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Rabbi Tamar Malino

SUMMARY

This interview aimed to document the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Jewish congregations and synagogues in Washington. Rabbi Malino represents Temple Beth Shalom and Congregation Emanu-El in Spokane, which are collaborative reform and conservative synagogues. Rabbi Malino discusses her role over time and describes the impacts of COVID-19.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Good morning. My name is Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes. I'm a member of the archives committee of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Today is November 18th, 2021. This is an oral history interview with Rabbi Tamar Malino of Temple Beth Shalom and Congregation Emanu-El of Spokane, Washington. This interview, the interview is a part of a series documenting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on synagogues and Jewish congregations in Washington state, especially outside of the Seattle area. We anticipate that this interview will become part of the Jewish Archives at the University of Washington. We're using this interview remote, we're doing this conducting this interview remotely using Zoom. Dennis Barnes is hosting and assisting with the technical parts of this interview, though he does not appear. Rabbi, thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this project. I'm glad to get to meet you in this online environment.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Thank you very much. I'm glad to be able to be here and be part of the important work of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: It's our pleasure. To start with, could you give some background on the congregation, Temple Beth Shalom and Congregation Emanu-El, including information on affiliation, leadership, size and history?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Sure. Um, so I, I have the fortunate opportunity to actually work with both congregations simultaneously. We currently have a collaboration agreement between the two congregations. Congregation Emanu-El is a reform synagogue, and Temple Beth Shalom is a conservative synagogue. Temple Beth Shalom itself is the product of a merger of two earlier historic synagogues in Spokane. Knesset Israel, which was a conservative Orthodox synagogue, and temple Emanu-El, which was one of the earliest founded congregations in Washington state, and that was a reform congregation, and the two of them merged in the late '60s and built the building that currently houses actually both synagogues, but belongs to Temple Beth Shalom now, um and Temple Beth Shalom is the larger, more established institution in Spokane. It's been around for a bit longer, um, as both, uh, as the merger of the both of the earlier congregations. We have about 200 families, approximately, who are members of Temple Beth Shalom, kind of between 190 and 200. And we have almost 70, between 70 and 80 families that are part of congregation Emanu-El, which has grown significantly in the last several years for a variety of reasons. Um, Congregation Emanuel, when I first got to Spokane 11 years ago, Congregation Emanuel was doing its own thing meeting in the Unitarian Church, and Temple Beth Shalom was doing its own thing as they established congregation in its building with the functioning religious school and its elaborate programming. And as I had the opportunity to start working with Congregation Emanuel, they had been having student rabbis, and they had a sort of less, uh, less, more havurah style community. And I started working with them. And then the opportunity came along to continue to serve Temple Beth Shalom. And I wanted to bring Congregation Emanuel with me. So we created the collaboration agreement between the two congregations. And we have Shabbat services together some of the time and mostly independently, because we have a reform service and a conservative service. But all of our educational programming is combined as well. So we have a combined religious school and a combined adult education programming and some combined social events

and holiday celebrations too, because Spokane, we're a small enough Jewish community that it makes sense to have everybody together under one roof and enjoying one another's company and and bringing more vibrancy to the center of the Jewish community here.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: It's so interesting. When I was thinking about doing this interview, people said, "What are they, what are they doing?" So I'm glad to have this little bit of an introduction. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to lead this congregation?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Sure. So I am ordained from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City, and I served congregations, some in New York, while I was still in school, and then straight out of school in San Diego for eight years, and then worked as an in the Jewish Community Center in Foster City in the Bay area for a couple of years before we moved to Spokane. Uh, my then partner got a job teaching at Gonzaga University, which is how we ended up in Spokane. We had four kids under the age of four, so I was busy doing that when we moved here, and then and then started slow and then I, when we moved here, I worked with Jewish Family Services and then started working with Congregation Emanuel and then with Temple Beth Shalom. So it's been a gradual increase in involvement and responsibility in this community.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: I totally know what you mean. At one point we had four kids under the age of seven. So yeah, totally get it.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Fabulous and crazy all at the same time.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: The main focus of this interview is to show how your congregation has dealt with the current COVID-19 epidemic starting around February 2020, and is ongoing. Um, I'd like to ask how your congregation in different categories has dealt with this over time. I know that it's not just one change at one time, it's people constantly had to readjust as we've gone along and into the future, uh, in such times of uncertainty. Um, maybe first to start with something that really, uh, has to do more with the building. The operation of the facility itself. Was it open? Um, did you close it? Did you use technology? Would you please speak to that?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Sure, sure. So, uh, we were fortunate to be able to celebrate Purim together, and that was kind of the last thing that we were able to do. Um, a year and a half ago as a community. And then very shortly after, because of the pandemic, just really shut down everything in the temple building. Um, so we were, our offices, everybody started working remotely. I worked from home, our administrative staff worked from home. We didn't have anything in the building. And, you know, like everyone else, scramble to recreate everything over Zoom. So relatively shortly thereafter, we were able to run Shabbat services over Zoom and have our, you know, organizational meetings over Zoom and all of that. And it was definitely a lot of quick pivot, I would say, not unlike what the organizational experience, I think has been through most of this pandemic. But for sure, we did that and and it was a and it was a big challenge. It was just a big challenge and the staff were in and out of the building periodically and I started leading Shabbat services, basically alone in the sanctuary with a Zoom tech. Um, and, and then everything was and then everything was projected from there because we wanted people to at least have a little bit of a taste of the building itself, although it did a combination sometimes at home, but most often in the sanctuary.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Do you think that your members were able to, um, make that connection or make that change to using something like Zoom? Maybe some, I hate to say it. Elderly people having some difficulties. How did that work out?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Well, we we put a lot of effort. I would say a couple of things. I would say some people definitely know how to use Zoom, and some were not interested in using Zoom at all. And that just happened. And, uh, you know, it's still happening. Those are some of the people who, as soon as we started opening our doors for allowing people back in the building, which was basically the end of the summer and into high Holy days, were the first people to walk in the door and hadn't been to services for a year and a half because they were like, "I don't do Zoom". So we definitely had some of those folks who were not not limited to elderly folks, just other people who were kind of, you know, tech. They were on Zoom all day for work, and so they didn't want their Shabbat services to be on Zoom, or they're just not not interested and find it difficult to relate that way. So we definitely had some of those folks. Um, in terms of our elderly folks, we worked really hard to ensure accessibility for everybody who was interested. So we actually had, um, our administrative staff troubleshoot with individual members of the community and talk them through it and in some cases where there wasn't a danger of COVID, we actually had people go over and, um, you know, and help them get set up if they were interested and willing to do it. We, you know, that was among one of the things that we did, really for to try to reach out to every member of our community as a whole and, you know, just check in and hear how they were doing and ensure that they weren't, you know, completely alone all the time and really to try to do some pastoral care and outreach, but not just me, really our whole community and we actually we had a COVID response team actually comprised of leadership in Temple Beth Shalom, leadership and congregation Emanu-El and um staff and leadership at Jewish Family Services. And we teamed up to

make sure that we were connecting with everybody that we knew of in the community who might have needs and and just to make sure they were okay and make sure that their basic needs were met, but also really just connect. Um, so we did that. And, and part of that conversation, every time we would talk to someone on the phone was, are you able to get on Zoom? Do you want to get on Zoom? Can we help you get on Zoom? What do you need to make that work? We're right here. In some cases, we even lent laptops to people, those kinds of things.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: That's great. That's really that. That's really good. Um, do you think that your attendance was when you were doing it over? Zoom was pretty good?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah, we had a wonderful attendance at High Holidays, the first High Holidays, which we were quite, you know, worried about. Um, and again, we put a lot, a lot, a lot of effort into not just creating a high holiday experience over Zoom, but really working with the month of Elul leading up to the High Holy Days and trying to create various experiences that would allow people to, um, take individual ownership over their high holiday experience, which is something I think that is a goal across the board for most Jewish experiences, right, we want the synagogue to be the center of Jewish life in one sense, but we also want people to have their Jewish lives at home. And so this was a chance to give people the tools to do it at home, because they couldn't do it in the synagogue. So we worked on that in preparation for High Holy Days, but also to create a Zoom experience over high holy days itself. And that was remarkably well attended. Um, and we had a lot of people connect, I think, in terms of regular Shabbat services, what we see now, and really what I've seen all the way through the pandemic, is that the attendance is essentially almost equivalent to what it was not on Zoom, but it's essentially equivalent to what it was in person.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Oh, I see. But is it the same people?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : I, um, in some cases we have people who now come every Shabbat over Zoom who don't live in Spokane and couldn't ever come, but are peripherally or integrally in our community. So we have a member who was active here for many years and now lives in Bellingham, who comes every Shabbat morning, and similarly, somebody from Pullman who comes every Shabbat morning, whereas when we were in person, of course, they would come, you know, once every 2 or 3 months, if that. So we have those regulars and then we have our regular regulars who now some of them come over Zoom and some of them come in person. Um, and then we have the folks who, uh, who didn't, you know, who left because they couldn't handle Zoom and they didn't want to. So it was kind of a trade off, basically. But in the end, the numbers are very similar, which is, uh, you know, kind of appealingly stable in a world that's changing all the time. But of course, you know, we want we want more attendance at services. That's always true. But, uh, but it was kind of interesting to see that, that the regulars were still the regulars and they figured out how to get here, whether it was in person or over Zoom. So.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: That's right. That's right. Um, now, have you reopened your building at some point?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : We have. So our first High Holy Days was entirely virtual, and we were entirely virtual through basically through the summer. Um, and then in the in the early summer, mid-summer, we were able to do a couple of outdoor Shabbat services, So we did outdoor things. And, you know, unlike the western side of the state, doing things outdoors here when it's cold and rainy, not so much. [laughs] So we had a good season where, you know, I mean, it wasn't really wasn't really warm enough to do things.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: And so in the summer you did some outdoor.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : So in the summer we started doing some outdoors. Still with the significant concern about, you know, how does the virus get transmitted outside if you're singing, right, that changes the picture. So there was we were very, very cautious, I think to our benefit and credit. Um, and then leading up to, I think maybe the week or a couple of weeks before High Holidays, we started doing a few Shabbat services in person and we did that and so we've had, we now are have the option to be in person or over Zoom pretty much for everything we do.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: So when you had when you opened it up, did you use, um did you require vaccination or how did that work?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah. So it's been a process of policy and decision making. Um, all the way through. Um, so we not for high for high holidays. What we did was we actually did a congregational survey and we didn't require proof, but we said, you know, how many of you are vaccinated? Basically, we had people just answer the survey. And our, fortunately, we have, um, our current president is a physician, our immediate past president is also a physician and actually in charge of COVID response at one of the local hospitals and really is, you know, really knows her stuff. So and she's now, even though she's not present anymore, chairs our OVID response committee specifically. So we have people, um, that we can connect with who really know what they're doing and are helping us make solid decisions. So at the time, they were kind of evaluating, are we over the threshold of a lower risk of

contagion because our congregation is mostly vaccinated, which is what we went with for high holy days, and we had limited attendance and we had spacing and we had masks and required and, you know, all of the different components.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: So you did require masks?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : We require masks.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Did you kind of put people far away from each other?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : We have only 50% capacity in our sanctuary. Basically, we've operated on 50% capacity in all of the rooms in the synagogue, in particular in the sanctuary. So we're able to, the way our building is set up is you can kind of open up into the social hall. So we were able to really seat everybody who wanted to come, but we were concerned about that and we had we had reservations for services. So that number one, if, God forbid, we need to do contact tracing, we can. But number two, we know that we're not over the numbers of people that we can fit into the room, um, which ultimately really hasn't been a problem. But we were concerned about high holidays and we got close to our limit. Um, not quite at it, but close to our limit for high holy days. So we just we decided to put all those strictures in place, knowing that most of the congregation was vaccinated and we were spacing and we were masking and we, you know, retooled the way that the Torah service is so that not everyone is clustered around the Sefer Torah, and people are singing from different places. And we have Plexiglas in our, in our, you know, at the podium so that I can lead without a mask and sing without expecting to, you know, without spewing germs on too many directions. And, you know, it's been quite a challenge to retool the ritual so that we can do it as much of it as we can and feel happy about doing that. And religiously and spiritually engaged in doing that. And at the same time be conscious of the safety concerns. And I think, you know, that also took, that was a big learning that that took a lot to figure out how we could do that and make it, you know, for myself in particular, not to feel distracted by it all the time. Um, but also just to make make it feel like we could, we could really pray and we could also really be safe, so

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: You mentioned-

Rabbi Tamar Malino : -to get to that, to get to that point. But right now we are solidly in-person every Shabbat for people who want to come. We never reach our or have yet to really reach our limit in attendance for a regular Shabbat service. Um, that's because we can open up the space and see, you know, several hundred people if we wanted to. And we don't get to that number on Shabbat. And then, um, and then we are accessible over Zoom for anybody who wants to participate that way, because we definitely have some congregants who are still hesitant or families with little kids who don't want to come. I mean, you know, there are plenty of reasons why people don't want to come in person still, uh, because they're worried about contagion.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Right. Right. Now, you mentioned, um, you mentioned a COVID response team or committee or something. So tell me more about that.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : So it's really, we we've kind of gone an evolution on that as well. When the pandemic first happened, we convened a group of folks who were doing, um, like who were helping to create the CCOVID response, not so much policy as the outreach to the community and really kind of caring for the community and making sure that everyone was doing all right or as all right as we could all be, given the circumstances and just helping to do interpersonal connections and helping to make sure that people had what they needed at home and making sure we also, in preparation for that first High Holidays, delivered everybody in the community a little high holiday basket with a mixer and with some apples and honey and with, you know, how to light candles at home and, you know, those kinds of candles, those kinds of things. So we really tried to make sure that everyone felt connected in some sense and had the means to celebrate at home.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: So that was for both groups.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : That was for both. Right. Everybody teamed up together and there were for both both congregations and Jewish Family Services. We have some folks who were not affiliated with either synagogue, but who are, you know, who participate in Jewish family services programming and are under that senior care umbrella. So we, you know, we didn't want to make any distinctions on that with regard to COVID.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: It's kind of interesting. It's almost, some parts of what you're talking about look like it would be a a positive thing.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yes, I think it was I think it really was. I think people were, responded incredibly well to that. You know, to that delivery and to all the efforts that we put in to making high holidays meaningful at home and all those things. I think it really it brought people together, and there was a lot of energy in the leadership of the congregations to to make that happen, which was

also a beautiful thing, just to see, you know, the community, like we can pull through when it's hard, you know, we can put lots of time and effort and energy. We can create a meaningful, beautiful High Holidays, even if it's only in two dimensions. And we can and we can try to reach out to our whole community. So I think that was very true. Some of that energy dissipated by the second year of High Holidays, you know, not surprising really, and at least as much work in some ways to kind of pivot and figure out how we could be meaningful in both in-person and at home at the same time. So in some ways, I feel like the second holidays was more of a challenge than the first high Holidays.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Do you do, try to do it hybrid? Like because this is a challenge that I've seen. Hybrid, in other words, you've got you're doing the service in the building, but you're also, um, using some kind of camera or something. So people can do at home so people can do it either way.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah, that's exactly what we do for everything. That's what we do for everything. So we have in our sanctuary, we have it set up so that, um, we have a Zoom coordinator in the back who manipulates the laptop and who manipulates the camera angles when necessary. Um, we have a projector and a screen up at the front so that when I'm on the bima, I don't, I mean, I don't touch the laptop or manipulate anything from the bima, but I can see all the folks who are on the screen and members in the congregation, depending on where they sit, can also see the people who are on the screen. And we have the sound system hooked up so that everybody can hear everybody, ideally, always. But we try to do our best for that so that the people on screen can really participate as fully as possible in what's going on. And, you know, I struggle with split attention, like, what are they doing? What are the people in the room doing? But, you know, for the most part it it works. And we it's a little different from live streaming. Right. And live streaming you wouldn't actually see the people on the screen and they wouldn't, you know, they'd just be watching you, um, and we wouldn't see their faces. And we really made a very deliberate choice. And this is, you know, the benefit of a smaller community, for better or for worse, that we can actually see all the individuals that are there with us on Zoom for the most part. I mean, sometimes when we have, you know, a hundred people on Zoom, you can't see all the squares, right? And then I have I have this in order to scroll through the squares for those particular events. But, you know, for opening mitzvah and circumstances like that, where we have too many people over, over Zoom to really interact. But lots of times we we really can interact with everybody and we do that now for our classes as well. We have a cool owl camera that catches the whole room. So people in the room who are speaking in the camera follows them and then they follow. The camera follows me when I'm teaching, and then we have the screen with the, you know, again with the with the connected to the laptop so people over Zoom can see what's going on in the room and everyone can see them. So.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: You know, one can imagine that in the future. And, you know, people will look back at this time and wonder and tell stories about it, I don't know. Um, what about the effect on, uh, the workings with the with the rabbi? That would be you and and your temple staff? How did that work?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah. So I'll go back and answer one other question that you asked about the COVID response, because I didn't, so in the beginning, we had this committee that was really all about connecting with the individuals and then we kind of morphed into more of a COVID safety policy. Questions about and that was a different committee. Um, the people who are the medical experts, more than the people who were doing the community outreach to make sure that we were following appropriate policy in our building, and those were where the discussions took place about are we, you know, make sure that the facility has the hand sanitizer in the right spots, and we're taking people's temperatures on the way in and, you know, all of the things that.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: You did do that, you did do the temperature thing.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : We still do it. We still do it. Um, our our COVID response folks are pretty insistent on the fact that they think that that's really important. We have an app in place, like the public school district did in Spokane last year. They're not doing it this year. But, you know, where parents kind of check off that their children are healthy before they come to religious school and before they come to Sunday school so we have that in place as well. We still do temperature checks if we have to, not all the time, but if we have to and we have either a sign in or we have the reservations, um, and we do all the spacing and all the masking and all the sanitizing and, you know, all that stuff. Um, so, so we have and and then they recently, you know, also evolutionarily, right, we had on High Holidays, we didn't require vaccination as of November 7th, we have now put in a put in place a policy where we require vaccination to come into the building.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Oh, okay.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : So that was a that was a little bit slow in coming, but I think we finally ended up with consensus. There was a lot of back and forth around that. Um, can we require a test for people who can't be vaccinated? What components of that what can we actually follow through on? Like, is our greeter really able to check test results accurately at the right time and, you know, some of it's governed by logistics. Um, because of course, we want to be as open and as welcoming to as many people as possible.

Um, and people who really do need the three dimensional experience of being in the room and seeing other people.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Right. There are people. Did you ever have a situation where somebody did have a fever and you had to send the, you know, the with the gun and you had to send them away?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : We had it happen with a kid. We had it happen with the kid. Come for religious school that, um, that had a fever and we had to send them home. We've had it happen with a couple of times.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: You can't tell with kids. So.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah. So far, not with adults. Um, I think most people are pretty circumspect now about if I don't feel good, I'm not going out, you know.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Right, right. And so you did, you yourself and the staff did work remotely and at home for the most part.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Right. So we worked remotely for the first, you know, almost, I want to say almost a year of the pandemic, really. Um, and then we would sort of stagger being in the building. So and we're not, you know, we're not a big organization with a huge staff, and we have plenty of space to spread out. So, you know, we have the the temple secretary who's in the front office and then our administrators in her office, and I'm in my office, and the education director is in her office. So we're, you know, we're in different places in the building and we didn't really have to, you know, we, for a while we were in our offices doing Zoom. I know it's kind of funny. Um, but you know better than having to wear. Masks around each other all the time. Um, but I did a I did a combination because I had kids home from school, so they were home all day by themselves. So I really wanted to make sure that I was home too. You know, it was the sort of classic parent juggle of having your kids doing school from home and you working from home and making it happen. So for my family, that was a big, um, that was a, that was a hard circumstance. So I did work from home quite a lot during that time. Um, and then, you know, again, things started to ease up. Kids went back to school, there was a little bit more. And so now I would say I work probably two thirds of the time for my office and a third of the time from home. Um, it's kind of where I've landed and our administrative staff is here. All is here, back here full time now. Um, and, uh, and our education director, I would probably say also about two thirds of the time in the building and otherwise not.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Well, good. That's good. And so it's kind of it sounds to me like it's a process slowly moving back into into the building.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : We've tried to just reevaluate at each stage and see what makes sense for the community and what makes sense for each of us individually. I do think there's also been a good amount of, um, I want to say leeway is maybe not the right word, but we've we've worked hard to make sure that there's a good amount of grace in people being able to judge their own personal situations and know when it makes sense to be here and when it doesn't. And everybody has a different sense of personal safety and, you know, different levels of vulnerability in their own health care situations or the healthcare situations of their loved ones. And so we've we've tried to be very clear that we're going to let people make their own, you know, our staff and make their own decisions about what they feel comfortable with, as opposed to having a certain set of required expectations around.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: That sort of segues into the next thing I had, which was the effect of, um, the COVID-19 pandemic on your congregation. I mean, did you have people with that, um, became infected with the COVID-19? Did you have any deaths or deaths with from family or?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yes, yes and yes. Um, I probably in much it feels to me like in much lower numbers than what I've seen in other communities for which I've been grateful. Um, we definitely have had congregants who have gotten sick and, um, you know, and I think the hardest thing, you know, for we've had any numbers of congregants who've gotten sick without being very seriously ill, but we've really tried to, um, you know, then they're quarantined for two weeks without being able to go out and do their thing. So, you know, we were like, can we bring you groceries? Can we, you know, we try to reach out to them. Besides the fact that it's scary. But even for the people who haven't gotten super sick, um, you know, their lives are significantly disrupted. So we've tried to, to make sure that we're there and around to help them in those situations. We've had, um, I would say two deaths directly from COVID and a couple of people who died of complications. Um, you know, they had other health issues and then, you know, possibly they had COVID at the end of their lives, although we don't know. Um, there were a couple of those as well and then many, not many, but a number of congregants. I'd have to look at the numbers to give you a real statistic who had family members who died of COVID-

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: -Family members.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : -In Spokane, and some of them, most of them not in Spokane. A lot of people long distance. Um, so it's

definitely had an impact, there's no question. And we also, ironically, and I don't know if this is true, I've actually had this conversation with other rabbis. Um, but we had a lot of deaths in our congregation, many of which were not Covid, but many of whom were elderly folks who I think were like, "I'm done." You know, we had we had people in their 80s and early 90s who had been plugging along and doing their things, and I think maybe they were tired, I don't know, but it was it was a kind of noticeable number of people who passed away that weren't next. You know, I would not necessarily have said, you know, it's their time. And that was just an interesting I think it was people were isolated and it was hard. And, you know, those people had lived wonderful, long, productive, meaningful, loving lives. And they were, you know, they were ready.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Yeah. I have not I've not heard that before, but I can see that. Do you think there was a financial strain on people who may have lost their jobs because of things being locked down in your congregation?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah, I definitely think that's true for some folks. Um, and, you know, Spokane's not a particularly affluent city, and our community is not a particularly affluent community. So I definitely think there are some folks who have struggled, who struggled financially, for sure. Another one of our, um, uh, explicit responses for COVID was to continue to do support measures that we'd already had in place, but to ramp up. So we asked for additional donations to the rabbi's discretionary fund, for example, that I can say that I use to support families in the community who need it. Um, and then additional donations to our food bank and just ways in which we, we kind of took note of the fact that we knew that people were going to struggle more financially, and how could we make sure that our community was participating in helping those folks. I think overall, I would say we got off remarkably easy. I think the people, at least the people that I know of, you know, what can I say? That that's what I know, that I think there are some people who definitely suffered a lot, but most folks kind of were chugging along and managed okay and in some cases, just their industry happened to be in a in a field that, you know, where they got a lot of profits, given people's new set of needs about digital equipment and stuff like that, you know. So that was a different, um, you know, kind of just a weird juggling of the balance. Um, so I've seen I saw that happen too. And I also think as I was looking at and hearing a lot of communities over the Jewish communities across the country talking about high holiday appeals and fundraising, especially going into that first high Holy days and how worried the congregations were that they were not going to be able to raise the usual funds, given either individuals financial circumstances or just the insecurity of everything or the means that they used to do. The fundraising now is no longer available. And I think we were lucky that way. Um, that we just we don't do a big high holiday appeal. And so we were kind of we were pretty stable. And, you know, our usual fundraisers are big parties and we haven't been able to do that. So there is a gap there still. But it doesn't didn't feel to me quite as catastrophic as at least what I was hearing from congregations around the country. So and, and we were also able to get, um, the PPE loans, some of the loans to help us meet payroll. You know, while during the gap time.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: That's good. What about, um, the was there more of a call for mental health issue, you know, assistance from people who were worried or, um, some people were very concerned and upset?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah. Um, well, I'll kind of go back to your question a little bit about, you know, my role as a rabbi. And I think I definitely did as much pastoral care as one could do in two dimensions as I could. I didn't, um, do hospital visits except for hospice circumstances where I did, in some cases, go.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: They probably wouldn't let you in.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : They wouldn't. In some cases they wouldn't let me in and in some cases they let two people in, you know, every day, and it was always and I was like, I'm not taking the place of a family member, you know. So there was there were limits about letting me in. Um, but also I was concerned a little bit about my own in, in the beginning of the pandemic, my own family's vulnerability. But then later on, you know, because I have kids in school, they're being exposed all the time, which means essentially I'm being exposed all the time, which essentially makes me not want to expose myself to congregants, which is kind of the way that I'm the the mode that I'm in now in terms of visiting folks in, in senior facilities and things like that. We do a lot of phone conversations.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: It's like you say, it's such a it's such a balance.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : It is, it is. So, um, so I didn't for a good portion of the time, I really haven't done hospital visits. I've really only done that pastoral care the most I can over the phone and occasionally over Zoom, um, and lifecycle events too, during the pandemic and a briss over Zoom, a baby naming over Zoom, bar mitzvah over Zoom. I didn't do any weddings over Zoom, thankfully, but, um, you know, you just you just adapt. You just do what you need to do. So. Right.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: That's right. The next part I was talking about observance, which we've talked about a lot already, about Shabbat services.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Mhm.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Did you have, did you have both Friday night and Saturday morning things over Zoom?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Mhm. Mhm. We did everything. We just went back to basically doing everything we had done before just over Zoom. Our education program, our religious school, our adult education classes, our, you know, Friday night and Shabbat morning services, both um, and, you know, a little some things I didn't do as much of, I didn't teach, I changed my adult education calendar a little bit and taught more, shorter programs instead of a year long class. We changed a little bit, but for the most part, we really tried to maintain everything we had been doing before, um, to the best we could. It just, you know, we shortened the class time so that, you know, people have fewer a shorter attention span over Zoom. We try to be attentive to those things. We shorten services in some cases. When we when we were only over Zoom, we didn't do a Torah service in the sanctuary because I was the only one there, and I'm not gonna do a Torah service by myself. There were there were ritual compromises that we made all the way through and we we went through a a pretty intense, um, study process and conversation with our religious observance committee at Temple Beth Shalom about, you know, the things that you can do, whether you can say Kaddish without a minyan in the room, whether you can have a Torah service without a minyan in the room, what constitutes a minyan, whether people over Zoom and people in the room constitute a minyan, you know, and and also all the conversations about technology and what, how ethically, how you could use the technology appropriately. And we have a pretty, um, our mission statement is that we're a liberal conservative congregation, which always makes people laugh. But, you know, basically on the on the liberal end of the conservative movement. So when we were having those conversations about halacha and uses of technology, basically most of our congregation uses technology on Shabbat. So we made certain and I, I anyway, we made compromises where we needed to make compromises. I feel like in order to do the best outreach and provide the best experience for our congregants that we could, and at a certain point, it felt like it was more important to make sure that they were engaged than it was to be really strict about, you know, leave your computer on 24-hours during Shabbat and don't use the chat and, you know, all those other things. I mean, we don't use the chat on Shabbat as a community, but if someone's going to type in the chat, I'm not going to be like, I'm not going to answer it, you know, so we just try to be we try to be as respectful as we of each other as we can within all of those, within all of those parameters, parameters, and, you know, and still hold the center of authenticity about how we, how we practice and, and but accessibility was a key factor in terms of accessibility.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Yes. Do you have a daily minyan does a special-so you don't have to do that. What about um, how did how did you handle B'nai mitzvahs?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : So we, um, in the beginning, we did basically everything over Zoom. We had the family on the, so normally over Shabbat I was doing the Shabbat service on myself by myself in the sanctuary. Um, and then we had the family on the bima and me in my office and everybody else over Zoom. So essentially the family was projecting from the sanctuary, but I wasn't. Um, and then and, and, you know, it so happened that the first bat mitzvah was the daughter of our gabbai. So she was able to handle the Torah service. It was great. You know, uh, we managed it the best we could. Not most families aren't totally, you know, comfortable handling that part of it on their own. Um, and eventually we kind of got to a place where I'm trying to think again, evolutionarily, but we got to a place where it was the family in on the bima. Me on the bima. This is after everybody was vaccinated. That was kind of the you know, once I got vaccinated, that was the, you know, I'll be on the beam with the family. The family members were vaccinated if they were able to be vaccinated. And then we had, you know, enough people in the room to make a minyan. And then eventually we said, you can have 30 of your closest friends and family in the room, okay. And then eventually we've now, you know, now we just have anybody who wants to come and then people over Zoom. So we've kind of, you know, progressively gotten more able to include people. And we did have a, you know, a circumstance where we had a family that, you know, one family, one parent wanted the kids to be vaccinated, the other parent didn't. They're divorced. The other parent didn't want the kids to be vaccinated and went back and forth. Unvaccinated, unvaccinated mom on the Bema, COVID cases. You know, we've had some of that. You can't you can't entirely stop it from happening. We definitely had some super close calls of community spread in the synagogue building. So far, none.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: But so far none.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : So far none. But it's, you know, ridiculously close calls, I would say. Yeah, I've been exposed a number of times and needed to test and all of that. And I, you know, I haven't gotten it, thank God.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: That's good. But, you know, it's always still even though everyone is kind of tired of it, it's still there.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : It's really still there. It's really still there, and in fact, of the cases that I know that we've had in the congregation, at least half of them have been breakthrough cases where people have been vaccinated and they've gotten it anyway.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Really?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah. So that's I mean, that's and I think people are vaccinated and they think, oh, I'll be fine because I'm vaccinated. Then they're less careful. And then in the end it's been a breakthrough case. So that's been, you know, and you know, and and the ensuing guilt of and I went out to the opera and I sat next to so and so and how did I know? I didn't know I was sick. And then I got, you know, I exposed potentially exposed. So and so I mean, all of that, all of those, uh, elaborate, you know, domino effect. That's hard.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Right. And you just said you haven't had any weddings.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : No, I haven't done any weddings. I had a couple that were postponed and then in the end, didn't you know, it either got to be tiny or it didn't happen at all. At least not yet. So I haven't done it. I haven't done any weddings over Zoom and I haven't done any. Yeah, I haven't done.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Have you done any memorials?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah. So that was another area in which our community just, you know, juggled and evolved, right. We didn't do, um, we changed our chevra kadisha to doing essentially a virtual long distance kadisha tefillah, which was hard, um, and sad, I think, for both. I know the family members of some of the deceased and also our kadisha themselves, who just felt like, you know, we want to be able to be there. But safety concerns didn't allow that. Um, in the beginning, the state had really strict requirements about who could be in a funeral home and then also how many people you could have at a, at a memorial service. So even outdoors, I mean, Temple Beth Shalom owns its own cemetery in Spokane. So we have a Jewish cemetery that we use. But the funeral home that we work with, you know, they had to follow the requirements of the state. So for a while, we were really only, you know, enough people to have a minyan graveside. So we did. We kind of morphed it into a service that was a funeral service over Zoom that I usually led from the sanctuary that incorporated, you know, which is not all that different from, you know, in New York City where you have a chapel service and then you have the graveside component, and they're separated by 2.5 hours because it takes that long to get out onto Long Island. You know, it became essentially morphed into that version of the funeral where we would have the funeral part with all the eulogies and everything over Zoom. And then I would do a graveside service with the burial, with just the immediate family, enough people to make a minyan so that we could say Kaddish. So that's basically what we did for most of the pandemic. And then again, only recently have we really gathered at the cemetery, and we basically had a few unveilings that were, you know, 11 months after the funeral and now all of a sudden, all the people could actually come for the unveiling when they hadn't been able to be there for the for the burial. So, um, we had a number of those.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: It's it's such a it's such a challenge. Now, you mentioned, um, you you continued the, the religious school. Was that all through Zoom?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yep, and our religious school teachers and our education director picked up the ball and just ran with it and created all their classes over Zoom. Again, we shortened the time so that Hebrew school was only an hour instead of two hours. You know, we we tried to make it manageable over Zoom. And I would say, you know, content wise, you know, the education, educational content suffered because of that. There's no question that, um, that it's not the same, but it did allow us to maintain and continue connection with the kids and ensure that they were at least continuing to learn some, um, and, you know, all of us to lay eyes on the kids in our community. That was huge. So-

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: -How big? How big is your religious school?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : We have about, I want to say, 50 kids somewhere, somewhere in that neighborhood, and it just, you know, it varies based on demographics, really. So some years we have, you know, 40, some years we have 50, some years we have 55,we have 35. You know, just like how many kids are there given the number there are in that grade. Um, so yeah.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Yeah. So, um, and so now are you is the religious school back in the building?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Religious schools back in the building. Again with, you know, strictures of, uh, you know, masks and distancing and windows open and no snacks, which is terrible, you know, Sunday school. I know it's, you know, it's a really a problem. Um, so we were big on feeding people in this congregation, and it's been a very I would say that the biggest adjustment to coming back into person, even more than all the like distancing, masking, sanitising stuff is the fact that there's no food, you know? I think that's for sure. To eat and schmooze and, you know, drink a cup of coffee and have a kid at lunch and all of that. That's been hard. And our community is not ready to reinstate. You know, we've kind of had those started to have those conversations about could we?

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Yes, I have seen that in other organizations. So I kind of wonder that I'm not sure they've shown it that way. But I think-

Rabbi Tamar Malino : -Restaurants and bars I think are problematic, you know, and you're indoors. And I would say the other thing, you know, that was a big joke, I think, and it was all over the Jewish press first in the beginning of the pandemic, too, that like you tell Jews, you know, you have to tell Jews six feet, because, I mean, you have to tell Jews twelve feet, because really, six feet is really three feet. You know, it's like everybody wants to be close together. You know, we're all, you know, huggy and, you know, all that stuff. It's so that's another place in which we've, you know, made really big distinctions about, you know, everybody used to shake hands and hug each other and kiss each other on the bema. And, you know, you know, there was a lot of that in a very beautiful, you know, kind of just warm way. And we can't do that anymore and I think that's that's also hard. You know, a lot of-

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: -May be that for a while too.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Yeah. Now what about social activities? You mentioned that you had some parties, but now you can't.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Right. Well, we used to have, you know, I mean, we had lunch together every Shabbat. We had, you know, big fundraiser once or twice a year. We had big, you know, scholar in residence events and, you know, things like that where we had, you know, big meals together in the synagogue. And of course, we can't do those now. We had one event over the summer kind of a beginning kickoff of the school year event over the summer that was outdoors. And we got a great turnout, and we had a falafel truck, and we had people eating outside. And, you know, that was really that was a wonderful moment of feeling like, oh, yeah, we could do this again. Remember what it felt like, you know, I hope.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Yeah. Right. I'm hoping that, that you that you will.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yeah. Me too. Me too. So now we're joking about, you know, kind of trying to figure out a Hanukkah party where we have, you know, heat lamps outside and, and, you know, an opportunity for adults to go outside and have a quick cocktail and then go back inside. We're kind of trying to play around with what that experience could be. Could we do, you know, give people a little baggies of donuts to take home for a, you know, it's you get creative. That's what I'll say. But I have to say we haven't discussed yet. I have this image of the kids spray painting dreidels on the pavement that are six feet apart would tell people where to stand. And, you know, anyway, like, we'll see how much of that, you know, get materializes. But, um, but we're trying we're just trying to do whatever we can do to have people feel engaged and feel joy and living a Jewish life and, um, and being able to come back together. So, yeah, all of our education programs are in person.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Do you think of any social action programs that you might have done?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yes. For sure. I think, you know, we had a relatively regular attendance at a at Second Harvest Food Bank volunteers that kind of went by the wayside because people just didn't, you know, they were concerned about being out in public and doing that. And we've recovered a little, but not entirely. Um, for the kids doing bar and bat mitzvah projects, it was a big challenge because they just not as many hands on volunteer opportunities and places where people wanted to, um, be out and about in public. Uh, even though, you know, the need was great. So it was a little hard of a juggle. Again, this question of how much- excuse me, how much personal risk people want to take. Um, and, you know, again, we used to gather together a group to serve meals at, you know, at one of the shelters for LGBTQ youth in Spokane. We did a big Thanksgiving. I think we did a Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas dinner where our community served the meal. They're not going to do that this year. You know, those kinds of things I think were not as easily, uh, you know, not as easily accessible. We've moved in other directions, I think. Congregation Emanuel has worked on creating some overlap with the NAACP and to do some more work in racial justice. There are ways in which it's continued, but it's definitely been different from the direct hands on service component that we used to have more of.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: Yeah, oh, I think you've mentioned about the synagogue's budget that it was was not too catastrophic. But right now, what I sort of think is, okay, it's not over. We are still in this pandemic. Um, even though we might be tired of it, we, you know, we still have to go forward. And we're doing this interview while we're still in it. So what do you think about the future?

Rabbi Tamar Malino : I think we haven't even come close to seeing what the real ramifications will be out of the pandemic. I think you asked me earlier about mental health and pastoral care needs, and we didn't really have much of that conversation, but I think that's going to be an ongoing that the needs in that regard have skyrocketed. Um, in Spokane in general, there's a shortage of mental health professionals and mental health care. And, you know, I've been in a position most often to refer people, some

counseling to do on my own, but most often to refer people and that's just hard. Um, everybody's anxiety level is ratcheted up a notch. So even people who were, you know, basically, you know, thriving and doing well are, are, have shorter bandwidth and are more shorter tempered. And, you know, take your pick of ways in which there's a kind of constriction there that there didn't used to be.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: I like that word constriction.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Um, so I think, you know that I don't know what the long term ramifications of that will be, but there will be many I can see. And also, especially for kids, we see a lot of the mental health challenges for kids and for teens. Huge skyrocketed rate and eating disorders, for example, which is something that I didn't, you know, otherwise, pay attention to, but now have to because I have people in my community that are dealing with that particular, uh, incredibly difficult challenge, those kinds of things that I see, you know, I just sort of see them ongoingly rising. And I can't imagine that need is going to significantly diminish anytime soon because we carry the, you know, we'll carry the, the, the scars and the emotional trauma related to this experience of feeling just that much more fragile in the world than we used to. Um, so that piece, I think, will be an ongoing challenge. I think the economics will be an ongoing challenge. I don't think we've seen the end of the tectonic plate shifting, particularly our community right now is is, for example, we have our our building caretaker, um, left. He had been, um, you know, doing building maintenance and and janitorial work for a long time. And then when the pandemic happened, he ended up being our Zoom coordinator and doing a lot of work in tech and Zoom and so then we started having things in the building again, and he was like, I could get a job doing, you know, sound engineering and Zoom. Why am I cleaning the building? You know, and and it was completely reasonable, you know, for his part, it was a, you know, it was an advancement in his own professional abilities, but then it left us without a caretaker and like everywhere, is short staffed. So and our, our administrator also is going to move on and our education director is retiring. You know, there are different ways in which I see, and some of that was long before pandemic was was in the works.

Sandy Ginsburgh Barnes: But it might have encouraged, it might have added to it.

Rabbi Tamar Malino : Yes. In some ways I think it did. But the, the staffing and personnel, um, you know, issues will continue to be complicated, I think. I can't imagine, you know, we're by no means the only organization and concurrently like what the salary rates are, where, you know, rates are going up everywhere. There's not enough school bus drivers in Spokane, which has cause to create, you know, a great ruckus in lots of ways. Um, but that, you know, it's going to it's going to be relevant also to, to our staffing shortages in the synagogue. Um, and so I don't think we've seen even remotely the end of that shakeup either. And then lastly, it will, it will be very interesting to see how people realign their priorities in terms of connection with congregation and with synagogue and with their own spiritual and religious lives and I don't think we've seen the end of that shakeup either. Um, in some cases, I think people are thirsting for community because they haven't had enough of it and they need it desperately, and they're so excited to be back in person or even just to talk to people on the phone or, you know, they need that, that connection, um, and that sense of celebration and joy and, and commitment to their own spiritual lives. And in some cases, people realized I was doing just fine without it. So why do I need to go back to it? Or hey, on Zoom, I can connect with, you know, Central Synagogue in New York City. So why am I going to participate with, you know, Spokane Jewish community? You know, there's there's a again, I think just a larger shift in how Jewish communities are going to work and I don't know where it's going to land in the end, but I feel like is that we can try to keep doing the things that we were doing that were successful before and see how much they take hold. And then, like every aspect of life in the pandemic, pivot, evolve, you know, try to meet people's needs and at the same time hold to our core of of Jewish values and Jewish teaching and Jewish tradition.