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

Recording Date: June 3, 2025
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

Andrea Shupack

SUMMARY

Andrea Shupack reflects on the growth of Bellingham and its Jewish community, highlighting the expansion of the synagogue, evolving inclusivity, and meaningful events that strengthened communal bonds. She emphasizes the city's beauty, the warmth of its people, and the community's commitment to diversity, learning, and welcoming members of all backgrounds.

Eleonora Anedda: Okay, so today is January 7th, 2022. Um, thank you so much for being here and giving me and us this opportunity to, um, have a conversation together. Um, so thank you so much. I'm recording from Rome, Italy. Um, in the meantime, Andrea is in Bellingham. Um, so so we're we're quite far away from each other. And here it's almost, um, 7:30 p.m.. So it's really, really different time as well. So thank you so much again for, for being here. And the first question that I would like to ask you is to introduce yourself and briefly, um, tell me about your background.

Andrea Shupack: Okay. So I'm Andrea Shupak. Um, and I moved to Bellingham when I was 12 years old, and I lived here through college and then left for 10 or 11 years, and then I moved back to be the cantorial soloist for the synagogue, um, here in Bellingham, Congregation Beth Israel. Um, and I've been living here and working at the synagogue now for just over eight years, about eight and a half years. Um, so I grew up in this community. I moved here the year that I had my bat mitzvah. Um, and now I am tutoring. The name is for students at the same synagogue where I had my bat mitzvah. So it's kind of a trip. Um, yeah.

Eleonora Anedda: Yeah, that is that is so nice. That must be. That's really amazing to, you know, have memories of your own and then, you know, help their kids on, you know, new kids on their path of, you know, that that must be great. Um, so, so speaking of, um, speaking of the town and you moving, um, what would you say is your relationship with Bellingham and, you know, the place and the community in general.

Andrea Shupack: My relationship with it. I mean, Bellingham, I, I was drawn back because it's just such a beautiful place to be. Um, and the community is really warm. And so I knew before even coming back, like I knew I would enjoy working here. Um, yeah, that's. I don't know how to answer. Like my relationship, I'm trying to think of. Like what? That. Yeah. It's home. I mean, it's it was a little bit strange coming back to the place that I had lived as a child, but it also had grown so much and was was a different place in some ways. It was very familiar. And it was also quite changed in the ten years that I was gone. So, um, and coming back as an adult and started, you know, raising a family here was a very different experience than growing up here. So it's kind of a new city for me. And also the same, you know, home that I remember from when I was growing up, but very interesting. It's a beautiful place to be. There's just so much outdoors and nature. And I knew I wanted to be back by the ocean. So those all kind of drew me back here. Nice. Yeah.

Eleonora Anedda: Um, so what this thing you just said makes me think of, um, you know, sparks some curiosity. Um, so what would you say was something that, um, you know, of course, the place was familiar because you lived here, um, before you moved. Um, but what was something that you noticed that was different?

Andrea Shupack: Um, so. Yeah. And I'm not sure if you're asking specifically about the Jewish community or the town itself, because those are kind of two.

Eleonora Anedda: It can, you know, even both if you have if you have insight on both, that'd be great.

Andrea Shupack: Yeah. So the town, I mean, it's grown. It grew a lot in those ten years, I think people it was sort of this secret that's gotten out now. And people know that Bellingham is this great place to live. So it's grown a lot. The whole downtown was transformed and redone, renovated. Um, and now they're, you know, the park and Fairhaven Boulevard Park has been completely revitalized. And, um, and they're also now doing a whole, like, along the entire Bay and Marina. They're revitalizing that. So there's just a lot of growth and development in the city. Um, and as far as the Jewish community, I mean, massive growth, it was a very it was, you know, when I came back, I thought I would know everybody. And there was so many people, I'd say it was like half the congregation remembered me. And I knew from when I lived here before, and there was a whole other half of the congregation that had not existed when I lived here the first time. Um, and when I taught in the school, when I was a college student, I think we had maybe 40 kids in the school. And then I came back and there were about 100 kids in the school. Oh, wow. Um, a lot of, you know, a lot of increase in young families and, and the, the biggest changes we moved from this small synagogue that we could sort of fit in when I was a kid. But when I came back, we were bursting at the seams, and we were using the school across the street because we couldn't fit our school in the three classrooms in the basement. This small synagogue that was built in, I think it was 1901 or 1902 that we were still in, and we just moved up 3 or 4 years ago. We moved into this much, much bigger, huge synagogue that we built over the last 20 years. So I actually was still living in Bellingham when we broke ground ceremonial, you know, we did like a ceremonial, like shovel hitting the ground, sort of to mark that. We were starting the process on this land. I was here then and when I came back, the building was still a shell. It wasn't finished yet when I moved back, but but the structure was all there. So for this, you know, huge new synagogue. So a lot of growth and change in the city and in the Jewish community here.

Eleonora Anedda: Yeah, that that sounds very interesting in the sense that other narrators also have mentioned how, um, the journey of finding, you know, a new place and building it and then having seeing it, you know, transform in front of your eyes. And then when they could finally move there, um, you know, it was exciting. It sounds very, very exciting. Um, so, so speaking of the community, um, I don't know if you can recall, like, an event that you would consider very important in the history of your community or maybe even something that was told by some, maybe you didn't live in, in first in, you know, in person, but, um, you know, something that maybe you also heard somewhere that, um, means a lot to the community.

Andrea Shupack: Yeah. And an event. I mean, I thought of a couple things. There's events I think of, like programs or specific, you know, things that we did on a particular day. And then there's also events like the fact that we moved into this new building. So the ones that stand out for me are, of course, most significantly moving into the new building. Um, another one is that the rabbi worked and, you know, with lots of meetings, lots of debate in the community, worked over, um, a couple of year period to change our policy to allow, um, interfaith marriages in the synagogue. And so we had our first wedding, I think it was three years ago now. It was very shortly after the policy was changed, and we had our first interfaith wedding in the congregation in, in our sanctuary with our rabbi performing the wedding. And I got to lead that with him. Um, so that was a pretty significant moment, I think, in the history of our congregation. Um, and not without its, you know, challenge and controversy. But overall, I think that the synagogue has really embraced that new policy. Um, and then as far as programming and events, I think one of our most significant ones, um, in recent history is that, um, it was actually I think it was right before Covid. Maybe it was a little farther ago. You know, time has really gotten wonky and I can't remember how long it's been. Covid makes everything go.

Eleonora Anedda: So far away. Yeah.

Andrea Shupack: Yeah. I think it was a year ago, and it was like four years ago, but we had, um, we called it a feast of learning. It was an all day event at our synagogue, and we had never done anything like that before. So. And it was the winter. I remember being worried that we were going to have snow and it was going to have to be canceled. Um, but, uh, we did this all day event and we had no idea if people were going to embrace it, or if they were going to be overwhelmed by the fact that they were going to spend the entire day at the synagogue. But we had scholar and residences and a musician come, and we had different classes being offered all over the building all day so you could choose where you wanted to go. And we had a big havdala in the foyer at the end before this dinner, and we had like 100 people crammed together singing together in the foyer. And we had such an amazing community feeling. And, um, and so many people came out and stayed the whole day and people came and went and came back. And it was just this really amazing experience of the of the community really coming together to learn on a variety of topics around Judaism and just celebrate community together. And it was really a moving, moving event. So for me that that was one event that stands out as really special.

Eleonora Anedda: Oh, wow. That that sounds that sounds very nice to be part to be part of. Um. So, so speaking a little more of the. Um, of the of the community, um, do you, do you know anything about, like, other communities in the area and like how these are different and or similar to the one in Bellingham, like in terms of traditions, in terms of what holidays they celebrate and how they celebrate them? Um, if they, you know, for example, if the people that are a part of the community keep kosher or if they celebrate

Shabbat or they don't.

Andrea Shupack: Yeah. So I mean, we're we have Chabad also in Bellingham. So I think of them as, as our only other Jewish community, like within about I want to say like 60, 70 miles. Um, so we our synagogue has really tried to accommodate a lot of different flavors of practice because we're, you know, um, the only like, established, you know, synagogue in in the area. But we are affiliated reform and we we do. I think compared to other reform congregations, we we have a pretty similar, um, type of practice and worship service and um. Demographic of people who, you know, where their observance level is. Um, in Bellingham, the, the only people I know of that keep kosher are the Chabad families, my family. And, um, I think there are there are a couple of other families that, uh, for the most part, keep kosher, but maybe, you know, maybe not super, super strict. So there's not, um, I think when you live in a place like Bellingham, it doesn't draw doesn't draw Jews, it typically that are very observant because it's hard to be observant in a place where you don't have a large population. Also being observant together. Um, so the so the people that move here aren't probably, you know, practicing at that level or they would or they would move somewhere where they could share a community that's also practicing at that level. So we tend to have a pretty, um, you know, we celebrate holidays, we celebrate Shabbat together. But there's not a large there's not that many people with a strict, um, Jewish observance level, I would say.

Eleonora Anedda: Yeah, that that makes sense. Like, yeah, I, um, and I also found it very interesting how the, uh, the rabbis are vegetarian and, you know, uh, tries to stay as open minded as possible in embracing other ways of living. It's it's very interesting. Um, so thank you for, uh, thank you for that, for your point of view as well. About on this. Um, and I'll just.

Andrea Shupack: I'll just add one more thing. Sure. Like being being a more observant family, keeping kosher in Bellingham and sort of that experience personally. Like we we have meat shipped here from, from far so that we can have kosher also environmentally friendly, you know, ecologically raised meat. So we ship it from Colorado. Oh, wow. Um, and, um, yeah, it's it's definitely like, I know, especially my husband who doesn't drive on Shabbat, like being, you know, when we lived in Berkeley, we could walk everywhere and visit with anyone we wanted to visit in the community because everyone was, you know, specifically lived in walking distance to the community because they wanted to walk on Shabbat. Mhm. Um, and so not having that here, it's definitely harder with everyone. So spread out to have that, that type of community. Right. Um, yeah. So we, we live walking distance to the synagogue, but not a lot of people do.

Eleonora Anedda: Right, right, right. And how, um, do you have any, any idea of how they manage? Um, if they're observant And so, for example, decide not to drive.

Andrea Shupack: Yeah. I don't know if there's anyone else who's shomer Shabbat other than the Chabad families. Um, I don't I know there were a couple families that when we lived, when our synagogue was, um, on Broadway, they lived really close to the synagogue. And so they had a practice of walking, but I don't know if they would if the synagogue was farther away, I think they would have driven. Um, yeah, we actually moved. When the synagogue moved, we moved houses because we had been living walking distance to the synagogue, and we knew at some point we were going to have to move closer to the new synagogue. And so when it was when it was almost ready to be opened, we we moved way, up, way up the hill, up U Street as well to be closer to.

Eleonora Anedda: Well, I'm glad that worked out. You know, um, that you were able to that you were able to find a closer place. Um, so in terms of, like, the community, like not only the structure, but like a general sense of like, like how the community operates and the way it tries to, let's say, also interact with the with, you know, different people, different points of view. How do you see where do you see the community going in the future?

Andrea Shupack: I think I might need you to reword the question. I'm not sure what you're asking.

Eleonora Anedda: Like let's say so the community lives and operates in a certain way, like today, and it will in the future as well. Like, you know, it has a has a way of being, um, what do you see that being in the future.

Andrea Shupack: You also mentioned like in relation to other communities in Bellingham.

Eleonora Anedda: Yeah. In relation to other communities, in relation to new families that might move or even just in general, like what the community like strives for, like what are their, you know, the objectives it has, the the things it wishes to accomplish in the future. Um.

Andrea Shupack: Um, yeah. So, I mean, I see us continuing to grow. That seems to be, um, continually happening, and I imagine it will continue. I also see the congregation really, um, becoming very aware of the importance of being as welcoming as possible, um, and doing more actively than just trusting that we're all going to be welcoming and it will just happen. But to to actually be putting in effort to learn, where are we missing the mark? Where could we be doing better? And so I see a lot of conversations

right now around there's sort of a term in the reform movement called audacious hospitality. Um, and it's it's actually sort of a program to teach congregations how to be even more welcoming and find their weak points to do better at, um, and I see the community really embracing that right now. So I think I see us, you know, also in that sort of struggling to, to be everything for everyone because we are the only synagogue in town. And so it's not like you can pick your conservative synagogue or your reform synagogue or find the flavor that works best for you. You know, we're we're kind of it. So the synagogue, you know, still kind of finding that balance and finding how to be accommodating and welcoming to all types of practice and all types of, um, beliefs. And, you know, an opening, sort of widening that tent. And I think that, you know, as we grow, we're continuing to learn how to do that and do better at that. And so I, I see the congregation continuing to widen its doors and welcome many, you know, you know, many new diverse types of families that are coming to the area. Um, and maybe also exploring with how to, you know, how to try different types of worship service that might meet the needs of different people, or how to offer programming that meets the different needs of, you know, all these different people that are coming through our doors. So I think that that's that's what we are struggling with. And it's also like where we are, um, growing and improving in.

Eleonora Anedda: I'm I'm always so glad to. It's very interesting because, um, a lot of different narrators have mentioned how proud and happy they feel about the community being so welcoming and warm and and open, and it's always so nice to hear how people that have been, you know, it's not like I'm not ready to have met each other before the interviews to decide what to say, but it's so. It's so nice and it feels, you know, being an outsider and listening to this. I didn't know of Bellingham. I didn't know of the community before I started this project. So it is it is really nice to to hear how proud of, you know, the people that are part of this community feel about it and how shared and, you know, the value that this shared objective has for, um, you know, the community itself. It's very nice, really nice. Um, so, so trying to go a little bit back in time about the community and its history. Um, do you know anything about, um, the split of the synagogue that happened? Um.

Andrea Shupack: I don't know much because I know we moved here when I was 12 and it had already happened. Um, and then when it was sort of reabsorbed. That was during the period that I was gone. Okay, so I don't actually know that much. And I remember as a kid, like my dad was very active and he he was even president at one point of the synagogue board. And I remember as a, as a kid, as a teen, like asking him questions and trying to understand like what happened. And I never and I was always given very vague, oh, it had something to do with the cemetery. Oh, it had something to do with the rabbi. Like I never got like a very clear answer. So I don't, I don't know, it was probably a combination of many things. Um, but but probably to my guess is that that same thing that we struggle with today, how to sort of accommodate all levels of practice and be this place for a conservative group of congregants who identify, you know, more in a Conservative Judaism and the reform and sort of how how you manage that. And so I think that probably had something to do with, you know, the fact that a group split and formed a conservative synagogue for a while, but then again, being a much smaller demographic, it makes sense that eventually whatever rifts there were were sort of not not necessarily forgotten, but sort of eased over time, and they eventually realized it. It would be they would be part of a stronger, more vibrant community if they kind of rejoined. Um, but for example, so so now we have a conservative service once a month that's lay led. Um, and so things like that are happening where, you know, those congregants that identified more in the conservative community, um, you know, trying to find ways to sort of help them feel like there's a place for them as well. So having like this, you know, different style of service and, um, you know, and trying we do like a more reform style service Friday night and we do a more conservative, slightly more traditional service Saturday morning. And in the conservative movement, Saturday morning services are more, um, more of the center of the of the week of worship. Like most conservative congregations, Friday night is not as big a deal as Saturday morning. And in the reform congregation, Friday night is more of a big deal than Saturday morning. So so finding those balances. But as far as the specifics of the split, yeah, I don't I know there are congregants who know all about it. Um, and I hope that you get to interview some of them, but I don't know much of the history.

Eleonora Anedda: That's that's absolutely that's absolutely fine. Um, but but how so? So thinking a little bit, you know, even if you don't know exactly what happened, do you think it worked? Like one day when the, you know, the split kind of, you know, kind of got reserved, like, in the sense that these family came back. These families came back. Do you think that it worked? Whatever is it that they did like was the community well balanced. And, you know, they were getting along after, uh, the split was resolved or you remember.

Andrea Shupack: When they came back? Yeah. I think overall, yes. I mean, I've never directly asked members that were a part of the, of that congregation. I think they were called a crime, um, members of a crime that are now members of Beth Israel. Again, I've never asked them directly, like, how do you feel being in this community now? But I but I see them being very active and participating and being a part of the community and coming to things, being on the board, being on committees. So and making sure that the voice of other, you know, you know, maybe another type of demographic is being heard. So I see them being very active and a part completely a part of the community. Um, over overall in general, for sure. Yeah.

Eleonora Anedda: Um, that's that's great. That's great. Um. And do you, um, do you know anything a little bit about like, um, again, tradition. Like, for example, before we were talking about keeping kosher and celebrating Shabbat, but like also other traditions, like or habits, um, like, for example, being able to speak or read and, and write Hebrew versus not being able to, um. Is this a community? You know, is it varied in that sense as well?

Andrea Shupack: It's definitely varied. Um, you know, there's I don't know the percentage, but there's lots of people who are comfortable chanting, Torah, reading Hebrew, following along in the service. And there are plenty that also are not and use transliteration, um, when they come and things like that. I also see many congregants wanting to learn more. So, like, I teach a Hebrew class. Um, and I teach a Torah chanting trope class, like liturgy classes like that. And the rabbi teaches adult ed classes, and there's other congregants who teach adult ed classes, and there's always new people coming through wanting, wanting to learn, um, wanting to increase their, their, you know, level of Jewish knowledge in a variety of topics. So, but, but I think that's, you know, when you have a reform congregation that, you know, in a town like Bellingham that typically draws families that aren't of a higher observance level, like you're you're certainly going to have, um, a significant population that didn't grow up with a lot of the either. They, you know, maybe they didn't grow up with a strong practice in their family or because we have such a large, um, interfaith, you know, population. We have lots of family members who are not Jewish or converted and are learning later in life. So there's a whole mixture of of, you know, level of knowledge and practice in our community.

Eleonora Anedda: Thank you. Um, so as far as the list of questions that I had, um, that really come to mind, I added a few more while we were talking. You know, the things that you said made me wonder about new things. Um, is there anything that we haven't previously discussed and or that you feel like needs to be part of this interview that you would like to share? It can be anything. Um, you know, is there anything that you think is worth including?

Andrea Shupack: Um, I know that's always a hard one. Um, yeah. No, I think I just hope that the, you know, I think that this community is. Just a very vibrant I don't I don't yeah, I'm trying to think it's just a very haimish, vibrant community. Um, and. Everyone finds their, you know, it's like there's there's lots of ways to connect, right? Some people really love learning. Some people really love services. Some people really love holidays. Some people just come to schmooze and be with other community members. But there's a place for for everyone in whatever kind of niche that they find that's meaningful to them. Yeah.

Eleonora Anedda: That's that's very nice. Thank you for thank you for this. Um, last thought. Um, so I want to thank you again so much for, um, for this time and this opportunity. And I know it's, uh, kind of early in, um, not super early, but it's still morning and in, um, in the US, where you are right now. So thank you so much for for this. And, um, if you think of anything else that you would like to add, or you think back and there's something you want to, you know, modify and and in, you know, the finished product of this interview. Um, you know, feel free to reach out. Um, but thank you so much again for, um, for this. It was a pleasure meeting you, talking to you.

Andrea Shupack: I hope it was helpful, I don't know.

Eleonora Anedda: It was. It was because it's, um, you know, again, there's not there's there's no right or wrong, um, and every point of view is welcomed, and every bit of experience from the same community can give a new aspect that somebody else couldn't give. So even if we're talking about the same topics more or less, um, it is always a new point of view, even if it's slightly different from someone else. It's always new. And that's and that's the that's the beauty of this. So, so absolutely. Thank you so much for thank you so much for this.

Andrea Shupack: Sure. Thank you.