Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

Recording Date: December 15, 2021
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

Paul Blum

SUMMARY

Paul Blum reflects on the history of Congregation Beth Israel in Bellingham, Washington, tracing its roots to Jewish families from Lithuania and Germany who settled in the area at the turn of the twentieth century. As co-chair of the congregation's COVID-19 Task Force and a registered nurse, he describes the efforts to develop safety protocols, transition services, and educational programs to virtual platforms, and adapt lifecycle events during the pandemic. Blum discusses the challenges faced by clergy, staff, and congregants as they navigated isolation, remote pastoral care, and the disruption of traditional communal practices while striving to maintain connection and engagement. Looking ahead, he highlights the congregation's financial resilience, the success of hybrid programming, and the community's commitment to balancing health, safety, and Jewish communal life in the future.

Nancy Blase: Good morning. I am Nancy Blase, a member of the Jewish Archives Committee of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Today is December 15th, 2021. This oral history interview will be with Paul Blum, co-chair of the Covid 19 Task Force of Congregation Beth Israel, located in Bellingham, Washington state. It will be part of a series of oral histories to document the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic on congregations and synagogues in the state. We're conducting this interview remotely via Zoom. recorded in zoom audio with video format and an audio only format. From those, a transcript will be developed. Many thanks to Dennis Barnes, who is kindly hosting and handling the technical parts of this interview. Paul, it is very good to meet you, and thank you for sharing with us. Congregation Beth Israel's various actions and reactions to Covid. Let's start with the history about your congregation. Can you outline the who, what, where, when, and how it began?

Paul Blum: Sure. It's nice to be here. Thank you for inviting me. Around the turn of the century, maybe 1889 or 1898, 1899 families from two small towns in Lithuania, um found themselves or came to Bellingham, Washington, a small city in the very upper northwest corner of the United States. Probably to escape persecution in Lithuania and to take advantage of the Klondike Gold Rush, which was occurring at that time. So Bellingham was a booming, booming community, on the route to Alaska. And these were Orthodox Jews. And there were not very many of them. And they were really the first Jews, probably in Bellingham. A few years later, families from Germany also arrived in Bellingham, and also Orthodox, but practicing a different kind of Judaism probably than the Lithuanian Jews. But they were the only Jews in town. So they got together and they started to have services. Eventually, the families grew, more Jews arrived, and they became more organized in their services around I think 1906, 1910, they actually sort of formalized the relationship. They rented a space and Congregation Beth Israel came into being eventually. And then they would have, like, itinerant rabbis would just sort of come through town and they would take advantage of that. And eventually, they bought a building on Broadway Street in Bellingham, and that became our home for Congregation Beth Israel. And families continued to grow. We would get a permanent rabbi. Then the depression hit, and Bellingham was hit hard by the depression. Families left. Jewish activity dwindled, and in the 1950s, families started to go into Bellingham again. The congregation grew, and a cantor from Vancouver, British Columbia, came down and essentially became a rabbi for like 30 years. And that was Rabbi Fred Gardner, and to make a long story short, more and more Jews arrived in Bellingham. We definitely outgrew the small shul on Broadway Street, and plans were devised to create a new synagogue and a new campus. We grew from a congregation of 60 families, and now we have a congregation of over 250 Family units, which is pretty incredible, and so three years ago, about three years ago, we moved into a brand new synagogue. It's on a campus with acreage, and it's really quite

fabulous. And it was an amazing event that accomplishment for a community of our size, thanks to very generous individual donors and a lot of hard work and planning. Anyhow, so that's the story of how we came to be where we are. I just want to emphasize that our community really is the only show in town. We have a variety of different types of practicing Jewish people. We were originally Orthodox. Finally, Rabbi Gardner said to the women up on the balcony to come on down to the main floor. And so our practice became more conservative, but really the practice that we and we never, uh, are formally affiliated with the conservative movement and the practice of the vast majority of the Jews in Skagit and Whatcom County who attend Congregation Beth Israel is Reform. And the congregation came to grips with that when we needed to find a new rabbi, when we, formally affiliated with the Reform Movement and had the assistance of the Reform Movement to find us our current rabbi, Rabbi Samuels, who has just been fabulous. So we believe that the reform, our reform practice, can encompass everybody's ritual practice, we have a conservative minyan on Saturday mornings and most of our services are conducted in Hebrew, and so our inclusiveness is really the foundation stone of our congregation.

Nancy Blase: Thank you. Going back to when you built the new building on the new land that you have do you happen to know the year of that?

Paul Blum: I think. It was. I think it was 2018.

Nancy Blase: Okay. Thank you. That would be great. So, going on from there it seems like Covid began in earnest early 2020. And is that about when your COVID-19 Task Force was founded. Would you speak about that task force that you co-chair?

Paul Blum: I remember the last event we had was Purim, and I think it was in February 2020. And that was when the state, after tha,t shut everything down, and the task force came into being in July because it was the Covid 19 reopening task force. So when we were shut down, well, fine, we're shut down. But we, the board of director,s saw that we needed to figure out, well, what was going to happen in the future. How are we going to reopen gradually? We're able to reopen because at some point, Governor Inslee established the three phase plan for reopening. I'm not sure when that occurred, but we had tried to anticipate how we were going to meet those requirements. So the task force was formed in July of 2020. And I don't recall the mechanics of how it was created.

Nancy Blase: Mhm. So you weren't on the original task force.

Paul Blum: No. I remember at a board meeting, the task force was discussing the task force, one of the board members or a number of the board members were on the task force, and they're sort of acting chair said she had too many irons in the fire and wasn't going to be chair wasn't even going to be on the task force anymore and suggested that I be the chair. You know how it works. And, uh, I didn't want to be the chair. I said, I don't want to be the chair. I'm not even on the task force, and then Steve Bannon is my co-chair. He said, Well, Paul, I'll be co-chair with you if that makes you feel any better. So basically, I was railroaded into being on the task force and being a co-chair, and probably because I had a very long career as a registered nurse. So I had a medical background because a number of people on the task force have medical backgrounds, and that's probably why they chose me. Other than the fact that it's difficult for me to say no.

Nancy Blase: So, can you briefly describe the role of the task force, how you operated? Did you advise the board?

Paul Blum: Right, our charter basically said that the task force was to develop plans for reopening and to recommend to the board the implementation of those plans. And we had a board meeting last night. So one of the things when I became chair of what we did was formalize some things, and we drafted a policy for reopening under stage three of Governor Inslee's plan. And now phase three has been sort of abandoned by the state, and nothing really replaced it. You know, we sort of reopened, but there was the guidelines fell to the wayside as far as I was concerned. The task force met, maybe a week ago, and we revised the policy, and I presented that revision to the board. And after the discussion, they had some suggestions. So we corrected or changed, revised the plan, the policy right then. So our new policy, the main difference is that we require proof of vaccination, so anyone attending an event or a service at Congregation Beth Israel will be screened and will have to show proof that they are fully vaccinated. Kids 12 and under will have to have at least one shot. So that was the big difference in our policy. We are also going to, and this policy hasn't been instituted yet. We want to wait till February 1st to allow the pediatric doses to actually be distributed. We're also going to allow eating inside the shul, once again. But it'll be controlled. Like for Onyx. After Friday night service, the host will actually serve people. Whatever. You know, grapes, you know, bits of donut, whatever, onto plates. And people will sit at a table. They won't be just standing around schmoozing like in the old days. And then we're going to have Hamachi at Friday night service, you know, when you pass a call around and everyone will take a piece, we're going to have the already cut up and make it less contact with a group collar.

Nancy Blase: Okay, so we've got the beginning, and now we've got the current. Let's go back just a little bit and tell us about how

your facility operated during the COVID early on and it sounds like it was closed till July. Is that right? And can you transition us a little bit from July when your task force formed and, uh, versus open.

Paul Blum: Yes. I don't remember when we started Zoom services. It must have been pretty early after we closed down. I don't, I can't recall. I'm not having services. So that's what the first step was: to have virtual Friday night services and virtual Torah study on Saturdays. In 2021, we had some B'nai Mitzvahs. And those also were all done remotely from people's homes. And members of the congregation would sort of form like a little mini caravan, like a parade to celebrate in front of people's homes with dancing outside, but the they did not the ministers did not occur in shul. And then in 2021, we opened up like a hybrid service where, under very strict Covid protocols, families could have a mitzvah in the shul. Everybody's masked and screened and socially separated, and it was hybrid. So you would have an indoor service, and it would also be conducted on Zoom, and then gradually, at some point, which I should have written down somewhere, yeah. I think the first small hybrid bat mitzvah was in May of 2021. And then in August of 21, vaccination started to happen. Our Hebrew School and Sunday School, rather, our Sunday school, which we call Kesher, started on Zoom in March of 2020. Right. Does that answer that question?

Nancy Blase: Very interesting. Yes. So it sounds like technology was definitely put into play pretty early to bring the synagogue to your members. Remembers?

Paul Blum: Yes.

Nancy Blase: What effects did it have on the rabbi? What sort of role did the rabbi play?

Paul Blum: Um.

Nancy Blase: That might be different.

Paul Blum: Well, you know, the rabbi could not meet with people to give pastoral care. You know, personally, the rabbi's role in Kesher was important. I mean, everything was shut down. Really? Everything was done remotely. But I don't think the rabbi was affected, psychologically, any more than the rest of us. I mean, obviously, we all were under a lot of strain because of this sort of isolation type of deal.

Nancy Blase: Thank you. How about the staff? Tell us a little bit about the staffing that you've had, and if COVID impacted that.

Paul Blum: It impacted them the same way it was impacting the rabbi and the rest of us. So we have an administrative assistant, slash receptionist, slash secretary, slash bookkeeper. And, she would work remotely and come to the office only on occasion. And, our Sunday School director, who is also our song leader and cantorial assistant, obviously also was working remotely, and, you know, it wasn't there were a lot of negatives to it wasn't satisfying, but it wasn't an undue burden. Yeah.

Nancy Blase: Okay. Thank you. Did it have effects on the membership? In terms of, did some of them come down with COVID-19? Were there any deaths in the membership? And were there financial impacts or mental impacts?

Paul Blum: I'm sure there were some financial impacts because we know we have a cross-section of people, but I'm not aware of any in particular. We had one family that had COVID-19, but it was not from an association with the congregation, and they recovered. Once phase three occurred and we could have events in the synagogue. I think it's called Kuk Sool. It's a martial arts class that one of our Congregants and actually board members conducts for congregants, and it's very popular. It's very cool. But one of the students got COVID, nobody else in the class got COVID, but this student's family got COVID. They all recovered and didn't have to be hospitalized, so that's great. I don't know any other congregants who developed Covid, which pretty much tells us that we were doing a good job of reducing risk, because our big fear, of course, is that Congregation Beth Israel would become a super spreader. Right. So, that never happened, and we're very happy about that.

Nancy Blase: Great. So as for observances, you've talked a little bit about the Shabbat Services now, and I guess, those early plans worked because there wasn't a super spreader. How about tell please describe your High Holiday services, perhaps in 2021. Did you have any? And if you had any in 2020 what was that like?

Paul Blum: Yeah. 2020, as I recall. And unfortunately, my memory is not that good. 2020 was all via Zoom and, well, you know, I mean, that was fine, that we really all were very grateful that we had that option. I mean, think about it. I mean, we're talking to each other and looking at each other now. And with these little devices, it's pretty impressive. It's amazing. It's like science fiction. So having these High Holidays on Zoom was great because we could do it, but it was terrible because it wasn't like it used to be, you know? So it was both those things. And then in 2021, we had a hybrid High Holiday service, and by that time, we had upgraded our audiovisual component. We just weren't using Zoom. We had almost like a whole TV studio quality situation,

technically, completely over my head. We had cameras installed in the sanctuary that were so unobtrusive. If you didn't know, if I didn't point out to you that there was a camera up there, you would never even notice it. Thanks to one of our members, David Goldberg. Goldman. He did a great job. And so we were able to have a really good, high-quality High Holidays. We blew our Shofar outside so that we were directing our trumpet blast outside, as opposed to onto all of the congregants, because it was a hybrid event. So we had some people show up, but I don't think more than 60 people showed up for the High Holidays in person. And the rest of us were on Zoom. And as co-chair of the COVID-19 task force, I was happy that only 60 people showed up. From my perspective as a risk reducer, I wanted as few people as possible. And so that worked out for me really good. I don't think it was as satisfying for the rabbi, but that's fine. It wasn't a super spreader event. And then similarly, our Friday night services, our hybrid events. And so only a few people have been showing up in person for Friday nights, which is not satisfying for the rabbi, but many more people are showing up on Zoom. So, really, we have more participants in Friday night services, especially during the summer when, you know, attendance usually falls.

Nancy Blase: And I believe you've mentioned some of the life cycle events, namely the b'nai mitzvah. How about births, weddings, and deaths? Can you talk about those, please?

Paul Blum: I have to think about that. Especially births. I don't know anything about births. And weddings. I don't recall any weddings in shul during the pandemic. Which is interesting. And, we did have some deaths, and that was all done outside in the cemetery. And so that wasn't a problem for us. Sitting shiva is a problem. And that was done a lot via Zoom. So that was different and unsatisfactory, really.

Nancy Blase: So, Congregation Beth Israel has its own cemetery in Bellingham.

Paul Blum: We have part of Lake View Cemetery in Bellingham, which is a wonderful, beautiful old, you know, large tree. It's just a lovely cemetery. We have a section of that that is ours. And, yeah, it's a sacred and beloved spot. It's very nice. If you could say a cemetery is very nice. It's very nice. Yes.

Nancy Blase: Well, it's good that you could have the services there. And that's sort of a normal, more of a normal feeling during Covid, which is good. So let's turn now to some other activities. Would you describe the educational activities, please?

Paul Blum: We do a lot of education online. I don't know what the participation was in live events, but the online participation is really good, like adult education. So that has continued. And we've availed ourselves of a lot of great opportunities. Our religious school is in person. And we've been very safe. So some families have opted not to send their kids to school. So our attendance is down somewhat, but not dramatically. And so I think our director and co-director, that is to say, our religious school director and co-director, and the rabbi have done a really good job. And the kids are thriving. Yeah.

Nancy Blase: That's great. How about social activities?

Paul Blum: As time went on, they re-established themselves. We had a movie night at the synagogue for youngsters just so that they associate going to the shul to have fun, not just to work, you know, as students. That was very successful. We had another youth activity, I think it was like a pizza night or something, outside during the summer months, and that was successful. And no one got COVID from that. And so we have had a number of activities, especially for the young people. Well, well regulated, you know, well controlled and safe. So that has picked up this year. Trying to think of anything else. Oh, and then the rabbi just attended a millennial night out, which is a misnomer, but it's for young people. And that was conducted at a pub. Right. So and that was he was just amazing at how many people showed up for that. And I hope that was safe.

Nancy Blase: Yes. Let's hope so too, and you described in terms of meals, you've described Kiddush and that sort of thing. Have you had any other meals as part of your social?

Paul Blum: When? When we had the B'nai Mitzvahs, there was food served according to the standards and guidelines established by phase three. And that went well, but we don't like I say we don't really do Kiddush anymore. For Friday night services, though, we're hoping to reinstate that. We plan on reinstating that very soon, but one thing that draws Jews together, and maybe all people, but Jews for sure, is the prospect of food. So we really want to get our eggs back on track to attract more people to be at Friday night services in person.

Nancy Blase: Paul, can you think of any innovative programs that emerged as a result of COVID?

Paul Blum: The idea that we are having services online has enabled people who never could make it to services. You know, basically, maybe the elderly who are shut-ins. Every Friday night, there are people taking advantage of a 45-minute service online, which has really been a positive thing, and the new setup, which is like a TV studio, was a real innovation. And we are teaching

people how to operate it because it is complicated. And we're teaching a lot of the youngsters in our community how to operate it. So that's stimulating their brains. So that would be the only innovations that I could think of. Though for me personally, because planning a b'nai mitzvah. It was always kind of complicated, but not that bad. Well, now, with the COVID-19 restrictions, especially at the beginning, it involved intense communication. So me personally, I've got intensely involved in families that I would not normally, you know, get to know as an old person, you know, here. And that was great for me. I mean, that was like just reinforcing for me personally how wonderful the members of our community are, generally speaking, how intelligent they are, it just made me proud to be a member of the community. So it wasn't necessarily an innovation, but it was an opportunity.

Nancy Blase: Great. Was there any social action that was able to take place during COVID-19 up to now?

Paul Blum: Yes. And I'm trying to think specifically. We have an active social action committee. They have social justice, of course, big on their agenda, but I can't recall exactly what events they did organize. Also, inclusiveness is now a big focus for them. And there have been a lot of educational office offerings about inclusiveness, whether it be racial or gender equality issues. And I don't think that might have been a combination of the social Action committee and the program committee putting on those events, which were via the internet. Every year participate in the Bellingham, Whatcom County Gay Pride Parade, which is a tremendously fun event. And, our congregation, you know, it's like a very noticeable part of that parade. You know, we got a big banner, and it's really a lot of fun. And I'm sorry, but I can't remember how it went this year.

Nancy Blase: That's fine. Was there support for members? Did the congregation provide meals, counseling, financial, or other support?

Paul Blum: The care committee definitely organizes meals for people who are in need of them. Usually, people undergoing a health care crisis, and that continues. And I know, I remember dropping off meals back when Covid first shut us down in bags at people's doors. You know, we wouldn't enter because one just the touching contact was still questionable. And then why would you expose a person having a health crisis to you as potentially a carrier of COVID? So, that was a different way to handle that. And our care committee and board definitely made attempts at outreach to people, especially the elderly, who were losing contact with the outside world because of the restrictions of COVID-19. So that was a organized situation.

Nancy Blase: Great. Thank you. Now, did COVID have any effect on the synagogue's budget or financial condition?

Nancy Blase: Not really. Things were different, but. But in balance. Um, everything was stable and fine, for example, our High Holiday expenses were slashed, but our High Holiday income to counter expenses also probably was less than it has been in the past. Building maintenance costs were much less because we were not using the building nearly as much. So the bottom line is that, on balance, we're in budget. We're not hurting that way. So I would say. Oh, and then we lost some people in our religious school, we might have lost even some members due to our Covid restrictions, but this is a normal attrition anyway for a congregation. We also gained new members, so everything worked out. On balance.

Nancy Blase: Great. We are still in a transitional phase for this pandemic. Would you please comment on your post-pandemic plans? I think you have touched on some of them, but perhaps the limitations and the response by the members to your plans.

Paul Blum: Right, right. It's the whole pandemic situation has always been fluid. We never knew what was going to happen next. No one was sure what was going to work, what wasn't going to work. And so I always stress when I'm presenting to the board or the congregation, anything about Covid is that it's all subject to change. So we have a policy now that it's all subject to change. We don't know what things are going to be like this spring or this summer. It could be better. It could be worse. But to answer your question, though, it's not up to the Covid task force, but it seems like this hybrid service and hybrid events may be something that's going to be here to stay, because it you can reach so many more people if, if there's difficulties in getting to the synagogue, if you can put it online, boom. We've solved that problem. We have congregants who live many, many miles away. I live 35 miles away from the shul. We have congregants in Oak Harbor, Arlington, Washington, and Anacortes, Washington. That's a distance to get to the shore. So the hybrid events and services, I think are are here to stay once everyone is immunized, and if our Covid numbers in the counties go down, we can eliminate more restrictions, but it's hard to plan too far in advance because we just don't know what the situation is going to be.

Nancy Blase: Right.

Paul Blum: I think you asked about congregants' response to the restrictions, and our feeling is that people are pleased that we're taking the pandemic seriously and taking the health of the individual members of the community seriously. And that is a primary concern, but it's difficult. There will be some parents of religious school students who don't want their children to get vaccinated. They're very uncomfortable with that. And so, that's something that we have to work out. What can we do about that? There are people who really don't like the idea that we have to wear masks, especially since the cantor and the rabbi are wearing masks

during services. That diminishes the beauty of the service. You know, what can you do? So, of course, there's going to be. Wait a minute. We're talking about 250 Jewish families here, right? There's going to be differences of opinion. There may be a thousand different opinions. So, for the most part, I think everyone has looked upon our policies and restrictions as positive in a positive way. Yeah. As a matter of fact, I think the board of directors always anticipated negative feedback, you know, like, that didn't occur. It just didn't happen.

Nancy Blase: That's good to hear. And I believe you've already touched on this, but do you anticipate some positive long-term consequences?

Paul Blum: Like I said, the hybrid service seems like it's a positive thing, and I think that's going to continue, maybe forever, you know, the congregation, like, probably every congregation has gone through different things, like the community during the depression had to survive that, like everybody else. When we transitioned to our new building, we sold the old shul building when someone wanted to buy it. I mean, who wants to buy this, you know, old building? What are you going to do with it? Well, we had a buyer, so we sold it before the new shul was ready for occupancy. So we had our own exodus. We and Bellingham are such a wonderful community. Churches opened up their doors to us. We had services in various churches. And so we were homeless. Our congregation was homeless. It was an exodus, and it just made it even more joyful when we were able to occupy the new synagogue. So we went through that. So we're resilient. At one point, conservative practicing Jewish members of the congregation had a dispute with the Congregation Beth Israel, and they broke away and formed their own congregation. Well, we've reunited. So that was another sort of trauma and trial, and tribulation that the community went through. And well, we're back together again, and we all understand this is it. We're the Jews in this area. And we're going to be united and we're going to do the best we can and we're going to love each other. And so we will make it through this pandemic.

Nancy Blase: Are there any negative long-term consequences that you can think of?

Paul Blum: I don't think so. We haven't lost many members just due to a sort of normal allowance. We've gained members, sort of a normal amount. We have not lost anyone to COVID-19. So you know I have friends who were in the Skagit Valley Chorale, which was a group that was hit very early on by Covid. It was one of the first super-small but super-spreader catastrophes in the state of Washington. They're traumatized. They lost friends and members of the corale who died from COVID-19. My friends didn't die, thank goodness, but they got really, really sick. That's a deep psychological negative impact on these people. And thank God, nothing like that has happened to our community at Congregation Beth Israel. So I don't see any long-term negative effects at this point.

Nancy Blase: It definitely sounds like there are quite a few positive long-term consequences in terms of people being able to participate more who might not have been able to because of age and distance. So I think that's very exciting for other congregations to be thinking about as well as going forward. So, Paul, this has been interesting and helpful, and I want to thank you very much for the time and for sharing. Congregation Beth Israel's actions and reactions this will enable others to access the information for years to come.

Paul Blum: Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, Nancy and Dennis, and thank you very much for inviting me.