Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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# Sam Jefferies

## SUMMARY

In this interview, Sam Jefferies shares his life, from his Jewish upbringing in the Seattle area and his education to his career in public affairs, political communications, and crisis management. Jefferies reflects on the evolution of his Jewish identity, the rise of antisemitism in higher education and public life, and his leadership within Jewish organizations following the events of October 7, 2023. He describes the founding of the Kids Table PAC, its mission to increase Jewish civic engagement and political advocacy in Washington state, and its focus on supporting candidates who oppose antisemitism. Throughout the interview, Jefferies discusses generational changes in Jewish leadership, the challenges facing the Jewish community, and his commitment to strengthening political participation and community advocacy.

Jeff Schwager: Hello, I'm Jeff Schwager, Oral Historian with the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. And today I'm interviewing Sam Jefferies, a founder of The Kids Table, a new political action committee designed to support pro-Jewish candidates for state and local office in Washington state and oppose candidates who are complicit or complacent in the face of anti-Jewish hate. Welcome, Sam, and thank you for speaking with me today.

Sam Jefferies: Thanks, Jeff. It's great to be talking to you.

Jeff Schwager: Um, so did I get that about right in the introduction?

Sam Jefferies: Absolutely. Yes. Uh, I've been very engaged in the Jewish community for some time, but, uh, we are not quite a year into this project, uh, the founding of The Kids Table and has been a very busy year and what we would consider to be a critical space. And myself, along with a few others, uh, launched in June of last year, and we've been off to the races ever since, quite literally in the in the political realm.

Jeff Schwager: Excellent. We will get to The Kids Table. But first, I just want to start by talking about you and your history. Um, am I correct that you were born in Seattle?

Sam Jefferies: Correct. Yes. I was born on First Hill. I grew up on the east side of King County and, uh, very much a native Washingtonian. Um, my grandmother's grandfather moved to the state in 1904 and, um, uh, continued to be an important part, uh, you know, of the fabric here in the Pacific Northwest.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh, how did they end up coming to Washington State? What was their impetus for that?

Sam Jefferies: Yes. I mean, I'm certainly, uh, a Heinz 57 kind of American with, uh, a pretty diverse ethnic background. Uh, my grandmother's grandfather was from Sweden and moved to Ballard, uh, as, as many Swedes did, uh, you know, working in fishing and logging industries. And, and then she met my grandfather at a USO dance during the Korean War. Uh, his family, uh, were Ashkenazi Jews from, uh, Montreal, Quebec, had moved to the US. He got his high school degree, uh, and, uh, Hollywood Hills, California, and then was drafted in the US Army and served during the Korean War and was stationed at Fort Lewis, uh, now Joint Base Lewis McChord in Washington state.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. Um, and what about your parents? What, uh, what can you tell me about them? What did they do for a living?

Sam Jefferies: Sure. Uh, so my, uh, mother was a shmatta, long time in the apparel business. She worked for many years for Eddie Bauer. Uh, and before moving on to a couple other companies and, uh, grew up in, in the area. I went to Edmonds High School in Edmonds, Washington. Was a rare Jew in Edmonds. I always remember a story of, you know, her having a play date with, uh, you know, friends from elementary school and, and they get a call the next day from those friend's parents and said, uh, "You know, my daughter was at your house for a play date yesterday and had something called a bagel. Uh, where-what is that? And where would I buy one?" And so, uh, that was kind of the goyishe nature of, of Edmonds back in the day. And then, um, my father grew up in the Twin Cities, uh, in Minnesota and moved out west. Uh, he ran, ran a sporting goods store for a number of years, went back to school, got his degree and became a public-school teacher, and was a public-school teacher for about ten years. Uh, actually starting at the elementary school where, uh, where I went to-uh, my sister and I went to as kids.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. Um, well, that's interesting to, to go back to school and become a teacher?

Sam Jefferies: Yes, absolutely. Especially after ten years, uh, running indoor archery range and managing a sporting goods store. It's yeah, a bit of a non-traditional career path.

Jeff Schwager: Uh. And where did he teach? What school?

Sam Jefferies: Uh, Margaret Mead Elementary, uh, in Lake Washington School district in Sammamish, Washington.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. Um, so tell me about your childhood. You were in Sammamish?

Sam Jefferies: I was. I grew up on the east side. Uh, went to Temple B'nai Torah, and we'll get to this later, but actually, was bar mitzvahed by Rabbi Jim Mirel, and, uh, then later went on to be, uh, board chair for the American Jewish Committee in Seattle. And Rabbi Mirel sits on that board. And it's quite a humbling experience to have your childhood rabbi serve alongside you on a board like that. But I, I grew up on the east side. Um, uh, And, you know, really had an incredible childhood in the Pacific Northwest. And, and I mean, I think very privileged to be from here. Uh, I did some of my high school in New York City, where my mother had moved at the time and then went to college in the Midwest, went to University of Wisconsin-Madison and, uh, got a degree in a wife there and have been schlepping both around ever since.

Jeff Schwager: Uh, um, what, what kind of kid were you? Were you, were you like a jock or were you, uh?

Sam Jefferies: Uh, a little bit of everything. I was a jock. I was a captain of the wrestling team in high school and a year-round athlete. I played baseball and soccer and, and got really serious about wrestling. Um, and really enjoyed that. And then, but I was an arts kid too. Uh, I was very involved in theater, uh, especially, especially musical theater before I forgot how to sing, uh, at about age 13. Um, and then really a reader. I mean, just, uh, you know, a literary student always enjoyed the written word, you know, was, was an obsessive reader of fiction, nonfiction, uh, real passion for military history. But, you know, just enjoyed that. There was never a book I cracked that I didn't finish and, you know, it was always joke that I was walking into walls with my nose in a book. So, um, you know, love the time outdoors, time on the water, um, you know, fishing and camping and being in the backwoods, but always with the book alongside me. So yeah, I, I would say, you know, um, pretty mixed interest really, you know, enjoy, and you know, everything from, you know, live music and was passionate about that and very proud of my classic rock vinyl collection and, you know, 1970s Chevy pickup, but, um, you know, could just as easily put on a suit and be at the theater and then be at the ballpark as well. Was this kind of kid who enjoyed a lot. Yes.

Jeff Schwager: And did you have siblings or were you an only child?

Sam Jefferies: Uh, I have a younger sister. Um, and so, yeah, we grew up together on the east side. And then when my parents split, she actually moved with my mother, first to Portland and then New York. And, and then, uh, I lived with my dad in Sammamish for a number of years. So, um, you know, we've stayed close and, and, but, uh, interesting parallel childhoods at a certain point.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. And why did you choose the University of Wisconsin?

Sam Jefferies: Yes, there was a bit of a family tradition for folks to go there. I had two uncles who played hockey there back in the 1970s. And then, uh, one cousin who actually founded--co-founded--the satirical newspaper The Onion, uh, on campus at the University of Wisconsin in 1988. So, you know, when it was my turn, my eyes turned east. And it was an incredibly rewarding experience. I mean, really, you know, amazing school academically, athletically, uh, a real trip for a kid from the Northwest to, to

go to the heartland and, you know, get a truly, uh, Midwestern Big Ten college experience. And then I got very involved in politics there as well. Madison is, is, um, the biggest little city in America. And, uh, the state capital is right next to campus. And so, I had internships and then ended up working as a staffer and so got to, to both study it and then I think participate in it, uh, you know, doing the political science track in Madison.

Jeff Schwager: You were a poli-sci major?

Sam Jefferies: Uh, yes. Uh, political science, international studies in history. But, uh, political science is really, you know, lit my spark, uh, along with the history studies and taking the past and the present and combining them together.

Jeff Schwager: Was there much of a Jewish community at University of Wisconsin?

Sam Jefferies: Enormous. Um, and, and that was a very rewarding thing for me. There was actually a, a group of Seattle Jews who, uh, used to get together fairly regularly. So, we'd have Shabbos together, we'd go to Hillel or Chabad. Um, they knew each other, and two of them actually ended up um, dating and getting married later. And, um, you know, we remain close to them, uh, as a family. They're both back in Seattle, but the, the Jewish tradition, uh, especially of in the East Coast of sending kids to, uh, the heartland to get education is very strong. And, uh, whether it's Michigan or Northwestern or Wisconsin, uh, tend to be large Jewish populations on campus. That was really rewarding for me. A big part of the community that I built. And, you know, getting to know the Chabad rabbi. And even when I go back and visit campus, uh, still check in with him and saw him fairly recently, which was fantastic.

Jeff Schwager: Um, antisemitism on campuses is a very big deal in the college world today. Did you have any experience with that when you were there or was it uh...?

Sam Jefferies: I did not. Um, and, uh, Wisconsin, like, you know, other large public universities has really been challenged over the last few years, uh, obviously, especially since 10/7 with encampments with vitriolic antisemitism, anti-Zionism on campus. But I did not have that experience. Um, we had a really a robust Jewish student life. And, um, you know, whether it was, it was speakers on campus or debates about Israel or otherwise, uh, there was really room for it at that time, which I think for me has made some of that trajectory even more disheartening because, uh, I, I experienced a relatively, you know, small liberalism on campus where there was room for thought and debate and discourse and, you know, graduated as, as kind of a more of even more of an active Jew than I had entered. And, and, you know, consider that a positive defining element for how I've been involved.

Jeff Schwager: Curious to get your perspective on why, uh, you think that change has occurred since you were in schools? I mean, 10/7 certainly seems to have been a defining moment, uh, but why do you think, um, that led to such an outburst of antisemitism? Or was there something before that, that did?

Sam Jefferies: Yes, the pump was certainly primed. I mean, the first Israel, uh, Israel apartheid-no Israel, no-Apartheid on Campus Week was in 2005 or 2006, I believe. So, there was a really concerted, multi-decade effort to infiltrate college campuses, um, with, uh, you know, antisemitic and anti-Zionist, uh, discourse and activists and, and you have student populations, which I think are already inclined to be left leaning, now what we would call progressive and activist. And then, um, as that has gotten dragged further and further to the left, uh, language around, um, colonialism, settler, settler colonialism, anti-imperialism has really been layered on, uh, the lens of the Jewish experience, uh, diaspora experience, and then, you know, post 1948. So, there was a great deal of work, um, I think that was done to, to prepare for a moment. And then October 7th ended up being that moment where, you know, this, this collision of-or coordination rather of activists, um, street level activists and, and student activists were paired with academia that had had drifted further and further, um, and I think, into extremist rhetoric and action and, and they combined. And then I think part of that too, is intentional. I mean, there's a fairly common saying now that the Jews put the names on the buildings, uh, and, um, you know, Arab, Arab leaders, um, put the people in the buildings. And so as there have been endowments, uh, of chairs of departments and Middle East studies and others, uh, many of those have been funded by the Qatari government, which is, um, one of the, the largest, I think the largest state actor of higher education, funder of higher education in the United States. We have seen perpetuation, uh, of a more radical ideology that I think at times is anti-American. And Jews are, uh, collateral damage and at times anti-Jewish and America is collateral damage.

Jeff Schwager: Hm. Great answer. Uh. Thank you. Um. Well, let's, let's talk about your career prior to, um, what you're doing now or. (Sure.) Um, what was your first job after college having, having majored in poli-sci?

Sam Jefferies: Yes. So, I actually went into the State House in Wisconsin while I was still a student. So, I became a part-time student so that I could work as a legislative staffer at the same time. And that was a, you know, an amazing experience. I took a reduced caseload while being able to-or course load rather-while being able to learn on the job, and Wisconsin was really at the heart of a changing political system. And Donald Trump was elected in 2016, in large part because of the political changes that

had begun in the Midwest in 2010 with the rise of the Tea Party Movement. And I, I was, you know, there as it was happening, right. And, um, I would say a participant in the most minor sense, but, you know, that really bit me with the political bug. And so, I moved to Washington, D.C. after graduation. Uh, I joke that I'm still a recovering lobbyist. I spent several years, uh, as a lobbyist for a couple different causes, doing some environmental work and then, um, international trade work and, and really enjoyed that, but made the move to the communications space. And so, I've worked in professional public affairs the entirety of my career, and it's taken a few different forms. Um, but that is either really for the past decade plus providing companies, industries, individuals with crisis communications, counsel, and then also, uh, layering on policy expertise in that. So, running public affairs campaigns, um, you know, in support of, or opposition to, good bills, bad bills, regulation, enforcement legislation and litigation. And, you know, it's been quite an education. I've worked on everything from Seattle to Shanghai and worked in Washington, D.C. and, and, uh, as well as in state capitals and city halls, uh, around the country. And then also have developed a background in media relations. So I spent the last four years as an on the record spokesperson for the Starbucks Coffee Company here in Seattle, uh, doing crisis communications for them and, and really taking, I think my seven plus years in D.C. is as an operative and, and applying it out here in the Northwest to, um, you know, various reputational challenges and, uh, you know, public policy challenges that that company and others face.

Jeff Schwager: I think a lot of those sort of, uh, overarching terms can, can seem vague to people who aren't in space. Um, can you give me some examples of, uh, media campaigns that you were involved with and led and how you tried to enact, uh, things, how you used your expertise to impact those issues?

Sam Jefferies: Absolutely. So, one of my first projects when I moved to the communications side was, uh, the Disabled American Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. it had been a ten plus yearlong project, and we really rolled out the public relations to bring positive attention to it, right. And so, everything from CBS Sunday Morning to, uh, you know, work with various congressional offices to be able to highlight that work, bring the stories of disabled veterans, uh, to life, highlight, you know, what, so many of the memorials in DC are conflict specific, right. Uh, World War II, uh, Vietnam Memorial and the Disabled American Veterans Memorial is, is the one I think that most closely applies to the conflict and conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global war on terror. So, there was a lot of storytelling around younger veterans, you know, who'd returned and, and, um, were having their service memorialized. So that's one. I mean, other examples, you know, oftentimes we would try and, um, uh, you know, passing certain legislation. I worked to pass legislation around, uh, um, train crew safety, um, freight train crew safety in the state of Washington. And so, uh, trains get longer and longer. Uh, and yet there's only one person on the front. And so, I built a broad coalition of various folks, uh, you know, unionized train crew members, fire chiefs and firefighters, environmental advocates, and others. And we would lift up their voices and, you know, have them write op-eds and coalition letters and, you know, appear on TV, and radio, and print, and then do direct lobbying, uh, of, you know, state legislators as well. So that, uh, you know, we could support the passage of a bill. Um, oftentimes we frame it in, "are we introducing, you know, risk for the people who are opposing what we're trying to move forward. Are we providing cover for our friends?" And then being able to land new stories and find voices that carry those message forward, uh, which is, is really been a big part of, of my professional work to date.

Jeff Schwager: Mm-hmm. And what about at Starbucks? How did, uh, how does crisis management work at a huge company like that?

Sam Jefferies: Yes. Uh, it's a very interesting place to do crisis management. You know, there's 40,000 stores around the world in 90 plus countries with 360,000 employees. And, um, you know, someone is going to do something wrong at some point, but Starbucks is an especially interesting brand because it's often used as a barometer for big debates going on in society. So, whether they're debates around race relations or unionization or, uh, in my time there, um, conflict in the Middle East, the war between Israel and Hamas and, um, Starbucks was a target of boycott. And so, trying to navigate, navigate those, protect and defend the reputation of the company, making sure that media reporting is fact based. Um, also making sure that you're communicating with this massive workforce, knowing that everything will be leaked immediately, and trying to make it as defensible as possible. Uh, in, in the time I worked there from 2022 to 2026, that's incredibly, uh, you know, difficult to do. Um, we operate in a highly politicized world and, you know, it's the old Mark Twain quote that, uh, "A lie runs around the world while the truth is still getting its shoes on." And if that was true in Mark Twain's time, uh, it is, you know, doubly or triply true today with the, the advent of the internet.

Jeff Schwager: Yes. Um, why was Israel, uh, or why, why was Starbucks being boycotted in relation to the Israel, uh, uh, war in Gaza?

Sam Jefferies: Yes. Um, I mean, Starbucks does not have a presence in Israel. And, uh, and you would think that is particularly strange, but I think the plain fact of the matter is that there are a lot of people out there who don't like Jews. And Starbucks was founded by Howard Schultz, uh, who, uh, you know, as a billionaire, as a high-net-worth individual kind of represents a lot of, uh, you know, stereotypes and antisemitic tropes. And it's impossible to boycott Boeing. When you go to the airport, you get on the

plane, they tell you to get on and you go wherever you want to go. And, you know, "Them's the breaks, Charlie." And, uh, it's much easier to boycott a retail establishment. So, you could do it and do it in a virtue signaling way and say, "I'm refusing to support this company because they support war crimes or what have you." And, and even though that's absolutely preposterous, um, and, and frankly, disconnected from reality doesn't really matter. Um, it became a means by which you could oppose, you know, a western brand and, you know, Jewish was conveniently used as a substitute for, for Zionist, pro-Israel, all the other monikers that, that I think we want to wear proudly, but others want to use as slurs.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Um, Schultz is obviously a huge, uh, figure, uh, presence, uh, as, and as a Jewish individual. Did you, um, you didn't intersect with him when you were working there?

Sam Jefferies: I did, um, yes, we, I joined about a week after he had rejoined, uh, in his third stint as CEO. And so, you know, I did work with him directly on a few things, uh, crisis communications, fairly unique role. And so, when, when your issues are urgent, they become urgent for the C-suite. Um, and then, uh, I think the last time I saw him was, uh, at the vigil, the vigil on October 9th after 10/07 at Temple de Hirsch on Capitol Hill. And, you know, obviously he came in as a-in his individual capacity. But, um, yeah, I, I staffed his, uh, testimony before the Senate in Washington, DC in March '23, and, uh, you know, work closely, especially with, you know, the chief communications officer during his time, uh, third time as CEO.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh, interesting. Um, so, and now you're, you're no longer with, uh, Starbucks.

Sam Jefferies: Yes, I left recently. I actually rejoined, uh, my old DC-based firm, uh, doing crisis communications in public affairs and found I missed the variety that working with a client roster offers, and the space for creativity that being a consultant allows. So, I've been back in that about three months and really enjoying it. It, um, you know, keeps my skills sharp, uh, especially in an ever changing, you know, media environment, information ecosystem. And, and then, you know, from the beginning, I've always said that, you know, "You can really give time, talent and treasure, um, in, in a philanthropic way." And, and I enjoy giving my talent because I am a public affairs practitioner. And so being able to do that in my professional life and then offer it on a pro bono basis effectively to the Jewish communities is just, uh, incredibly rewarding for me, something I'm proud to do.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-hah. So, you're on the board of the AJC? Is that right?

Sam Jefferies: Yes. I'm Immediate Past President for AJC Seattle. I joined that board right before COVID and, uh, was, I guess, Vice President and then President, essentially in the two years following 10/7.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh. And, um, tell me about that. What was that work like?

Sam Jefferies: Uh, it was a time of crisis. I mean, uh, you know, I, I remember having conversations in August and September of 2023, uh, and talking about the anniversary of the Abraham Accords and highlighting that. And, and I had previously traveled with AJC to Morocco and Israel. Uh, there were, there was a cohort of American Jews, Israeli Jews, and Moroccan Muslims. And we spent time in both countries and really a cultural exchange meeting with leaders, and business leaders, and civic leaders, and others, and as well as getting to know each other. And I had brought one of the participants to Seattle to talk about that in a, you know, salon-style conversation and, and potential, you know, expansion of the Abraham Accords, um, shortly before October 7th. So, we were really so hopeful, and were looking forward to kind of the idea of a new Middle East and, and then so much of that changed. And we went into crisis communications mode and, and which I think I was well positioned to do. But, you know, it was incredibly difficult and, you know, worked to, to put out fires, whether it was, you know, uh, working with campus administrators to, you know, edit their statements and advise on, on messaging, um, to, you know, applying pressure to attorney generals and others to enforce the law, especially as we saw, you know, protests and violence targets used to, you know, drafting and ghost writing op-eds, which, um, you know, were-when AJC spoke about the weaponization of sexual assault on October 7th, uh, and wrote about it in the Seattle Times. That was the first time the Seattle Times had ever covered the subject. And, and so, you know, the, a number of things like that to be able to make a case vigorously, you know, about, uh, Israel's right to exist and defend itself in the world, and at the same time talk about the safety and security of the Jewish community in the Seattle area and how as antisemitism continued to ratchet higher and higher, uh, the environment was getting worse and worse for us. And, um, you know, really important and difficult moment for me was there, there was a family that had a "Seattle Stands With Israel" sign in its window, which was actually an AJC sign that had been handed out at one of the rallies, and somebody with a keffiyeh wrapped around their face, walked up in broad daylight, and threw, threw a rock through their window. And that was the family that, um, their daughter and my son go to Hebrew school together. And, uh, I, you know, kind of knew them casually and ended up, um, you know, dropping challah at the house and spending some time with them. And then at the same time advocating for our elected officials, especially on the Seattle City Council, to speak out against antisemitism at that time. And, um, I've, since, we've become very close with the family, and Aviad Benzikry uh, is, is one of the original board members of The Kids Table and is really, uh, remains with me in this work in the trenches.

Jeff Schwager: Among regular people in the Jewish community, from your perch at the AJC, what would you like to see more of from, from the average Jewish citizen?

Sam Jefferies: Yes, I think civic engagement is really important, but it has to change with the times. And, you know, there is engagement with these institutions, which were, you know, products of different eras, whether Jewish Family Services, or Jewish Federations, or otherwise. And while all of those organizations do incredibly important work, um, we are losing a generation of political leaders in real time who, uh, have very negative views of Israel, um, very negative views of the Jewish community, traffic in antisemitic tropes, uh, on the far right and on the far left. But I think in western Washington in particular on the far left. And, you know, it continues to be surprising and troubling to me that, uh, folks in our area, uh, don't know their elected officials, uh, everywhere from school board, and city council, and county council, uh, up to the state legislature, and then our congressional delegation. They don't have those relationships. They have trusted that others will have them and, and will kind of advocating accordingly. Uh, they haven't engaged in, in fundraising or in advocacy in a sustained way. And then, you know, in the last two and a half years, uh, uh, Dan Senor has spoken about running a Jewish adrenaline and all of us being in a dozen WhatsApp groups. And, you know, the call to action really being, you know, putting a news article in, in the chat and saying, "Oh my gosh, have you seen this?" And, and it's great that there's more awareness, but for me, it's the next step, it's the next step, it's the next step is, you know, how do we re-equip ourselves to be stronger advocates for our community? You know, how do we get over kind of the bureaucratic slog, uh, and, you know, death by committee of good ideas, and instead, you know, empower in an entrepreneurial way people who are really worried about what they're seeing in their kids' classrooms, or their workplaces, or college campuses, or in the news, or otherwise. You'll fight it on a million fronts and, and then take some action. Um, and, and I see a lot of handwringing, and I see, you know, folks, uh, attending events more and more, but there has to be more than that. There has to be, be the beginning, not the end. But it starts with that basic civic education: "How does a bill become a law? How do we elect these people? What does the school board do that's different than a school superintendent?" "It's different than a principal. It's different than a teacher." And then, "How do you as an individual, become an effective advocate so that you can, you know, have a real impact?" Because I think there was a mistake that we reward effort first and foremost. And effort is frankly irrelevant. Uh, the outcome is the only thing that matters. And you can try as hard as you want. You can be, you know, "A mouse in a bowl of the milk churning your, your feet. But if it doesn't turn to butter, you're going to drown."

Jeff Schwager: Well, that seems like a great place to, uh, shift our conversation to The Kids Table, um, and what you're doing there, and how you're using that group to, to impact, uh, local and statewide events. So, um, why don't we start with you just giving me the background on The Kids Table and what you're hoping to do there?

Sam Jefferies: Sure. Uh, so as I said, I've been very involved with the AJC as well as with some other legacy Jewish organizations. I had gone through, uh, the young, um, Young Leaders Development program at the Jewish Federation here in Seattle, uh, as well as, uh, some work with the ADL, but was really finding that that work only had so much bite. And a part of that was because these are 501(c)(3)s that are not allowed to engage in political activity by law. And so, they can have good messaging, they could have, you know, good arguments and good data. But if they're going into fundamentally unfriendly offices and those offices are making a political calculus that antisemites, uh, are better politically organized, than they are going to vote against you ten times out of ten. And, you know, there was a lack of understanding of that. And then, two, that, you know, our federal delegation had been attended to for a long time. And, you know, there were many folks who were looking to elect champions of the community to Congress, but they were in doing so, ignoring the offices of the mayor or the county commissioners and others. And that needed to change. So myself, and a friend, Alexa Holling, had been engaging in some Jewish political work that really came out of the state Democratic Party's, uh, anti-Israel resolutions in January of 2024. We'd raised money for some candidates. We'd taken a number of meetings, but we really decided that there was something that was needed. Something needed was more formal to be able to raise money, you know, give it and engage in political activity in a way that spoke with a single voice for the Jewish community. Uh, and that, that really put a line in the sand for in this moment of crisis, you need to be with us. And as you said at the top, uh, being with us is not just being complicit or complacent in antisemitism, but, you know, we expect you to be active against it. So, you know, we had a number of conversations with folks around the country who had launched similar initiatives. And, and then we launched in, in June 2025 and put-had a specific model. One, we capped the donations. So, the idea was 100 Jews at 100 bucks a month. And, uh, you know, lowering that giving level so that you could really invite new people who didn't have agency in the political world. And really in the model of a labor union, uh, in, into, you know, the, the politically active space and then, not ask them to do the work of finding candidates to support and giving individually, but giving to The Kids Table so that we in turn could support or oppose candidates. And then that continued to expand. We, we began publishing a monthly newsletter. You know, the news media, I think, really got tired of reporting on our issues. It's very difficult to get focused on antisemitism locally, and also to separate what was happening here in Washington from, you know, the debate of Trump versus Biden or Trump versus not, you know, not-Trump, what have you. And frankly, we, we had plenty of our issues at the local level without getting into national politics. And, so, we published a newsletter that breaks down on a monthly basis how the system works, why it's not working for Jews, and then what you, the reader, can do about it. And covering everything from college

campus activism, to K through 12 and curriculum, to graffiti removal, uh, you know, to political stagnation and the lack of contested seats here in Washington. And then use that to, to reach a base of folks, begin to raise some money, meet with elected officials, uh, help to, to shape their views around Jews, the Jewish community, differentiating between legitimate criticism of Israel versus, uh, you know, um, antisemitic opposition to a Jewish state and, and then begin to, to put those folks into office. We said from the beginning, you know, we don't want to meet with school superintendents. We want to hire and fire the people who hire and fire school superintendents. And we found we had some success with that, uh, over our first campaign cycle.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh, and the name, The Kids Table. Tell me about that?

Sam Jefferies: Sure. And so, uh, a credit to her, uh, Alexa actually came up with this where, you know, I would kvetch about I have this professional career in, uh, public affairs and, you know, will offer time and time again my energy and my expertise and, uh, you know, time and time again, uh, even, you know, after I had assumed the role of, uh, Board President for AJC, it felt like. "Thank you for your input. Uh, why don't you go wait over there at 'the kids table,' and, you know, we, we, we appreciate you being a participant in the conversation. Now it's time to go look for the Afikomen." And so, you know, is, is kind of a tongue in cheek nod to, to that. Okay. If, if this is where, you know, our ideas are not going to be accepted and, and, you know, we continue to be told that there is going to be a time and place for young leaders, but it's not today. Uh, then we'll, we'll build it ourselves. And, and then that's the other piece is that, um, we, we did believe, and I continue to believe that there is a need for new leadership, uh, for folks who have, you know, never operated in a world in which Twitter didn't exist to be able to take on the antisemitism of today.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. Um, how do you see, uh, the difference in approach or attitude or issues between the, the generation that was telling you to "go to the kids table" and your generation?

Sam Jefferies: Sure. I mean, I think a part of it is that, uh, you know, previous generations have been very comfortable with quiet, um, back-door advocacy to folks in power. It would be to, you know, quietly support these individuals. And then once they are, um, you know, on the board of regents for university or, uh, in elected office or otherwise, then you could go and speak to them not in a public fashion and express your concern and, you know, quietly mold and shape attitudes, uh, to be able to improve life for Jews. And to their credit, that worked for a long time and, and probably was a product of, you know, our experience. Um, you know, in, in Europe and elsewhere in which, you know, engaging directly as Jews in a political process was fraught and dangerous. And, uh, and it worked for a number of years. Um, it doesn't work in the same way anymore. There needs to be public advocacy. There needs to be, you know, uh, clear definitions of who we are and what we care about. And that needs to be combined with that private advocacy so that we are building those relationships, but we're also willing to stand up and speak vigorously for the world, you know, about the world and, and the way that we see it, uh, at this present moment, demand that folks stand with us in a way that's meaningful and not performative. And then, uh, you know, having, uh, tools for accountability as well. And, you know, and some of it is, is like parenting. I'm, I'm a parent. And, you know, if you don't set boundaries with your kids, if you don't have consequences, and follow through on them, then bad behavior will continue. I think that is what we have seen, uh, with many current political leaders, um, and some in the community who continue to show up and, and, uh, kind of make political donations and engage in advocacy in sort of a default fashion, uh, rather than, you know, questioning, uh, why they're not standing up for us in a time of crisis and, and demanding that they do so and then being willing to, to support an opponent, uh, if they don't.

Jeff Schwager: So, when you're looking at, uh, candidates to support, I presume that most of them are running on local issues they're not running on antisemitism or the Middle East. How do you sort of-are you trying to get them to put those issues in the foreground as they're running, or...:

Sam Jefferies: Not necessarily, um, uh, well, as I said, you know, uh, our measurement is, is outcomes and not effort, right? And so, what we would like is, you know, a, a safer, more secure environment for Jews to be Jews in Washington state. And some of those issues are front and center public safety being an excellent example where if you are allowing I-5 to be blocked by protesters for six hours, uh, you are backing up ambulances and you are, you are telling people that there are no consequences for this behavior. And they can go and throw rocks through windows, and spray paint graffiti with calls for violence against Jews. And, you know, um, target, uh, observant Jews on Shabbos who are walking to shul and otherwise. So, you know, public safety is a relevant issue that we do expect them to speak to. We would also say that antisemitism in classrooms is a relevant issue that we expect them to speak to, and act upon. We do put the onus on candidates to be able to say, how would you use the position that you're seeking to support the Jewish community and oppose antisemitism? And then we also ask them what you would do as an elected official, uh, to address extremism in your own party, whichever party that may be. I think those are both, you know, very open-ended questions that really put the onus on them to, to be able to consider creatively how to address our problems, which are difficult and shape-shifting and, um, multi-layered. We also make it very clear that we do not expect officials at the state and local level to engage in foreign affairs. That there is a State Department for a reason. There are foreign affairs committees in the House and Senate in DC for a reason, and they should-that, that work should be left to them. But when they engage in foreign

affairs, whether it's calls for ceasefire or, you know, accusations of genocide or otherwise at the state and local level, it has zero effect except to encourage targeting of Jews, and Jewish institutions, and the Jewish community. And, so, we actually asked them to separate themselves. And then we find that by building this relationship and being the politically savvy people that we are, uh, and supporting their campaigns on other issues, because our ultimate goal is to put them in positions of power, then we can have an open door. And if there are more nuanced conversations that need to be had about Israel, about the conflict in the Middle East, uh, that we can better have them on a foundation of mutual trust.

Jeff Schwager: Can you give me an example of a race where you talk to a couple of candidates and got sort of different answers to the concerns, and that led you to, to back one candidate as opposed to another?

Sam Jefferies: Sure. Uh, you know, we were very involved in a school board race in Seattle last year. And, um, school board is often overlooked position that is, uh, quite influential, um, both for hiring superintendents, um, retains the power of the purse strings for a district, that type of thing. And, you know, campus has been a real problem for Jewish and Israeli students, you know, here in Washington. And, uh, so we surveyed two, the two candidates in an open primary. And one of the candidates, uh, came back with very, very strong answers about requiring accountability, about mandatory reporting about, you know, uh, the difference between, you know, legitimate criticism of, of various policies and, and then targeting, uh, and othering of Jewish or Israeli students. And we were very impressed by that. The other candidate didn't bother to respond at all. And then when asked by the Seattle Times about our endorsement and about our spending, she, she explicitly told them that she did not consider antisemitism to be of concern to her as a school board candidate. And so, uh, that was a very easy choice to make. Uh, we supported the former over the latter. We got a lot of media attention for it, uh, which we-was also positive in a start-up phase, and our candidate is now on the Seattle School board, and remains a very strong voice for Jewish students and families in the district.

Jeff Schwager: That's great.

Sam Jefferies: Yes, really great. (Great work.) Very proud of that.

Jeff Schwager: Um, do you, uh, either with The Kids Table or separate from The Kids Table, do you see yourself advocating on a national level in the future? Is that something that interests you or are you really focused...?

Sam Jefferies: I've advocated plenty on the national level. Um, I am lucky to have relationships with some of our federal elected officials, my member of Congress, and others who, who really know me as a Jewish community leader and advocate. And that is the hat I wear. Um, you know, when I meet with them, that's incredibly important. But, uh, there are a lot of people who are focused on the national level, whether it's presidential campaigns, or Congress, and all of that is very important. I'm going to a fundraiser for a member of Congress who will be the next chair of the House Armed Services Committee on Monday. Um, and that that engagement is incredibly important. But the last time I met with him, all we did was talk about The Kids Table, because there is so little work being done to mind the store, um, back at home and to be able to be mindful of the next generation of, of politicians coming up who unfortunately continue to creep further and further to the extremes. Uh, and as we move farther away from the Holocaust, is a defining element of the American Jewish experience. Uh, there is frankly a lot less sympathy for us as a people. Um, and we need to be able to figure out different ways to be able to tell our story, you know, with urgency, but also with political acumen, so that we can make it good politics to be pro Jewish in our part of the world, just as, as it should be elsewhere.

Jeff Schwager: Yes. Um, one race that didn't, I think, turn out the way you had hoped was the Seattle mayor's race. (That's right.) Um, and although you didn't give a strong endorsement to Mayor Harrell, you did strongly oppose Mayor Wilson. Um, I'm curious how you feel that has, uh, impacted the-her election has impacted the Jewish community so far and, and what your sort of fears are, and how you think, uh, you or other people should be working, uh, to, to, to manage those fears, uh, or those possible outcomes, uh, as, as we move forward?

Sam Jefferies: Sure. Uh, I mean, I would say yes, we're very concerned about Katie Wilson's election as mayor of Seattle. And, uh, you know, that in part becomes-is because she identifies as a democratic socialist. And the Democratic Socialists of America, of America are, uh, you know, uh, vitriolic in their anti-Zionism, uh, to, to a degree that is very clearly to me, antisemitism. Um, and, and a product of a ten-year-plus campaign to reorganize the local Democratic party in a way that is, uh, extreme radical. And extremism and radicalism, um, whatever part of the political spectrum it comes from has never been a good recipe for Jews, uh, in the United States, or United States or elsewhere. So, has she governed as a boring, Wonder Bread bureaucrat to date? Absolutely. Should she continue to do so? Yes. And there should-can and should-be vigorous debates on, you know, the role of capitalism versus, you know, um, broader social safety net or, or socialist system in Seattle. But I would hope that it would be done, you know, on the basis of public safety for all. Um, and the ability of Jews to live, to embrace their, their identity, um, and the overwhelming majority is Zionists, um, you know, safely and securely in, in our area, um, without feeling under, uh, you know, threat either physically or a need to hide their Judaism to, to succeed in this part of the world. And, you know, my great fear is that,

uh, Katie Wilson, along with Zohran Mamdani in New York, Brandon Johnson in Chicago, others have promised a long laundry list of free things: free buses, free housing, free social programs, whatever. Uh, that comes as all of those cities and many others are facing enormous budget constraints and, and, you know, many, many millions of dollars in the hole and, um, uh, borrowing practices, uh, that are running out of runway. And I, I worry that in, uh, a month, or six months, or a year when it comes to fruition, that all of these promise programs, uh, not only are not going to happen, but prices continue to go up and, and, um, you know, campaign promises are broken and, and money needs to be moved around that it will be an easy thing to blame Jews. And, uh, whether Jews are being blamed directly, or they're just, uh, "Don't mind me and my civic malfeasance. Look over there.: Uh, that is a, a traditional role that we as Jews play, um, as a scapegoat in civic life. And, and I think it's being done in a fairly sophisticated way in New York. Um, housing prices are based-are um, blamed on Israeli investors and Jewish landlords and others. Um, which is an old trope, but in addition to that, Mayor Wilson on the campaign trail, uh, did make commitments, uh, to certain activists to, uh, take executive action, uh, and engage in Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, uh, of Israel. Now, frankly, irrelevant to the, to the machinations of the city, the program she was talking about in which there was, um, some exchange between the Seattle Police Department, um, and, and the Israeli Defense Forces has been defunct for more than a decade. And, and the way it's talked about doesn't include exchange with any other countries. Um, and singles out Israel individually, but that is a campaign commitment she made. And so now, when she inevitably fails to get to 4,000 units of new housing, new low-income housing in the city of Seattle, uh, and taxes go up as well. Um, I really worry that, "Look over here. Um, you know, the big bad Jews are waiting to, um, take more control or, you know, we need to take action against Israel." Uh, even if it's irrelevant to the day-to-day life in Seattle, uh, is coming.

Jeff Schwager: Um, when you hear somebody say they're an anti-Zionist, um, do you take that to mean they, they want to eliminate, uh, Israel or do you take that to mean they are opposed to the current Israeli government and their actions?

Sam Jefferies: You know, I got to be honest, Jeff, I'm not an intellectual scholar. I'm not an academic. There are many smart people who have studied this. Um, the way-the lens through which I view it is that people of my generation, um, have the word Zionist used as a slur against them. Um, it's shortened to, to "Zio." Um and you know the phrase "dirty Zio" is thrown about, um, especially on social media at a rapid rate. And, you know, um, in civic spaces, whether it's local political parties, or corporate offices, or otherwise, you know, you are being branded a Zionist is a scarlet letter. (Mm-hmm.) In a way that I think is comparable to being, uh, you know, um, a gay man and being HIV positive in the 1980s. And it is the kind of thing that prevents you from getting promotions. It's the kind of thing that pushes you out of future political office. It's the kind of thing that, that runs you out of academia. Um, and, and so, you know, we as Jews love to debate, uh, "What is antisemitism? Uh, you know, "What is anti-Zionism?" "What's legitimate criticism of, of the current policies of a country, or Bibi's government or otherwise?" Um, I think that that's a debate for, for other, bigger brains. Uh, for me, uh, I see it used as a slur quite effectively, uh, to push Jews out of, uh, civic life in, in Washington state. And that is why, uh, what I hope that the state will continue to address because it's, it's unacceptable. And, um, it's, it's gone unaddressed for too long.

Jeff Schwager: Well, you seem to have a pretty big brain, uh, from where I'm sitting. [laughs] Um, we're just about at one other question I wanted to ask you. You're incredibly articulate, um, and, and thoughtful. Are you ever going to consider running for public office yourself? Is that in any way a goal for you?

Sam Jefferies: Uh, you know, I would say, uh, I would never say never. Um, but running for public office is a hard thing when you're as passionate about an issue as I am. And this is the issue. And so, you know, I could run for public office, and I could go on the county council, and I would spend 99.9% of my time dealing with municipal water policy and, um, you know, waste tonnage and, you know, permitting and zoning for mailboxes and sidewalks. And that's all incredibly important work. I want my mailbox to work as well as my roads. Um, but no one is addressing these issues in the, the politically effective way that I think they need to be. And so, uh, I think right now, I'm, I'm committed to this work and this project and making sure that, uh, you know, we as a community are empowered and engaged and have agency. Um, and so, you know, when, when we can fix that, then yes, maybe I'll run for office and, uh, go get my potholes fixed. But in the meantime, uh, you know, I'm, I'm here, I think proudly to, to be a leader, uh, for my community at this time of crisis and, and to make this world a place where I want, you know, my kids, my son is a fifth generation Washingtonian. And, um, I want there to be a sixth. And I want them to be able to do it, and as proudly a Jewish way as they see fit.

Jeff Schwager: Well, thank you very much both for, uh, doing this interview and also for all the great work you're doing in the community. It's very much appreciated. Um, I'm going to stop our recording and then I'll briefly say goodbye to you after I hit stop. So here we go. Thank you very much.