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Daniel Raas

SUMMARY

Daniel Raas reflects on his personal and family history, tracing his journey from Portland and San Francisco to a long career in Bellingham, where he worked with the Lummi Nation for nearly four decades. He discusses his Jewish education and deep involvement with Congregation Beth Israel, describing the synagogue's evolution, leadership, and role in fostering Jewish life in the region. Raas also explores Bellingham's social history, including its past exclusionary practices, and highlights efforts by local Jewish leaders to build positive relationships and civic engagement within the broader community. Throughout the interview, he reflects on synagogue debates, community divisions, and the ongoing challenge of balancing diverse religious perspectives while maintaining a strong and inclusive congregation.

Martina Lancia: Okay, so first of all, today is November 26th, 2021. We're here on Zoom to interview someone that offered to share their experience for the Jewish Historical Society. So welcome and thank you so much for giving us your time and to share your experiences with us. Um, so how are you today?

Daniel Raas: I'm doing well, and you?

Martina Lancia: I'm doing okay as well. Um, so the first the first question I would like to ask you is if you could briefly introduce yourself and tell me more about your background?

Daniel Raas: Okay. Um, I'm Dan Raas, formerly, that's Daniel Raas [spells out]. Let's see. I was born in Portland, Oregon, raised in San Francisco, in the city, um, went to college at Reed College in Portland, uh, majoring in organic chem and then, uh, went to law school at NYU law, where I was a Root-tilden scholar. Um, and then started my legal career in Seattle with Seattle Legal Services. Uh, I went to, uh, I got married that year, and my, my wife and I moved out to the Washington coast for three years, uh, and a little town called Moclips in 1976, we had decided we were not cut out to be rural people. Uh, since she was raised in San Mateo, California. Uh, and neither of us had lived in the US and anything looking like a little town of 150, 200 people on the edge of the rainforest. So we moved to Bellingham, where I secured a job with the Lumbee Indians. The Lummi nation. I was there first on reservation attorney, shortly joined by a guy who is my still my best friend, uh, Harry Skip Johnson. And we worked with them for I worked for them for 39 years and did all kinds of interesting stuff like that. Um, and, um, let's see. In San Francisco, which, uh, my father was born and raised in San Francisco, uh, say third, third or fourth generation San Franciscan and his father's father family, the Rosses came over from Alsace-Lorraine. The family came in the 1850s through the 1860s and came in through Galveston and, uh, four or five brothers, I think, eventually ended up in San Francisco, um, where they were very active in the French Jewish community, uh, Alsace, alternating between French and German, depending on who won the last war. I was, uh, my Jewish education. I was, uh, bar mitzvah and confirmed at Congregation Sherith Israel Temple. I can't remember, uh, in San Francisco, San Francisco, which which, uh, was a very large Congregation. My wife was raised with Temple Beth-El on the San Francisco Peninsula. Um, as I say, we got married in, uh, 1973 by a rabbinic friend of her grandparents, whom we never met. Uh, not unusual, I understand for those days, while we were, uh, out in out on the coast in the town of Moclips, there was a synagogue in nearby 45 minutes away in the town of Aberdeen. It had 11, ten or maybe 11 families. Uh, we were not active. We came to Bellingham, as I said, in 1976, um, our daughter was born in 1978 and about, and Bellingham has had, has had and has a synagogue that we'll get to in a minute. But when our daughter was born in 1978, we talked about Jewish education and when she

was three or four, she came home one afternoon from preschool babbling about baby Jesus. We looked at each other and said, you know, it's time. This girl has got to know where she comes from. So we joined the local synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel. Congregation Beth Israel was founded formally in 1908 by a group of families who came from Lithuania, the towns of Kupishok and Shipishok? I can't, I think, um, they built, uh, they incorporated in 1908. They had a couple of buildings that they rented and then built a synagogue in 1924 that could have come straight out of eastern Poland or Lithuania, or any part of the eastern, that part of Eastern Europe. At the time we joined, there were 50 or 60 members. They were overjoyed to get this fresh flood. But the synagogue had was originally, not surprisingly, Orthodox school and, um, they'd had a series of visiting rabbis, none of whom stayed more than a couple of years. Uh, had fell the visiting rabbi, uh, contingent fell off during the Depression and World War II, but after World War II, the synagogue was able to hire a, uh, formerly or, a formally trained cantor, who stayed for roughly 30, 35 years and who was always considered the rabbi at that center at our synagogue, even though his training was not rabbinic necessarily. Um, he was substantially more modern than the membership had been, or certainly the visiting rabbis and he began to slowly change the synagogue from one that followed Orthodox traditions fairly closely, as I understand it, to one that would move much closer once again. Uh, my understanding to Conservative Judaism, uh, in fact, he was able to, uh, move the women downstairs from the upstairs balcony, uh, that began to integrate them into the rituals that the synagogue carried out. He performed the first Bat mitzvah in... I think the mid '60s, which was a major departure and the, the community was uh, again, about varied between 40 and 60 or 70. In the early 19- well, in the post-war years and in particular in the 1950s, uh, Bellingham, which was, uh, for those of you who don't know that the Washington Society probably knows this. Bellingham is, uh, 90 miles north of Seattle and about 60 miles south of Vancouver, B.C. uh, Bellingham was traditionally a farm, forest and fishing, uh, community. It had Western Washington College before that. Western Washington Normal Schools, a teacher training school. The college, Western Washington State College, began to expand in the '50s, and '60s, brought in several Jewish professors who joined the synagogue. The town grew from 30 to 40,000 people, maybe 50,000, and that brought in more Jewish professionals as well and they began to join the synagogue and take part in Jewish communal life. By the time we came along and, uh, when we joined the synagogue, which was in the early '80s, the new generation, if you will, of uh, 30s and 40s were, uh, we're told basically it was our time to step up and take the leadership, so we were doing that and that actually started in the early '70s when one of the guys who had been was was then a second generation Bellinghamster came back from law school and, uh, and in one of his, uh, colleagues came back from med school and, uh, they also had a couple of other, uh, people that age joined and they were told collectively, okay, your turn, uh, and began to take over the leadership of the synagogue. Uh, as I say, we joined in the early '80s. Uh, I was recruited, uh, to the board of directors, uh, I think in '83 or '84, um, you know, by then we had, our daughter Beth, and then our son came along in 1984. Um, so I've rambled for a while. Am I going where you want me to go?

Martina Lancia: Yeah, absolutely. Um, thank you for this, uh, very interesting and detailed introduction. Um, so since you've been living in Bellingham for a while now, what would you say is your relationship with the town?

Daniel Raas: Personally or the synagogue?

Martina Lancia: Uh, both or whatever you feel comfortable sharing?

Daniel Raas: Um, I would have said if you'd asked me that 25 or 30 years ago, I would have said, um, well, personally, that I'm a, you know, member of the civic leadership group, so to speak and that I'm active in local civic areas and politics, but also that the Jewish community in Bellingham has always been pretty much accepted and certainly that was due to Rabbi Gardner's aggressive outreach work with both the local clergy and the community at large, and his wife, who ran a number of shops, culminating in a woman's dress shop and dressing uniforms, and was well known throughout the community for that. But also because the families didn't feel any particular animus from Bellingham's leadership. Now, you should know that Bellingham in the 1920s and '30s and maybe going into the '40s was a sundown town. Sundown towns are known because the unofficial and sometimes official rule is if you're Black, you have to be out of town by sundown, and the northwest Washington, uh, both Bellingham and, uh, the surrounding Whatcom County and county, the Skagit County had very active Ku Klux Klan organizations who paraded and met, uh, publicly through the '10s, '20s and '30s. So it's not as if everything was sweetness and light. It's more that the Jewish community was neither, uh, high enough profile and lots of Catholics around they picked on, uh, the KKK was originally in an anti-Catholic group and then anti-black again. Not so many blacks, but a whole lot Catholics. Um, but the Jewish community was not, did not antagonize the that part of the the town's townspeople or the, uh, so there was little overt anti-Semitism that went on. Um, again, the rabbi, Rabbi Gardner and his wife had a lot to do with that. But they didn't come until after the war and the, the synagogue bounced around from, um, as I say, 40 to 60 members and then slowly began growing, and it has been accepted both as a part of the, uh, civic life, but also the mainstream. Protestant pastors have made efforts to reach out, as they did with Rabbi Gardner, to all of our rabbis, and that has been generally reciprocated. Uh, so, you know, when we've had major, major events, it's, uh, not unusual and indeed expected that the, a number of the surrounding pastors will join us. Um, and the relations have been quite cordial along those lines. Um, there has been some friction with school, with Bellingham School District and for sure with the surrounding school districts over holiday celebrations and there was a, the usual problems, but in particular an overtly

Christian, uh, Christmas celebration, which to his credit, one of the principals at Bellingham High School, uh, forbade. And when a group of teachers defied him, uh, he suspended them, not the kids, uh, and was upheld by the school board, uh, by the school board. The school board had no problems saying, "No, that's that's not our policy. Our policy is clear." Um, and and our social action group had spent a lot of time and effort, uh, uh, getting the school board to the position where they adopted that policy. And my wife was directly involved with that. So generally speaking, now, um, our relations with the surrounding town are very good. I think, um, again, we're substantially more, um, well, Billingham is now 120,000 130,000 people. Greater Billingham area County is 250,000 225,000. Um and the synagogue is 300 members, but that includes members from the surrounding counties because we're the we're the only reform synagogue north of Everett, which is 60 miles away from us. Uh, and the reform shul there is only, um, they're they run around 120 to 140 members and have for years and years and years. Even though there are only 30 miles from Seattle. People tend to go for instead of going to Beth-El and Everett, go to one of the Seattle schools. Um, but we are the only, only reform synagogue and a separate, the Chabad organization here in Bellingham. The only formal synagogue north of Everett. So our catchment, if you will, includes Skagit County and San Juan County and Island County a little bit, and actually the Lower Mainland in British Columbia, because, again, we're we're only 50 miles from downtown Vancouver. But the border is, uh, 25, 30 miles away. Um, and many folks, rather than go into In Vancouver to worship come down to see us. You know, personally, I'm still very active locally in the Whatcom Democrats. Um, and uh, uh, also with the legal community, even though I retired from the active practice of law. Um, so, um. Is that what you were after?

Martina Lancia: Yes. Okay. Um, so, so given that you are pretty active in the community or in general, seems to be quite knowledgeable about the communities, even in the surroundings of Bellingham. Do you have any sense of the differences between The community in Bellingham and communities in other parts of the region or in the surrounding areas in terms of like holiday holidays they celebrate or the traditions they observe, um, versus the ones that are celebrated and or observed in Bellingham?

Daniel Raas: Well, yes and no. I mean, um, being the only synagogue north of Everett, uh, and with her history of moving from Orthodox to, uh, formally joining the reform movement in 1985, um, and now remaining, uh, a proud member of the URJ, we need to offer celebrations and services, what have you to that wide spectrum of people. And we do. There's a regular Saturday- well, first of all, um, being reformed we, we use, uh gates prayer. Um, but much to the surprise of many reform, uh, Jews who come to us, uh, Friday night, for example, most of the services are still in Hebrew and in fact, as I traveled around around, uh, the North America as a member of the URJ board, I was initially quite struck at the how, uh, ritually conservative congregation Beth Israel was, uh, because we go to large synagogue and in, name a place, DC, New Orleans, Chicago, Minneapolis. This service is almost all in English and at home, it's really mostly in Hebrew. You know, the visitors from, uh, for, uh, bar mitzvah or mitzvah, uh, or other celebrations or rituals are quite surprised when they usually go to somebody else's service. It's pretty pretty easy to understand. Here we are in Hebrew, and you might get totally lost if the rabbi were not saying, okay, now we go to page 220. Uh, and that's a carryover from being an Orthodox school and using the conservative prayer book up through the 1990s, up through the, the the current, uh, Gates of Prayer, which I think was '93 or '94 the first time, it came out, and, uh, wanting to make folks who were ritually more conservative comfortable and also inculcating, uh, a sense of this is really who we are. We are different, uh, from our surrounding Christian neighbors. Um, you know, granted, there's there's a growing Sikh community in Whatcom County, and their services are almost all in Punjabi. Um, but that's the same sort of thing. That's one of the things that binds them together. A use of the Hebrew prayers binds us together. So that's, so I'm probably a major difference. A second difference is, um. Because we, number one, as a matter of history, but also because, uh, we need to accommodate, if that's the right word, be cognizant of, honor, all of the, uh, other streams, um, we will celebrate all of the all the, all the fullness of holidays that other reform synagogues might not. There's a probably the best example is that there's a full second day of Rosh Hashanah. Uh, they're celebrated now, the rabbi generally doesn't lead that. That's laylat. Uh, but it's reasonably well attended. Um, and you know, they're are every every month there is again a lay led conservative Saturday morning service and everybody who feels feels that they're missing that is welcome to come and they do, and I think they get around 30 to 40 people on that Saturday Saturday morning. Rabbi doesn't leave that the lay leaders do. We also have regular on the other three or four Saturdays, we have the rabbi and our cantorial assistant. Uh, offer those. Now, I know that the larger, uh, synagogues in the Seattle area also offer Saturday morning services all the time and have for years and years and years. Um, but once again, ours are mostly in Hebrew. We've, you know, again, I'm not sure, um, how much is involved, uh, these days, but certainly in the recent past, say, the 90s and 2000, the b'nai mitzvah preparation is longer and more rigorous than in other synagogues. Um, both because that's historically what we do but more importantly, I think now is that's the best time we have to, um, and also the time when we can force them to do it to get the B'nai mitzvah, uh, class to focus on what it means to be a Jew. Uh, and we spend, as I say, quite a bit of time with that along those lines, I'm finding out because my granddaughter, who is now eight, is starting religious school down in Seattle at one of the big schools down there. Um, she has about, um, only 70% of meetings that we, we hold. Um, I have no idea why. It seems to be working fine for her, but apparently our religious education is a little more strict. So. Yeah. Otherwise, you know, we we have the usual round of celebrations and calendar events or what have you. Um.

Martina Lancia: Do you know if, um, most people in your community-so you mentioned that most of the celebration are in Hebrew, so I would assume that most people can read it or speak it or understand, you know, have, you know, like, uh-

Daniel Raas: -I would, I would not make that assumption.

Martina Lancia: Mhm. Okay.

Daniel Raas: Um, I think that most, most of our congregants can memorize the Hebrew words and the, the tunes, um, and recognize a Hebrew phrase or, or be able to translate that. But I wouldn't presume that most of us have a facility either in prayerbook Hebrew or spoken Hebrew. Um, I mean, I don't, um, even though I've taken a couple of classes in Hebrew and I have a beginning knowledge, but I don't, I would be quite surprised if it were anywhere near even 30% of its adult congregants. Um, now, mind you, that's not to say that when we were first online a year and a half ago and the rabbi cut the service way down people didn't start to complain. "Oh. What happened to, you know, the Amidah? What happened to, uh, the prayer?" Um, so he added things back, but, um. And as I say, the my strong feeling is that the people who were complaining, most of us didn't complain, but most of us who were saying that's part of the service are an important part of the service. We're not relying on our Hebrew understanding, but the understanding of what the prayer means and why that happens. So, um, yeah, so I, I would not impute to the congregation a whole lot of knowledge of Hebrew. You know, we do have, uh, a number of people who spent time in Israel and therefore do speak a lot of Hebrew. Um, of course, the rabbi and our cantorial soloist, who is, uh, actually doing a course in one of the rabbinical schools, um, uh, she's amazing. She's in her early 40s, two small children, full time job as a cantorial, and she's taking a full course load. Um, you know, she's getting to be fluent. Fluent in Hebrew. And we have, as I say, a number of folks who either spent time in Hebrew or who are native Israelis who have come to our community. But I don't think most of us have that facility.

Martina Lancia: Okay. Thank you for the clarification because it makes sense. Um, do you do you know if, um, it would be the same thing with, like, other things such as kosher diet or observing Sabbath? Is it, is it the same? Does it vary the same way or it's more uniform for these kind of things?

Daniel Raas: Um, my suspicion is that we mirror, uh, again, a, uh, any other medium size reform school. Maybe again because we're the only ones around because, so we picked up all the conservative Jews who can't quite stomach Chabad that we're probably a little bit more, uh, uh, observant of the Sabbath. And there are certainly a number of families who are shomer Shabbat. Uh, but I don't think that's necessarily the norm as to keeping kosher. Once again, I think that's a idiosyncratic with the congregation. The synagogue, uh, if we ever get food back to the synagogue, uh, requires kosher style and of course, no shellfish, no pork, etc. and we are formerly a milk congregation. Not, not meat. Um, that's an interesting, was interesting back. Before we when we did have food to get the, uh, the names for families, uh, to understand. That we really do mean it. No sneaking in the chicken. So, um, you know, as the synagogue. Because once again, that that's the that's the norm. Normative Judaism. And we need to model normative Judaism, even though as individuals, we may not follow that the rabbi is quite clear about that. He and his family are vegetarian. So that's not a problem for them. Um, Again the cantorial soloist, soloist and her family. I don't know that they're vegetarians, but they're certainly, they certainly keep a kosher household. Uh, even though she was raised primarily in Bellingham, uh, and went to college at Western and then went off and did things and became a cantorial soloist, and then we were overjoyed that she came home. Uh, so, you know, in terms of modeling appropriate Jewish behavior, the synagogue is pretty clear about doing that. Um. So there are. Go ahead.

Martina Lancia: No, no, no, no, I'm absolutely finished.

Daniel Raas: Well, there are. There's a, there's a timeline. Um, you know, I've sort of skipped from here. We are 50, 60 members and here we are today 300 members, there's like 40 years in between. 35 years in between. Um, so when when we joined the synagogue, as I say, in about 1980, 81, uh, and then we came along and growing slowly. But in the early '90s, and when my daughter was bat mitzvah in, uh, 19- what's been 1991, there were, uh, three people in the three, three girls in her class. Big school. Right? Big class. They ended up with five in the class. Uh, two other two boys showed up, but they were already bar mitzvah. But the three girls, um, uh, were bat mitzvah. And for each of the bat mitzvah, each bat mitzvah the synagogue was packed. I mean, our little shul had not only the upstairs, but downstairs on the main floor had people at seats lining both aisles. You know nothing you want the fire marshal to look at and, uh, shortly thereafter, I became president of the synagogue, and I was talking to people, and that became basically the norm, uh, for, uh, many mitzvah celebrations. Most of them, not all, but, uh, and obviously that was not all, uh, not the congregation, but the local friends, uh, coming, um, and the kids were all encouraged to invite their school friends, uh, and many of them came and had very wide eyes when they're like, nothing like what they'd ever seen. So in the, uh, being president of the school has its own series of big issues and trials and what have you. But, uh, on my way out of that job, for example, I can persuaded my successor that the synagogue building was just too small. Uh, and we had to do a bigger synagogue. So we formed a long range planning committee and one of our members, uh, said we owned, at that point, uh,

four city lots, um, and slightly outside of downtown. Um, and so we asked, uh, half a dozen local architects to give us plans for a synagogue that would fit 250, 300 [people] on that, on those lots, and we got we got six very interesting suggestions. A couple were, uh, absolute, you know. "Oh you're Jews? No, that's okay. I'll build you a church." Uh, you know, northwestern architectural style has some interesting things, but that was not what we wanted. We got a couple that were quite, creative, uh, and would have worked fine. Maybe, uh, we used up every square inch, though, of course, the city was going to say, "Oh, you're going from a maximum occupancy of 150, maybe to 300? Well, what about parking?" Uh, and we had no more land for parking. While we could have maybe put together close by parking, it was clear to us with our synagogue building at that point was up 65, 70 years old, 70 years old, built in '24, 75 years old. So our planning horizon was 75 years and we were growing. There were maybe 120 members, 130 by that time. Uh, we didn't see the likelihood that we would get much below that in Bellingham. Whatcom County had been growing steadily. Um, and, um, so we looked at these six drawings and said, we just it's just too small. You know, we would build this synagogue and we would quickly outgrow it. And what's happened in the years since? Uh, we have, as I say, 300 members. Now, none of those buildings would have come close to fitting 300 members. Um, so we started looking for land, and, um, we had all kinds of, uh, members who would look for, um, empty pieces of pieces of property in the greater Bellingham area. And, um, I was chairing the committee, and 2 or 3 times a week I would get a call from somebody I've located, uh, and, you know, I would for some, it was obvious that was not going to work and for others, it was possible. Um, but there might be some other problems. So we'd go out and take a look. Sometimes, ometimes we wouldn't and one of our congregants had spent an immense amount of time building a map. This is before computers did this quickly. Uh, that showed where every single family lived. And we all lived in the almost all in the north side of town and all our growth was being in the north and the east side of town. Uh, so somebody would come in, I'm sorry, in the south and the east side of town. That's where the growth was. Um, so somebody come in with a great, great chunk of land in the north side, and we would take a look and say, you know, we're not growing out there. Uh, and we probably won't be. Uh, and in fact, we haven't. It worked out very well because the main, uh, main roads out there. Uh, I need substantial improvement. They're built. They were built 40 years ago. They're still mostly two and three lane roads and that whole area is now, uh, apartments and strip malls. So there are two churches out there. They have giant parking lots. And you don't want to be there, say, at 10:30 on Sunday morning because you get nowheres because there's no- so eventually we we located a great, great parcel, um, just off the freeway. Freeway runs right through town, um, literally, you know, five minutes off the freeway. And we went to the city and said, "We want to build a synagogue on this piece of land." They said, "No, you know, because that's that piece of land is going to be cut in half, mostly by a major four lane road that we want to construct." And we said, "That's okay. We know that you're going to take about three acres of the nine. We understand that." And they said, "No, we're going to take six acres and nine because we have to have a stormwater retention plan. And furthermore, we are willing to condemn the land." And we said, "Oh, really? What about it?" So so we made a great, great profit on that land. But it set our, uh, our land search back by three years. And two years later, we were able to locate a much larger piece of property. Uh, that was 25 acres, but it was part of a 90 acre chunk that the sellers wanted to sell as one. Fortunately for us, the city parks Department was looking at that piece of property too, but they didn't have the money. Um, so we bought the northern 25 acres, which is roughly the only part that is buildable. And they bought a park in the southern 70 acres, which is currently undeveloped, uh, and may stay that way for a long time. But after we finished doing a land swap or two with city, uh, we now have, uh, roughly 19 acres, a 19 acre campus that we bought in 2002. Now, one of the things that the committee and two of the, two or three of the potentially large funders required was that we pay as we go, no borrowing. So it took us 20 years, but we now have a 25,000 square foot synagogue with parking for 200 cars, surrounded by city parks on two sides, a wilderness area on one side and some, uh, high end residential on the north. All paid for. No mortgage.

Martina Lancia: That, that sounds nice.

Daniel Raas: Which is pretty amazing. It took us 20 years, uh, and, uh, many folks gave lots more than they ever planned to. But the facility is is, uh, first class and will last us for 70 years and as I say, the we have a religious school with 100 to 120 kids in it, they're still meeting mostly, uh, virtually. That's the the, uh, ground floor, main floor sanctuary. Um, when we're not social distancing, uh, backs onto the social hall together if necessary. You know, being close friends. Uh, it will seat 500 plus, and we have a patio that will seat another 150 if the weather isn't raining. Um, or even if it is. But, uh, um, so that there's, there's definitely room for growth there. Um, you know, the, uh, it has a little bit of office space, a whole bunch of general purpose meeting rooms. including a beit midrash, which is used occasionally for, for small services when they're, you know, when 15 people show up. Why use the main sanctuary? We use beit midrash, which will hold 35 to 40. Uh, although you need to move the Torah scrolls, of course. Um, we were fortunate to have a number of people who really wanted a custom made altar. Um, and we were able to, uh, find a designer who gave us a particularly northwest, uh, version of an offer, a bema. So we had and we were able to locate a fallen old growth cedar tree. So we have a bema which is designed strictly with that. It weighs about three tons. We had to reinforce the floor. Um, and, and but it's kind of it's a wonderful, uh, uh, beam that looks northwest. Looks fairly modern. Uh, we were able to repurpose the from our old synagogue. So that is clearly out of sync. But there's a reason, and we were also able to salvage the chandeliers from our old synagogue and they are in the, uh, the foyer and the beit midrash, uh, again out of sync with the more modern, uh, architecture. But that's the history. That's, um, you know, I don't know if I've given you a good, good snapshot of what

the synagogue looks like right now. Um, I have some other personal history which might be his, uh, interesting. When I joined the Beth Israel board of directors, I was, uh, dragooned into being secretary. Um, after all, lawyers know how to write, but with that, at the time, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was organized into regions, and the Pacific Northwest region had been created, uh, back in 1980, maybe 1975 and there were, it was small enough in terms of number of synagogues that every synagogue got a representative to the board, the regional board. And the president came to me and said, "Do you want to do this?" And I looked in and said, "What's that mean?" Uh, so I ended up on the regional board and roughly that was '85, roughly ten years later, uh, at the conclusion of my, uh, congregational president job I was elected regional president, which put me on the URJ board, uh, where I served for roughly 20 years. More than that. Um, and while I was there, we were while I was regional president, we moved from 17 congregations to about 35, about 30. We moved five more in later. So the region grew doubled in size basically, and stretched from Fairbanks, Alaska down to Ashland, Oregon and north, south and east, west from Billings, Montana. Actually, I think Great Falls had a congregation, but I'm not sure when they joined Billings, Montana to Aberdeen, Washington, which is the ten member school I mentioned before. But I gave us the largest geographic stretch of any region in the Earth, as it also included British Columbia and Alberta. All of those congregations were also part of the Canadian Federation, the Canadian region, but it didn't make sense for them to have administrative, their administration had come out of Toronto, which was 2,000 miles away. Instead, it should come out of Seattle, which was only 300 or 400. But it meant that our- and we also, instead of many other regions, always met in the same city or the same two or three cities. We moved around throughout the region. So we met in Fairbanks, uh, once. Once we met twice in, uh, uh, Anchorage. We met in Ashland, Oregon, which is the southern twice in, uh, um, Butte, Montana. Uh, and also in Seattle and Bellingham and, um, once in Tacoma, uh, you know, other places we met. But, uh, that was unusual for, for the region. Um, so you did mention in your questions about the, uh, split we had?

Martina Lancia: Yes. Um, if you if you know anything about the history of the temple and the community, um, that was part of it at the time. And how and you know, what happened, um, when the split occurred. I know that. I know its history, but-

Daniel Raas: -Where did they come on? I was president when it started. So, um, where did you hear about it?

Martina Lancia: Um. So our, so basically, we're interns and we were prepared, uh, by our supervisor to, um, ask specific questions about the history. And so we researched about it. Um, but, you know, um, I researched a fair amount, but I'm not entirely familiar with, uh, Jewish community because I'm not of Jewish religion. So for me, it was like a very long learning curve. So I learned a number of things. And that's, you know, that's why, um, I'm more interested in learning more from who lived it or knows more about it because I, I don't have, uh, that complete knowledge about it.

Daniel Raas: Okay. Well, um. As I, as I mentioned, um, during the late '60s, early '70s, moving into the 80s, there was a new, newer generation of folks moving into town and joining the synagogue. Uh, and several several of us were, uh, had been raised in a reform school, uh, and understood the difference between Reform and Conservative Jews, Judaism, let alone Orthodox. But by then the synagogue Beth Israel was much more of a conservative synagogue than it was when it had its Orthodox roots. Um, And in the early 1980s, when Rabbi Gartner was clearly ready to retire and eventually did retire and we had a couple of interim rabbis, uh, up through 1984, the board appointed a study commission. Well, first, the board tried to attract, um, a full time rabbi, permanent, permanent, full time rabbi. Uh, and to do that, uh, they did two things. The first was that they went through all the right channels to get rabbis. Uh, and the second was that they said, "Okay, everybody, uh, we figure a full time rabbi is going to cost us whatever the number was. That's far more than our budget has been. We need to show ourselves and more importantly, the rabbi, that we can pay the salary." So we all swallowed hard and upped our dues and proved to yes, we can support a rabbi. And so they went out. I wasn't on, I was on the board, but certainly not on that that group and commenced a study of- well, first of all, I found that they could not attract Rabbi unless we were affiliated with some formal movement. The rabbis for for support purposes. Uh, in terms of colleagues support purposes, in terms of, uh, ritual, etc., and, uh, rabbinic pension issues, any health care, uh, we're saying, you know, "I'll come, but only if you affiliate with the movement that I'm affiliated with." Um, and so that group, our search committee said, "Oh well, okay. So I guess we should think about affiliating." And, um, they did a study that showed that both in terms of ritual and background and the questions of what we want our rabbi to be able to do and how they would present themselves that they recommended affiliating with reform, reform movement. So they presented all their findings and, you know, uh, several pages on each group and why and we had a congregational vote and we voted roughly 80/20 to affiliate reform. And there were some old, older line families who were, uh, very unhappy with that and so but they were willing to go along because of the sense of the community. Uh, they were not overly happy about it, but they were willing to go along. And, um. So we went out and started interviewing, interviewing potential rabbis, found a rabbi we liked, uh, made him an offer. He accepted. So he and his wife and kids, uh, showed up. But before that, there was another set of, uh, issues where the, uh, some folks in the 20% undertook their own background situation and came up with some ideas that they felt he was, uh, not the right person for them. Um, and they did that. I believe in, in good faith. Uh, you know, they were they were clear that they didn't want to be reformed and therefore they didn't want to reform rabbi. Uh, but I think they would have I'm quite sure that they would have done that background and, uh, objected for one reason or another to any rabbinic candidate we had who was reform affiliated. Uh,

so that caused a little bit of a stir. Then I think I have this, um, chronology correctly, the union of American- no, the reform seminary, Hebrew Union College decided they would recognize intermarried students, Jews who were in the college but who were married to a non-Jew and that made them extremely angry. Made our group extremely angry. And look what you affiliated with us with. Uh, they'll never be able to teach our kids, uh, to be proper Jews when they're not married to a Jew. Um, and that was a a serious issue. And, organized Jewry and still is to some extent it is on the Orthodox side now and in some conservative areas and not in other conservative areas. But reform has been very clear and then we had a fight about can a non-Jewish spouse be buried in our synagogue, uh, cemetery. The first purchase Beth Israel made before it was Beth Israel was, uh, three acres of land adjacent to this city cemetery. We contract with the city to keep the landscaping and dig the graves and things but it's our land and our, uh, our cemetery. And the rules at the time were, uh, only Jews could be buried in the synagogue. Well, we were getting a lot of intermarried, uh, couples who were not exactly excited about that and I believe that was the the straw, if you will, that broke the camel's back that a number of, uh, that group that had been the longtime members of synagogue could not accept that idea, even though what we did was to create because we had three acres. That's a lot of land. Um, we created a whole new area that, whereas for intermarried couples, if they wanted, that way another Jew could be in the alter section and people still do that. Um, that was not satisfactory so they said we're out of here. I think about at some point between 15 and 20 families, um, formally left us. Well, that's not true. Ten, ten families, for sure. Formally left us. Another 10 to 15 families stayed in with a foot in each synagogue. Um, and the it was sort of this at least where we were, my wife and I, it was the secret that nobody talked about, uh, because these people were had, you know, had been colleagues. They were friends. They remained friends in many instances. Uh, they just were worshiping differently. The Jewish community was still the Jewish community. They, you know, we weren't big enough to be anything else and certainly the outside world wouldn't pay attention to our kids. Um, and after many years, um, I think that what happened was, uh, the congregation had shrunk a little bit in terms of active members. And, you know, it takes a core group of people who are willing to spend a lot of time, Friday and Saturday to come and be at services and to administer what's going on and to take care of the the space that you rent. Um, and I think they finally decided that Beth Israel was, uh, going to go its way and would accommodate them, but was not going to let their ideas rule the, the rituals and they couldn't continue as a going concern without totally burning everybody out, and again, from my point of view, they were welcome to come back. And this this was not a, "You people are awful. We can't possibly live with you," It was a, "Well, we worshipped differently and you have different ideas. Ours are traditional. You're rejecting the traditions, but we all have to be in the same city." Uh, synagogues have splits like that all the time. Often it is, uh, led by a rabbi or a another spiritual leader who whose contract is not renewed. Uh, and they say, "Well, nuts to you, I'm going to take all my supporters and go over here and form this synagogue over here." Those are bitter fights. Uh, at least from what I saw as part of the Beth Israel contingent, we were not having that kind of bitter fight. My experience as on the board gave me a longer view and a much wider view to say, um, you know, we don't have those fights here. This is not where there is a spiritual leader who left us or who was fired or not renewed. Um, and now has it in for us. You know, there are congregations where that's their origin story. It's not really a good, good origin story. Uh, so they came back. Most of them, uh, some of the older congregants, uh, just didn't affiliate, but the kids did. And in fact, uh, in that line, uh, one of the, uh, one of the kids became president. Excuse me. A while back, it was stepped back into leadership. Uh, and then a great job in that.

Martina Lancia: So you would say that the even if the split happened at some point, the, the community outside of worship stayed together or some people ceased to have contact or ceased to be friends, ceased to have relation relationship outside of Synagogue?

Daniel Raas: Well, again, we were not close to any of that group. I think that's that's not quite true. We're close to one couple, and our our relationship didn't suffer particularly you know, we occasionally got invited to their parties and vice versa and, you know, the, uh, the family that I personally insulted because I said, "I'm sorry. We have a fair share dues system. Uh, that means that we expect that you'll contribute, um, between one and a half and 2% of your gross income as dues. Uh, and you just cut your dues by 80%. You can't be members if you do that, because none of our other congregants will feel as fair." That has because I looked I called my friends within the URJ and got that that advice for sure. Um, um, you know, they were very insulted. How dare I do that? They've been pillars of this community forever and ever and ever. Well, we weren't being invited to their their, uh, celebrations anyhow, because we were strictly reform. Um, but it's my understanding that as to other people in the community, it didn't affect their relationships terribly. You know, it was not a, it wasn't a personal fight in that sense. And again, I don't think it was in bad faith that any on any side, uh, so, and frankly, the, the Jewish community in Bellingham isn't big enough to have that kind of split. We still are. As I say, there is a Chabad group. Uh, you're familiar with Chabad?

Martina Lancia: Um, so other people have mentioned, um, in previous interviews. Um, but they don't. They all said they know it exists, um, in the area, but they're not entirely familiar.

Daniel Raas: Oh, well, I'm reasonably familiar. Uh, for one thing, my brother in law joined the group, uh, in Tacoma, um, for reasons that he was never clearly able to articulate to us. But that's okay. Um, and, uh, he has actually stuck with it because he now has a lot of close friends. Although the rabbi who attracted him, um, was, uh, fired for sexual improprieties. Yeah. Happens, you

know, um, uh, Jews are no different than any other group of people and in fact, um, within the it turn out turns out that, uh, two of the major leaders of the cemetery, uh, were, uh, recently discovered to have, uh, uh. What's the polite way to put it? Acted extremely inappropriately in all senses of the word towards the women in the cemetery. Some of them over many, many years so there were a lot of people who knew and covered it up. Yeah. Um, there's a lot of soul searching going on, shall we say. Make me glad I was never on that board of overseers. But as to, um. Chabad. Chabad is a ultra-Orthodox group. It is centered in Brooklyn. Um, there are a lot of different ultra-Orthodox groups in Brooklyn and now in upstate New York. Um, you know, Rockland County and Dutchess County. I think, um, and when you see the, um, picture of a modern Jew in black coat and a black hat-

Martina Lancia: -Yeah, I've seen him.

Daniel Raas: Those are also ultra-Orthodox, you know, go down to the the Diamond district and you'll see a lot of those folks. Uh, that's on West 43rd, For a second. Something like that.

Martina Lancia: Not around. Around? Yeah, around. Um, not far from Grand Central, Times Square.

Martina Lancia: Yeah. Right. Chabad is a particular, uh, group within the ultra-Orthodox. They have, uh, attracted a number of international Jews with a lot of money, uh, who have funded their seminary and their outreach, and they have established what they call Torah centers all over both the US and, uh, parts of Canada, where they are usually located near a university, and they target as potential members Jews who they believe have fallen away from the true faith. They're all very sincere. Uh, Chabad is, uh, as I say, it's just one of several. But they strictly they say they strictly adhere to what's basically 16th and 17th Eastern European normative Jewry. So they're the ones who require still require separate seating. Keeping kosher is absolute, um, and which includes, you know, no running and cars or trains or buses on the Sabbath. They truly observe Shabbat. Um, for those who are strictly joined into Chabad, say my my brother in law is a member of the Chabad group in Tacoma, but, uh, he is not shomer Shabbat. Shomer Shabbat or, uh, particularly, um, he does not keep a strictly kosher home, for example, but that's just fine. Um, but Chabad, as I say, has established these communities. The one in Bellingham has we have at Western Washington University has about 16,000 students, the Chabad bought a house. Now, uh, I've forgotten the what they call it, but it's, uh. What they, uh, where they hold all their activities is right near campus, easily within walking distance, because on the Sabbath you have to walk. Um, and they have a lot of student members, uh, a lot of students whom they call members, uh, and support from a small number of non-student groups or non-student people and non-student members. Um, maybe 15 or 20. Maybe 30, not a whole lot more than that. Our rabbi and, uh, their rabbi are on reasonably good terms. Um, a number of- well, the College Hillel, Western Washington's Hillel is, uh, the board is primarily, if not exclusively, Beth Israel members. But my understanding is they get along the Hillel, uh, students get along fine with the Chabad students. Um, but again, the attraction is every Friday night, right after services, they serve a hot meal, and they sing the songs and they do the dances. Uh, and Saturday morning, if you want to come, there's a service and once again, they have activities, social activities in the afternoon, uh, on Saturday and then also through the week if you are missing, uh, uh, your home, uh, celebration of one holiday or the next, Chabad will do it is their, their, uh, the rabbi and his wife are very caring people. Uh, which they are. Um, I mean, they don't get sent out unless they are able to work with, uh, college age students. Um, and to that extent, they're a competition center. But frankly, you know, um. Institutionally, Congregation Beth Israel is glad to have them here, sort of, uh, but every once in a while, they're an embarrassment. And every once in a while, um, we embarrass them, but we don't particularly interact except online. Um, because there's a Facebook group called Jewish Bellingham, uh, where we find out who each other are. Uh, um, so, uh, you know, if you are part of the, uh, active Jewish community at Western, then you know all about Chabad. And indeed, when our son went to Emory, uh, and, uh, we went with him to settle him in, uh, and while we were there, the first day, the Chabad and Hillel were both on his doorstep. He said, "Oh, yeah. Really? Thanks. No, thanks. I know who I am." Uh, You know, but, um, they're both Hillel and Chabad are an established, uh, presence on campus, and that's fine. That's good. So other questions?

Martina Lancia: Specifically of the list, we went through all the ones that I have on my list, but if there is anything else you would like to add, even unrelated, related or unrelated to what we've talked about so far? Absolutely feel free, even something from your personal background that you feel, um, it's important to have as part of this interview. You're you're more than welcome to share.

Daniel Raas: Well, as part of the the overall Jewish history of Washington, um, the URJ established a camp about 12 years ago, uh, called Camp Kalsman. And while I was on the regional board, as well as the National Board of the urge and the UHC, uh, one of the things that we desperately wanted to get in the region was a camp for our kids, because our kids were going to California, and they made great friends in California, but they never saw them outside of camp. Unless they happened to go to the same college or something and a good chunk of the California camp, which was at first Camp Swig and outside of San Jose, California, and then camp, camp um, Newman up near Santa Rosa, which was severely damaged in the fire. They were great places to go, but not, you know, they were not our region, our local kids, and in addition to the camp fees, you had transport fees. And if you were worried that your kid was going to get sick, you couldn't drive and and, you know, and rescue them, uh, or the flight was a thousand miles, uh, because we so we had a big effort to establish a camp, and we were told correctly, the only way that we could get a camp was if

we could find someone who was willing to donate $5 million for camp, uh, which 20 years ago is a lot more than it than it is today. Um, and it happened that, um, uh, Rabbi Leonard Thal, who had been, uh, raised in Bellingham. In fact, uh, you know, his picture still hangs on the wall, up with his sister and his parents, who was a high officer of the URJ and had spent time as a rabbi in Southern California, just happened to know family, uh, that was looking to establish a camp. So we went on a property search for camp and looked at four or five. Uh, there was a cult in Seattle, uh, called the Love Israel family. Not Jewish, not particularly Christian, but, um, this guy Love Israel, which was the name that he adopted. I think he actually was Jewish once. But he established the cult and he was very successful, uh, and had, uh, a compound on north, uh, east of Emperor. Yes. Northeast of Everett, Washington. Out of the woods of some 70 or 80 acres upon which he had built a bunch of houses or a bunch of buildings. At least none of them with permits. And eventually, being a cult leader caught up with him. As with many cult leaders, um, you know, there were little, little tax issues and little employment issues. A little, "Oh, you did what?" issues, you know, the usual sexual exploitation of, uh, younger people who are a little more, uh, impressionable. And, of course, the condition of joining his cult was that every everything you had, you donated to him. Uh, some people wanted their money back. Um, and at some point, uh, as I say, the IRS got involved. And the upshot was that his compound went up for sale in bankruptcy. Uh, and it was too far off the beaten path to interest. I mean, it's out in the woods, right? It's less so today, but, uh, it was out in the woods, and, uh, the the local county was not going to let a developer carve it up into five acre parcels, let alone, uh, more intense development. So the development community wasn't interested, which is why we got our piece of property, by the way, uh, that the it was right out there, bounded by the city on two sides and by the county on two others. We are technically part of the county, but you have to develop for the city rules, and the city wasn't going to let you develop until their big, big road was built, which it hasn't been yet. Way too expensive. Um, the plan is they will require the adjacent landowners to pay for the road, and they'll have to supplement it with some federal money. Well, it might happen now with federal money. Uh, our deal with the city on the land swaps I talked about includes a provision that, uh, in return for giving them three acres for a park and half the road, because the road would be right along our western boundary. They will not charge us a per foot, uh, charge when they build, when they build the road. Uh, that was worth a couple hundred thousand dollars back in the day. It's now worth 2 or 3 million. Building roads is expensive, and it's only gotten a whole lot more expensive. Uh, but, um, but as I say, it isn't built and it may not get built. The city does not have it on its plans, but for camp Kalsman, the developer would never get it, get get involved in that property because he couldn't develop for a long period of time, if ever. And one of the tricks in development which I learned by representing developers is you do it with other people's money and you've got to turn it over fast. Um, well, what's now camp Kalsman was going to be slow, if ever, and it was never going to turn over. So the development community was uninterested, which left, Well, who else can turn it into a camp? Uh, well, you know, there's, uh, the Boy Scouts. They were having their own problem. The Girl Scouts who had a whole series of camps they liked a lot, but didn't need another one. Campfire boys and girls. Ditto. Private camps are way out of favor. They're not no longer profitable. And they were never profitable in the northwest. Um, I don't know where you were raised, but, you know, the eastern idea, East coast idea, where you send your kid away for a month or two. Never caught on in the West.

Martina Lancia: I was raised in Italy, so I'm not. I'm not American. Um, so I never went to a camp in my life. [laughs]

Daniel Raas: You should go.

Martina Lancia: Yeah.

Daniel Raas: There are some adult camps that are great fun.

Martina Lancia: Oh, I didn't know.

Daniel Raas: But the eastern eastern model is you, uh, especially the northeastern model is that when it gets hot, hot and sultry in the cities, either the- you have a summer place, which is close enough so that the man, because he's a man, the main, uh, breadwinner, can come out on the weekends and the wife and kids go there, or, uh, the wife and, uh, husband stay in town, but the kids go to summer camp for a month or two. Uh, but they make all kinds of friends, and we get all kinds of- want to see, uh, uh, a great parody of that. The second Addams Family, as the kids go off camp, they don't last there, at camp. uh, but that never caught on to the west. So private camps were never, uh, moneymakers here. So who's left? Religious groups who want to build a camp? Well, that was us. Uh, so that's how we got a camp. And Camp Kalsman has been expanding ever since. It is wildly popular. Uh, they open their, uh, registration for next summer at the for returning campers, middle of October. New campers beginning of November. Several of the sessions are full, uh, and it's everything that we could possibly have wanted it to be.

Martina Lancia: Nice. Very nice.

Daniel Raas: Uh, so, you know, I don't see on the horizon that there will be another, larger, another significant synagogue north of Everett. Unless the traffic gets really, really bad. But if you live between us and the town of Mount Vernon, which is 30 minutes from us and 30 minutes from Everett, almost all the Mount Vernon Knights come to us. Um, because when you get down towards

Everett, you're now back into suburbia. Suburbia? The roads get crowded. Uh, and not going north yet.

Martina Lancia: Right.

Daniel Raas: Uh, and we have this brand new facility. Um, when you. The rule of thumb is when you build a new building, over the next two years, after two or three years after you open it, your, uh, membership increases 15% to 20%. No matter where you are, if it's new building in town, new building in the suburbs across the US at least. Um, and, uh, and we found that to be true. And we were, uh. 240, 250 when we opened the building, we're now at uh, 300 roughly which which is recruitment from the surrounding area more than in covers. We get a lot of incomers, but, uh, and always have uh, but there are a number of people who know they're Jewish and, uh, know that it's important occasionally and maybe important to your parents. Um, and here's a new excuse to actually make it happen. So. Or they have kids that constantly, you know, this kid needs to know who she is.

Martina Lancia: Right, thank you so much for, um, for this conversation. I really appreciate it. Um, your time and I really appreciate it all the very detailed and rich answers you've given. And this is, this doesn't have to be a one time session in the sense that if you ever feel like there's more that you would like to share in the future that later comes to mind, we're always here to, um, to know more. So. So whenever, whenever, um, you have questions, concerns or new things you want to tell us, we're always here.

Daniel Raas: So how long is the project?

Martina Lancia: Um. Hold on, let me stop the recording so it doesn't go.