so many years, and there's, like, this deep sense of nostalgia of, like, before the Rebbe passed in 1994, what it was like here, and what 770 was like and what the Jews were -- were like, and -- and I think that it's easy to be rooted in nostalgia, in a sense, you know? It's -- it's easy to sort of be rooted in the past. The question is, like, how do -- who am I now, and what's relevant for me now? And I think that that power vacuum, that leadership vacuum, has either driven people away and feeling like, there's no real concrete way that they could feel heard or expressed in the community, and -- or it's focused -- it's forced other people to really step up and try to -- not in any way, God forbid, to take the Rebbe's place, but to sort of step up and say, "OK, what does leadership need to look like now in our community?" And I think what leadership needs to look like now in our community is people having the willingness to ask tough questions and engage people in multiple ways -- spiritually, intellectually, creatively, emotionally -- in their identity. And so this -- sort of the spheres that I feel like I occupy in -- in Crown Heights, you know, my own home -- which we have super lively Shabbat meals of, like, 30 people almost every week, and Jews, non-Jews, artists, observant people, non-observant people -- many times people are coming to Crown Heights for the first time, like, this is their stop. And that sort of lively Shabbat atmosphere, for me, is, like, one point, one focal point, in -- in Crown Heights living, of keeping that diversity alive. Then there's our synagogue, that's another -- a point of -- of engagement in the community. Then there's the school. And I think that people need their safe havens, you know, where they can be who they are.

And I know that in Crown Heights and in this community these kinds of safe havens, whether it's a home that you feel comfortable in, or a synagogue, or a particular school, or -- is very important in being able to really thrive here.

JOHNSON: You came here after sort of the uprest, the unrest, of -- well, I guess 1991, or—

SIDOF: Yeah.

JOHNSON: —whenever. I mean, do you have a sense of, like, what that was like then and how that kind of -- those changes have kind of—

SIDOF: I have friends who were part of -- who -- who got hurt in the riots or -- I have a friend who saw his father get hurt really bad. I have another friend whose -- whose house was, like -- he was, like, stuck at home, and he was, like, scared to go out of his house. I have a friend who was part of this -- I think this, like, music group that was, like, Jewish and Black teens that came together, this, like, rap group that was, like, part of, like, the aftermath healing of -- of the riots, and -- so most of my experience with the riots were, like, after the fact, like, through people who lived through it. And -- and the sense that I get now, living in Crown Heights all these years, is this "We're OK," you know? [laughter] Like, we went through a rough patch, but we're OK now, you know? People try to color Crown Heights with -- with this, like -- with racial tension. It exists— it exists, for sure— but not to the -- the degree that I think that people are assuming that it exists. Still looking at this community as if it's just, like, fresh from the riots, which it's not. It's not fresh from riots, you know? And -- and I think, you know, when we -- when we had this opportunity, we were looking for more space for the school, and there was this, this building that was for rent on the corner of President and Brooklyn. And it was owned by the -- by the Church of St. Mark's, which is on the corner of Union and Albany -- I'm sorry, Union and Brooklyn. And the -- the -- the priest, the father of that church, who's now retired, sort of had the vision, in a sense, to feel OK to rent out that property to -- to -- to Jews. I remember we had this board meeting where there was representatives of our school board with representatives of the church board. And there was this moment of "Did you ever think that a Black church would rent out prime Crown Heights property to Jews?" And we sort of said at this table, "You know what?

We're going to be the ones that are going to make this work. We're not carrying the stories of Jews who felt, you know, wronged by Blacks, and, hopefully, you're not carrying the stories of -- of Blacks who felt wronged by Jews. And let's try to make this work." And it wasn't -- it wasn't -- it was a little bumpy at certain points, I'll be honest. And now [laughter] we -- we get asked all the time by people in the community, like, "How did -- how did that happen?" Like, "How did you -- how did you get in that building?" Or, like, "We were always wondering what that building was." Or "It's such a beautiful, you know, Brooklyn building, and how did you get it?" And it was, like; there was no game, there was no -- you know. I mean, it wasn't the easiest -- it wasn't the easiest terrain, but that was for other reasons. But dealing with the church and -- and with the Black leadership was super smooth. And I actually made a point of going to the new father and sort of sitting with him and saying, "I just want to let you know that I would love to form any kind of partnership with you. Like, you're a man of faith, you have a school, you believe in children. I'm a person of faith, I have a school, I believe in children. We're neighbors. You're my landlord," [laughter] you know? "What would it look like if we could really show the community that we can exist, coexist, in peace?" And -- and I -- and we've had a great, a really great relationship. So I think that people are -- are -- are ready to let go of that heavy story. Which was real; the riots were real and they were quite painful. But I think now, you know, 26 years later, the community has changed. And what I think is interesting is that now Hasidic and -- Hasidic Jews and -- and Black people have a common enemy, on some level. "Enemy" is a strong word. But now, you know, White people moving in and driving up the prices and gentrification of Crown Heights. And so now it's like, well, you know, you Hasidic Jew who've been living here for 30 years, and you Black person -- you know, African American woman who's been living here for 30 years, well, we both could be driven out of our homes because of somebody who wants to move here from wherever. And, you know, we actually just bought a house a couple years ago, on -- on Union Street. And -- and the -- the broker was this really wonderful African American lady who was -- lived across the street. She lived in that house for, like, 40 or 50 years.

She was selling this house across the street from her. And we made an offer on the house, and then this young couple from Fort Greene made an offer on the house. And -- and we wrote this whole letter about why we wanted to live in this -- in this -- in this home and how it reminded us of our first apartment on Union Street that we had lived in when we first got married with all the beautiful Brooklyn details and how we were committed to a -- a life in Crown Heights. And the broker had said to us -- this broker who's -- who's going to be our neighbor -- she said, "I had -- I have your family, on the one hand, or this couple who's looking for a cheaper brownstone, so they're coming to Crown Heights. Of course, I'm going to choose your family." And so it's like -- I feel -- you know, the Crown Heights of today that's facing, you know, different people moving in, many people feel we're being stripped of our character in certain ways. I mean, I don't personally feel that way, but many people feel that way. I feel like now it's a whole other war, in a sense, that's being waged now in a whole, you know; who does Crown Heights belong to? And even on the Jewish community, you know, the Chabad community has been in Crown Heights for so long. And once upon a time the Jewish community in Crown Heights was very diverse. There was Chabad Chasidim, and there was all different kinds of Chasidim here. And then at some point many of the Hasidic Jews left, and the only ones that stayed were Chabad. And so, the story of Chabad Jewry in Crown Heights is like, "We were here. We didn't leave. We stuck it out. This is our community." And now, in, you know, 2016, 2017, you have this -- you know, you have modern Orthodox Jews who are starting to move here or unaffiliated Jews or more modern Jews, developing communities, opening up synagogues, and it's -- and Crown Heights is starting to become hot and, like, desirable place to live. And there's a resistance of, like, Crown Heights Hasidic Jews saying, "Wait. Don't try to take ownership of -- of Crown Heights Jewry. Like, we're like OG," [laughter] you know? We're like -- like, we're -- we're -- we're here." And I actually went to an event a couple weeks ago at this -- this sort of grassroots social justice organization that opened up on Nostrand Avenue, and it's part of -- it's part of an -- a national organization. It's a Jewish organization. And -- and I went, and I was talking to

somebody, and he said, "You know, I don't know how I really feel. Like, I feel like there needs to be an awareness or, you know, that they may be here now but that really, like, Crown Heights Jewry belongs to the Hasidic Jews. Like, you know, we kind of -- we have right of passage here, in a sense." And I felt bothered by that. Because while it's true that Crown Heights Jewry has been here for decades and decades and decades and really kept Judaism alive in this neighborhood, and -- and that's -- and that -- there's value to that story, I think the fact that others are starting to come here and want to forge their own story within this neighborhood is a positive thing, because then you get layers and layers and layers of, like, identity. And that only serves, I think, to enrichen the neighborhood and the culture. But it's an interesting -- it's an interesting shift. Who really owns this place?

JOHNSON: Yeah. [laughter] I mean, that -- you know, I -- I never -- I was reading about that, actually, today, you know? Like, just to do research on -- or to -- just -- you know, the gentrification of Crown Heights is really fascinating. I mean, do you feel like -- I mean, just on a prac-- in a practical manner, you know, we live in New York City, you know, there's -- there's -- like your situation with your car and the young boy. It's like -- what -- what makes a safe community for you? What does that -- what does that look like?

SIDOF: You know, my husband speaks about his childhood in Israel; where he would be outside playing all day long on his bike, and his bike was like this, like, broken-down bike that he fixed himself, and everyone's making up games on the street, and out until, like, it's dark. I mean, that sounds safe to me. Like, for kids to feel, like, really free in their environment. That feels like safety to me. And -- and I think also just this sense of accountability. I remember I -- I got this package -- I was waiting for this package one time, and it didn't arrive. And I -- I -- I assumed that someone stole it. Because, you know, you have a porch, and people could walk by, and people have stolen bikes. My son has gotten his bike stolen, like, four times. So why -- why wouldn't someone have stolen my package? And I got a knock on my door a couple days after I had resigned to the fact that my package was stolen. And there was this, like, sweet, elderly, African American lady with her friend standing there, like, "Is this -- does this -- are you

at 18 Balfour Place? Does this belong to you?" And I was like, "Yeah! That's my package!" And they had delivered it to it 18 Lamont, which is the parallel street. And it was no big deal. Either she did the right thing and she -- but it -- it felt so, like, "Oh, I'm being taken care of," you know? "I'm -- someone's going out of their way." And we walked back with her to her home, and she told us her whole story of who she is and how -- and how long she's lived there in that house -- for, like, a million years -- and where her children live and -- and it was just like -- it was a moment to sort of just, like, encounter somebody and witness somebody, and that feels safe to me. That feels safe, as far as people having an authentic curiosity and lack of guardedness around themselves and each other.

JOHNSON: How does the -- I mean, just kind of to fill in on my ignorance, does the Hasidim still have a kind of community safety apparatus or system or—

SIDOF: Like Shmira?

JOHNSON: Like a Shmira, yeah.

SIDOF: Yeah, they have Shmira, yeah.

JOHNSON: And how does that interact with—

SIDOF: Shmira and Shomrim.

JOHNSON: And Shomrim, yeah. How does that work? I mean, does that make you feel more secure? Or, like -- I mean, how does that work, kind of like, within, kind of, this community of—?

SIDOF: I don't know if it makes me more, feel more secure in an "us-versus-them" sort of way. Like, "I have my people to call." It doesn't feel like more secure in that. It feels like it's just, like, it's another avenue that's available to me that tends to work fairly quickly. So little things, like if my child, like, lo-- like, locks himself in his room by mistake or something like that, I can call Shmira or Shomrim and, like, they'll be here. And it's not like calling the police, let's say. [laughter] You know it's, it feels a little bit more, like, available. Or sometimes there are people who bother us at the school. We have a corner property and, you know, people are walking outside or, and there have been times where I've called the police and I've also called Shomrim, because I don't

necessarily know who will get there first. And I can see it's sensitive between them. And you know, but it is what it is, which, if you're really vulnerable, you kind of look out for all the help you can get.

JOHNSON: And -- I mean, just -- just in terms of just sort of the new people, like the gentrification of the neighborhood, I mean, what's your sense of -- like, how do those people kind of view the whole neighborhood? Do they -- do you think they sense it as being a safe neighborhood? Or, like, what -- you know, like, what --

SIDOF: I don't know. I would --

JOHNSON: —what kind of—?

SIDOF: -- I would hope so, if they're paying that kind of money to live here! [laughter]

JOHNSON: Yeah, right? Right. Do you have any—

SIDOF: I don't feel -- I don't feel --

JOHNSON: —connection? Yeah—

SIDOF: -- I don't feel this sense of, like, danger living here. You know, again, I -- I live in a -- even if you look at Crown Heights, I live in a fairly safe part of Crown Heights, you know, whatever that means. You know, I -- I have lived in other parts of Crown Heights that felt like less safe in certain ways. There are certain corners that I'll feel vulnerable walking across or walking by, for sure. But I feel like New Yorkers, like, we know how to kind of -- we know how to roll. Like, there's a certain swagger in our walk, we kind of put up the guard. You know, you just know how to be. So I don't feel, like, any particular vulnerability, from my perspective.

JOHNSON: So, so how do you define diversity? I'm just curious. I mean, I think you kind of—

SIDOF: That's such a great question. How do I define diversity? Right, because it's, like, a word that we use a lot, right?

JOHNSON: Well, when we talked, you --

SIDOF: Right.

JOHNSON: —used that word, "diversity," and you talked about the Shabbat and—

SIDOF: Yeah.

JOHNSON: But -- but, I mean, you're -- you're a person who lives in a community that is diverse, but then there's communities within communities within communities. And I'm learning new things by talking --

SIDOF: Sure.

JOHNSON: -- to you.

SIDOF: I define -- I think that humanity inherently is diverse, because there are no two people that are the same. I don't think that we're any more or less diverse. You know, even if you look at a community where everyone seems to look the same, seems to live the same life, you will still find many, many different stories and ways of being and histories and memories and preferences and all that. So I don't -- I don't feel like diversity is, like, big -- is this fabricated thing that people create, like, "Let's have as much diversity as we can have," you know? I feel like it's inherent. To be human is, like, inherently diverse, because we're -- we're all different from each other. I think the question is, like, do we create the space where we -- tho-- where those differences are not threatening to one another? You know, can we be in a space where -- where I can accept that there are many ways in which I'm different from you and that you are different from me and I'm not threatened by that or afraid of that or trying to change that? And in that space of respecting that, I can probably discover so many ways in which we're alike. So I don't see diversity or pluralism as a value in and of itself. I see it as a value when it points to the underlying unity that we all share. And I think that -- I feel like being able to balance between those spaces of "I am who I am, you are who you are, and we don't have to be the same, but yet I can broaden my circle to include you, and you can broaden your circle to include me." And that's a very powerful dance, in a sense.

JOHNSON: I'm just going to go [laughter] through and see, make sure I have— So that's actually -- you touched on everything that I was interested in.

SIDOF: OK.

JOHNSON: Your story's really fascinating.

SIDOF: Thank you.

JOHNSON: But I wanted to -- what -- are there other things that you want to --

SIDOF: Do?

JOHNSON: -- mention and do and --? What -- how do you -- what do -- what -- what do you see the future as, like, if you were to imagine Crown Heights, this community, the Black community, the gentrifiers, like, all in a soup together, what -- what might that look like?

SIDOF: So there's this movement in Israel called "intentional communities," where basically it's people who live within a geographic location. It could be within the same apartment building, or it could be a neighborhood or a city. And they come together, and they sort of define, like, their shared values, purpose, vision, and live in a way in which they support each other around that, those visions. And there are people who are trying to bring those models to cities across America and Jewish communities across America. And I wonder what it would look like to have an intentional community in Crown Heights. What would it look like for people who are living here to live here with intention around shared values and to actually feel empowered living here? Not like they have to live here, or they live here by default, or their family lives here, or they live here because Crown Heights is important to their parents, or -- no. They live here because they're choosing to live here and they actually feel like they can make a difference by living here, and they live here with intention and deep-seated values. So that's my next sort of vision, in a sense, as far as making -- you know, building communities in Crown Heights is -- is thinking about -- you know, there are -- there are people here who are in limbo. You know, it's hard for them to live here. It's getting to be more and more expensive. It's daunting, thinking about really building a family here. But for whatever reason they -- they are choosing to live here. And instead of it being something that's happening to them, to -- to flip it and give them the power and say, like, "You're here. Like, what does it look like for you to make the best of it? What does it look like to find a community of like-minded people who -- who are living here, who want to live a fantastic life?" So that's kind of where my mind is traveling lately.

JOHNSON: Well, I think you're doing an amazing job of, like, realizing that --

SIDOF: Thank you.

JOHNSON: -- in your own way. Like, just kind of your movement; from [laughter] Minnesota to here, to Washington Heights to here, to being a photographer and a filmmaker, to an educator now, a mother, a wife, you know, a visionary.

SIDOF: Yeah. [laughter]

JOHNSON: And you're what, how old? [laughter]

SIDOF: Thirty-eight, yeah. [laughter] I just turned 38. I'm at that age -- it's funny. It has just happened to me, like, twice the past week where, like, "Oh, you don't look that -- you know, you don't look 38." I'm like, "Oh, I'm getting to that age where, like, people tell me I don't look that age?" You know, like now people have ideas of what that age is supposed to look like? You know what I mean? [laughter] It's like -- like, "Oh, this must mean I'm getting older." [laughter]

JOHNSON: I'm 56, so it's like --

SIDOF: Wow. [laughter]

JOHNSON: -- you know?

SIDOF: Wow.

JOHNSON: You know, it's like, "You don't look --" -- well, I'm [unintelligible] --

SIDOF: Yeah.

JOHNSON: -- I look 50 -- you know, but -- [laughter] but anyway. But -- well, I just want to thank you so much --

SIDOF: Thank you.

JOHNSON: -- for --

SIDOF: This was—

JOHNSON: -- participating. Part of -- so there were two groups that were doing interviews. We were -- there's a group called the Weeksville Heritage Center, and they -- their oral histories are about education in Crown Heights. So, so much of what you said really fits into that category. And then -- and then our side was, sort of just like, "Well, what does it, you know, mean to live in a safe community? What do-- you know, how do --

how do we define that for ourselves and for our community and for our families and—?" And, you know, where do the police, you know, fit in? And I think a lot of people have those questions all the time. So -- so yeah, so I feel like you touched on all of that.

SIDOF: Great.

JOHNSON: It's really beautiful --

SIDOF: Thank you for this opportunity.

JOHNSON: -- beautiful story. So this -- this can become part of your family archive.

SIDOF: Yeah. It's great. [laughter]

JOHNSON: But thank you so much.

SIDOF: Did I say that I have four kids and—

JOHNSON: Oh yes. Why don't --

SIDOF: Do you want me to say that?

JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah.

SIDOF: OK.

JOHNSON: So why don't -- so -- yeah, so why don't you just say your name again and, you know, like --

SIDOF: OK. So --

JOHNSON: -- like what -- all the background information that you want?

SIDOF: -- so my name is Yocheved Sidof. I'm 38 years old. I am married, and I have four children. I have a son who's now 11, a daughter who is 9, a daughter who is 6, and another daughter who is 4.

JOHNSON: OK. So one boy and three girls.

SIDOF: Yeah. [laughter]

JOHNSON: And you intend to stay here in Crown Heights.

SIDOF: And I intend to stay here in Crown Heights, yes.