Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Recording Date: September 4, 2025
Last Edited: October 4, 2025

Rabbi Jay Rosenbaum

SEPTEMBER 4, 2025

SUMMARY

Rabbi Jay Rosenbaum, a dynamic leader in the Jewish community, draws on his upbringing in a rabbinical family and transformative experiences in Israel and New York to guide his congregations with innovation and inclusivity. Known for fostering interfaith dialogue, social justice initiatives, and creative educational programs, he builds bridges between diverse communities while making Jewish life engaging and meaningful.

Ruth Sassoon: Good afternoon. We are Ruth Sassoon and Nancy Blaze, members of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society Archives and Research Committee. Today is October 11th, 2023. This interview is with Rabbi Jay Rosenbaum, Rabbi emeritus of her So Near to Me congregation, who is speaking from Mercer Island. Today's interview is one of a six-part interview series documenting professional and lay leadership roles in the Jewish in the greater Jewish community. It will be part of the Jewish Memory Archives of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. We are in Seattle conducting this interview remotely using Zoom. Dennis Barnes is hosting and assisting with the technical parts, though he does not appear. Rabbi Jay, please give your name, including spelling, the month and year you were born, and also where you were born and raised. Please spell the names of your parents and grandparents and the places they came from.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: So my first name is Jay, J A Y. Rosenbaum is R O S E N B A U M. And my father's name was Nathan. You want a spelling on that? N A T H A N Rosenbaum, and my mother's name is Shirley Rosenbaum, S H I R L E Y. My maternal grandparents were Pearl, P E A R L, and Yisrael Y I S R A E L. Alexander. My paternal grandparents were Simcha and Rachel Rosenbaum. So Simha would be S I M H A and Rachel. Rachel and Rosenbaum are the same. I was born in New York City, Bronx, New York, and raised in Long Island, New York, in a little town called North Bellmore on the south shore of Long Island.

Ruth Sassoon: In.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: Nassau County.

Nancy Blaze: What was it like being Jewish where you grew up? And please include any involvement in the Jewish community.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: Well, I was born in 1950, and my parents and I moved out, and my little my sister, who was then I was three and she was six months old. And then another sister came along, like 11 years later. Um, but we moved out first to Levittown, Long Island, from New York City, when I was three years old, and then we moved to North Bellmore, the next town over. And initially, my dad was in the advertising business, but then he quickly took a job as the rabbi of, at the time, a small congregation of 50 families that met in a bar and grill in North Bellmore. And within ten years, it was 650 families. and he got his rabbinic degree while he was serving as the full-time rabbi of that congregation. So this was an exciting time to be Jewish in New York during the baby boom years. And the same story that was happening in our synagogue was happening all across Long Island. Lots of people are moving out of the city. I mean, at the time, there were like 3 million Jews in New York, and a lot of them were moving out to the suburbs. Uh, building, you know, beautiful synagogues. Uh, and there was a lot of it was a very real vibrancy to that, to that community. Uh, my synagogue was Temple Beth El in North Bellmore, and we laid the cornerstone in 1958. I was eight years old. I also attended my father's rabbinical school graduation when I was eight years old at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Um, so it was, um, I went to an Orthodox day school, Cool. Um. Hebrew Academy of North Nassau County. From the time I was in

kindergarten all the way through the ninth grade. And then after that, I went to Yeshiva High School of Queens for a year, and then to Yeshiva of Flatbush High School in Brooklyn for two years. I had a pretty rich Jewish upbringing. My family. My father was a conservative rabbi, and we were Shomer Shabbat and Shomer Kashrut, and I got a very rich, intensive Jewish education. And at the same time, there was a little bit of a dissonance between the Judaism that was being practiced in my home and in my school and the Judaism of the community that I was part of. And since I was part of a conservative congregation and most of the people in my congregation were not Shomer Shabbat, at the time, maybe half of them did keep kosher. It was different than conservative congregations today. Um, but I walked to synagogue and often with my dad, sometimes on my own or with friends. Uh, but most of the members of my congregation only walk into the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And then you could see, like, really hundreds of people in the streets of our town. And the local public school was closed because half the school was Jewish. They were not as observant as I was. Um, and I didn't go to the same public school. I didn't go to public school. I didn't go to the school that most of the members of my congregation went to. So there was a little bit of a disconnect there. I didn't have a community of Jewish observance, you know, to support me, although I did have a wonderful family. It was a challenge. That was a challenge for me.

Nancy Blaze: Um.

Ruth Sassoon: Please describe your university experience, and also when you knew you wanted to become a rabbi.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: So I went to initially for my freshman year in college, I went to what's called a joint program between the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University, but I left. I left after a year and a half. I was having a kind of religious crisis, and between the ages of 19 and 25, I stopped keeping kosher. I stopped observing Shabbat. I did spend a full year living in Israel when I was 22 years old, right after I graduated from college. And I lived in Kiryat Shmona up north for a full year. And I was part of what's called the Jerusalem Program, which doesn't exist anymore. But at the time, it was like a kind of Israeli Peace Corps Program. So I still had a lot of Jewishness in my life, but not the kind of Jewishness I had when I was growing up. Eventually, what happened? Oh. So I transferred from the joint program I went to New York University, NYU. And I wasn't involved in anything Jewish at NYU. But after college or after I got back from Israel, I began to get connected with a place called the Westside Minyan in New York, which is part of the movement. And we were about 50 of us up on the fifth floor of a synagogue that was otherwise dying. And now that synagogue, Anshe Chesed, is very vibrant and has like 5 or 6 different minyanim meeting in the same synagogue. And they have a great rabbi. But at the time, this was a small group of us who were, um, it was kind of like a community of rebels, of Jewish rebels. Um, like half of us were from rabbis, children, a lot of the preponderance of the group was kind of refugees from the conservative movement who felt isolated in our own congregations, and yet we didn't feel comfortable in the Orthodox movement either. We had too many questions to be part of the Orthodox movement. We were too committed and too knowledgeable to be, from our perspective, part of a typical conservative congregation. And so we for the for the first time in my life, I had the closest that I'll ever get to having like a conservative, uh, conservative, um, Jewish community of peers who were very much like me who wanted to be intensely Jewish and had a lot of Jewish knowledge, but also were very liberal in the way we looked at the world. Um, and also felt very comfortable being critical of Judaism and the Jewish people and asking any question we wanted about God without feeling like we were going to get, you know, thrown out of the room. Um, so it was a great experience. And it really ultimately shaped my becoming a rabbi. I don't think I would have become a rabbi if I hadn't had this experience in the West Side Minyan. I found myself kind of spontaneously getting up and teaching and saying things, and people would listen, and I would give Torah, and people paid attention. And I thought to myself, well, maybe I like this stuff more than I thought I did. I think between the ages of 19 and 25, I was kind of on a journey to figure out if this is Jewish stuff? Like, do I do it just because my parents told me to do it, and I'm trying to please my parents? Or is it something that's really part of me? And by the time I was 25, I think I realized this is really part of me. I really like this stuff. This is I feel excited when I'm in, when I'm in a Jewish community atmosphere, and especially if it's a Jewish community that wants to have commitment and questioning at the same time, which is kind of the ideal I was raised with, in the conservative movement. So out of that experience of being part of the West Side Minyan, I decided to go to rabbinical school. I had not thought about it before then. Uh, so I was about 25 years old when I entered rabbinical school. I was a few years older than the typical student. Um, and I graduated when I was, I guess, you know, like, maybe 29, um, and, uh, I had gotten married, met my wife Janine, at the West Side Minyan and other places in the movement. And, initially, since she was from Seattle, I thought, well, this relationship isn't going anywhere, but she ended up staying in New York for a year. And the rest, as they say, is history. And we, for our first congregation, were in Trenton, New Jersey, Ewing Township, New Jersey, technically, and went on from there. Uh.

Ruth Sassoon: So that led to.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: My first congregation was Ahavath Israel in a small congregation in Trenton, New Jersey. We were there for six years. From there, I went to, Beth Israel in Worcester, Massachusetts, and I was there for 16 years. I thought I would be there for my whole career. Janine is from here. Of course. She always wanted to come home, but we never thought that would happen.

There would be an opportunity, because there were only two conservative synagogues in the Seattle area, and both were taken and both were taken by rabbis who were relatively young, but then you never know. Things happen. And suddenly, Hertzel was looking for a rabbi, and I applied, and we were lucky. And, you know, we came to Seattle.

Nancy Blaze: You are well known for having started various dialogues. Let's talk about four of them. First, between black and Jewish communities.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: Well, before that, do you mind if we go back a bit? Because. Oh, sure. I thought you were going to ask me more about more than I gave you, the bare outlines of where I was. But I wanted to tell you a little bit more about what I did as a congregational rabbi before I retired. I don't want to skip over that period entirely. Okay. With you? Yeah. So I would say the driving force for me in my rabbinate was that I really wanted to make Judaism as compelling and as interesting as I could for the members of my Jewish community. And I was dealing with, of course, not an Orthodox community, but a conservative community where, where I think there was an interest strong interest in Judaism. But there were also there were people who had a lot of doubts about whether Jewish texts and Jewish observances were relevant to their lives. And I wanted to show people a different side of Judaism. Um, many people associated Judaism with a very restrictive and limited kind of lifestyle. And I wanted to show people that Judaism has spark and funk, and verve, and actually can be very unconventional. Jews are natural rebels. And so I wanted to show people that, that, you know, you could be a very, very religious Jew or a religiously observant Jew, and, and your religious observance was, was part of your spunkiness, right. That the observance itself could be a kind of a kind of rebellious rebelliousness against the convention. And so I always looked for some element of surprise in Judaism or something. Something of the unexpected, because that's really a key to human growth. Anyway, if things are always the same, then you never grow. And so I always wanted people to see Judaism as expressing something about the belief in the possibility of what was unlikely, that that would be what would ultimately give people hope, so I'll give you just a few examples of some of the things, some of the things that I did that I particularly took joy in. Um, one of them is this program called Make Love Shake. So here is a t-shirt. T-shirt. You can see that. And it's a, it's a picture of a, a quote-unquote love shake, which means it was an ice cream shake with. It's a pun. It's a play on words, and it's based on the elephant joke. How do you make an elephant float? Take two scoops of ice cream, some soda, and a little elephant. And this was a little shake was an ice cream shake. But of course, we know that that's what you do with a little love. You shake. You shake the lulav and etrog. So, you know, using that play on words, uh, we created a poster with the Lulav shake logo and, um, and some flyers and buttons and stickers, and T-shirts. And my favorite was that we had a song, and it was based on the old Dion and the Belmonts song Teenager in Love. And the refrain went, each night I ask the stars up above. Why must I wave my etrog and love? And it had all the harmonies. And. We got a group together and we sang this song in lots of different contexts. And we got people really excited. And when I first did this in my congregation, in Worcester, Beth Israel, typically around 25 people would buy a Lulav and Etrog for the holiday. And our goal was to make it to 100. We actually had a kind of a Lulav, like a thermometer, where we had people, you know, we said, well, we're getting close. And so we got like 125 people that first year when we did it in Herzl, a few years later, many years later, we got like 180 people that first year to buy Lulav and Etrog. So, that was an example of the kind of thing that I like to do. We had a program called Sneak Into Shul on Yom Kippur, which was, which had a picture of people wearing sneakers. And the idea was to get people to wear Non-leather shoes on Yom Kippur, which most people associated with being, like, really, really religious. I remember when I first did this campaign in Worcester, one person wrote back very angrily, This is very religious. But most people reacted to it with a sense of fun, and I wanted to teach people what they mean and that it was very meaningful not to wear leather because leather comes from you have to kill an animal to get leather. And on Yom Kippur, it's about being compassionate. But I knew that I would have to break through a lot of inertia, and I knew that I had to break through the feeling that people had that to do. This means you're very religious, and that means you're very limited and strict, you know, a humorless kind of person. So I used this humor in order to kind of coax people into this idea, and we got a lot of people to do it. Then we had a program, one program that I was especially proud of. It hurts me when I first came was we did a program called Men Cooking for Shabbat, and it was a four part course where we had we got trained, we had people who were expert cooks in the congregation, men and women who compiled, um, who basically taught about 50 men how to how to cook an entire meal for Shabbat. And people came out of that four-part course with a full recipe book with four different menus that they could use, like for a Friday night or Shabbat afternoon dinner. They had to in order to graduate; they had to team up with another person from the group and cook an entire Shabbat meal. And their wives had nothing to do with it. They just came. Uh, and also there was a graduation ceremony where we gave people aprons, and we had red aprons, bright red aprons, and it said men cooking on Shabbat. And I taught them a song, a Hebrew song that we sing on Shabbat, one of those mirrored, uh, which has to do with food. And so one of my favorite moments in my entire rabbinic career was getting 50 men wearing these red aprons coming up to the bema and singing this Hebrew song about food. It was just unbelievable. It was just fabulous. The joy, uh, was just fabulous. And, um, that's that's the kind of spirit I wanted, I wanted, I wanted people, and again, Shabbat is a tough sell for a lot of people. You know, there's an old, there's an old, there's a ditty in a colleague of mine who compiled a book of Jewish humor, and he had a little song that he said, Shabbat Shalom. Um, stuck at home. O come, O bride, we're stuck inside. I mean, even myself. Growing up in Long Island, where there wasn't weren't people around me observing Shabbat. Shabbat was the day when I couldn't do very much, you know, there was nobody around. And, you know, you couldn't

watch TV, you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that. And a lot of people had that experience of Shabbat. I wanted people to see the joyous side of Shabbat. And this was an example of how we did it. Um, and then, of course something that, people will always associate with me with at Herzl is Purim, because on Purim we would do these fabulous Purim Spiels going back and, you know, going back to my very first year we would take something very contemporary and we would write a skit with music, and we had a full band. Uh, so we wrote our own lyrics to rock songs. Um, so we were trying to think of some of the ones that were more famous. We, I mean, we did The Simpsons. We did the Muppets take, uh, take Shushan um, we did, uh, Blazing Strudels was one of my famous ones for Blazing Saddles and for Blazing Saddles. We did Pirates. The Pirates of Shushan. For Pirates of the Caribbean, Blazing Saddles. We started with a cattle drive, uh, because it was a cowboy picture. So we had, uh, ten people dressed up in cow suits, you know, you know, marching, marching down the center aisle of the synagogue with Blazing Saddles, music playing. And just it was it was just hilarious. You know? So. And those were the kinds of things that we really, really enjoyed doing. Um, one of my favorites was I forget which one this was, but there was a scene in which we took, um, we had three guys, me and, uh, Michael Birkenwald and David Eisenberg dressed up as Destiny's Child with skirts and outfits and everything. And we sang one of their, one of their songs and we and with the dance, you know, uh, and, um, you know, again, what we would I think what we were doing there, if you kind of step back from it was just showing a different side of, of Judaism, that Judaism can be a little outrageous. Um, one of my more outrageous costumes is I dressed up as, like, called Lady Gaga. Um, and, um, I actually, I actually pasted I spray painted 50 groggers to a gold lamé dress, and I had a big hat because she used to wear big hats. And, you know, I wanted to show people that Judaism could be outrageous, you know, in a good way. And it was that, and what I was doing was completely traditional. That's what you're supposed to do on Purim. But, um, not every not everybody really understood that Judaism had had that capacity. So I tried to show that wherever possible. And, and, um, I tried to imbue that in my sermons, too, whenever I could. So, one of my favorite sermons was the very last sermon I gave before I retired on Yom Kippur. Um, it was a sermon, and it was a sermon about my retirement. So it was a very emotional sermon for me because I knew it would be my last holiday sermon. And I started the sermon by handing out the lyrics to the Beatles song When I'm 64. Of course, everybody knows that song. So we started. We started the sermon by having the entire congregation, like a thousand people, sing that song together. Uh, and I remember I still get choked up thinking about it because, like, as I was singing it, I was, I was, I was I sort of felt a catch in my throat because you know, when you're in that situation you, I mean, when I first heard the song, I was probably in my 20s, you know, but when I gave the sermon, I was I was in my 60s, and it meant something entirely different. And you could see that the congregation, which, you know, has a lot of people over 60, they all could relate to it because they're all they were all, excuse me, in a similar situation. I didn't sing for every sermon, not even for most of them, but by doing that, um, I really wanted to show people how to kind of stretch people's understanding of what it means to be a traditional Jew. And that was one of the ways I did it. Now we can talk about the other stuff. So go ahead, ask me about the.

Nancy Blaze: The dialogues.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: The dialogue I wanted. I guess I wanted to say that one of the things that I really valued about being a congregational rabbi is that if you're in a congregation for any length of time, you, you, you, you build up relationships. Um, one of the things that was, I mean, there were a lot of wonderful reasons to come to Seattle, but one of the things that was hard for me in leaving Worcester was that I had been there for 16 years. And you build up relationships after 16 years, and then you have to start over, and that's hard. But by the time 17 years were over in Seattle, I had built up those relationships in Seattle. And what was nice was even though I was retiring, I didn't have to leave the community. I was rabbi emeritus, which means in the context of the congregation, I wasn't actively involved in the day-to-day life of the congregation. I wasn't on the bema, but I still knew a lot of people in the congregation, and I didn't have to lose those relationships. And I was able to tap into those relationships in a different way. Um, and that's what led me to get involved in a lot of projects that involved building bridges between different groups in the community, and knowing so many people in the Jewish community was a big advantage in creating those relationships outside the community. So the first one that I did was, well, I guess I want to say one more thing before that, and that is one of the things that laid the groundwork for this was when I was maybe in the congregation for two years, maybe three. Very early in my career at Herzl Ner Tamid, I gave a sermon in which I said something nice about President George Bush. Uh, now I'm a registered Democrat, and I didn't vote for George Bush. But this was a time of great danger for Israel. And President Bush had either said something nice or done something good. And I praised him for that in the bema from the bema, because I thought, it doesn't matter who the person is or what party they belong to, if they do something for Israel, I want to call it out and I want to give them credit. Well, I guess not everybody felt that way. Uh, and I was still relatively new in the congregation, and people didn't know everything about me, so I was visited. By the next day, I was visited in my office by what I call the Democratic Thought Police, who proceeded to tell me that because I said this nice thing about George Bush, therefore I must be pro-life. And they went through a long list of things that are associated with Republicans and conservatives. And it was then that I realized that something, something had really shifted in, not just in the Jewish community, but in the American community. And I gave a sermon about what I called the new heresy. Uh, it used to be if you said something outrageous about God or disrespectful about God, you could, you know, people would get very angry with you and you could even be excommunicated. Well, in the modern period, you know, in the 21st century in America, there's nothing you can say about God that's going to get people upset. You

know, so many people don't even believe in God. But if you say the wrong thing about politics, people will literally stop speaking with you, and you'll be virtually excommunicated. So I called this the new heresy. No longer is the new heresy about God. It's about your political affiliation or your political views. And I thought that was really, really a shame. I mean, you know, the things that we talked about now, the polarization in America, the fact that politicians no longer reach across the aisle, that people are demonized. You know, for being, uh, you know, different from you politically. And, you know, friendships are broken up, families are broken up over political views that that didn't weren't always true. And I, began seeing that trend already, you know, back in as early as 2004. So by the time we get to 2016, after the Trump election, I thought, I really want to do something about this. I want to start to address I want to start to bring people together from different points of view, rather than thinking of it as, you know, one side has to defeat the other. And that's the way we're going to create change in the world. So the first one I did was something when I was still working at Hertz. I was it was a civil discourse, um, Experience. And my friend, Dr. Mark Jones was introduced to me, because he was one of the facilitators at this. It was the subject was immigration. And we wanted to get people to to think not in terms of Democrat or Republican, but to but to see that this is really a complicated issue and not not one that's black and white. Uh, and so, Mark and I work together and we liked each other very much. And we decided after this was over, let's do something on the Black-Jewish relationship. That's a relationship that had always been important to me, since I was a kid. I mean, I grew up in the 60s, at the height of the civil rights movement. My father went to the March on Washington in 1963 and stood next to Wilt Chamberlain. Um, I remember my father giving many sermons on civil rights, as a congregational rabbi. And I also remember my father bringing home an African American, fire chief who had moved into the town and, he couldn't find housing because of racism, because people didn't want him to live in their neighborhood. And I'm sad to say that some of those people were members of my own congregation. And my father went to bat for this, for this man and invited him over for dinner. Uh, and we talked about these things at the Shabbat table, you know, very often. And my father, I remember my father telling me people from the congregation came up to him and said, Rabbi, you belong on the pulpit. You should be talking about religion, not this. And my father, of course, said, this is religion, this is Judaism. Um, so I remember those days. I remember, the heroes, the great heroes of the civil rights movement and how involved, the Jewish community was, in the civil rights movement and at a time when, you know, Blacks and Jews forged an alliance together to work for positive change in America. And then I also remember the relationship really deteriorating, and a real rift creeping into that relationship. And I always thought it was a shame that there was that rift. And if I ever had the opportunity to do something to make it better, to heal it, to bring it to a to a new level, I would want to I would want to be part of that. And I didn't do anything about it for a long time. But suddenly, for whatever reason, in 2016, I saw an opportunity. Uh, so Mark and I began to work together. Uh, we pulled together a group of like, a dozen people. Six from the Jewish community, six from the Black community. We had, like, six dinners, three hours, three hours each. Uh, we talked about some really emotional issues, and it was a very, very meaningful experience. And that led to the experience that I'm part of now, which is a Black Jewish clergy group. Uh, we decided to have rabbis and black ministers study the Bible together on a monthly basis. And we've been doing it now. We're now in our fifth year of doing this in Seattle. Uh, and the Bible becomes like a shared language, a shared sacred text that both communities revere. And it becomes a kind of safe vehicle for touching on some very emotional issues that might be harder to get to if we just went at them directly. But if we talk about the Joseph story, and in the Joseph story, there's a there's betrayal, like Joseph gets out of prison, and he tells, he tells and and I'm sorry, his cronies get out of prison. And they say when, when you he says to them, when you get out of prison, remember me? And they forget him. And when you tell that in a Black Jewish group. You know, you get some interesting comparisons where black people say, well, you Jews, you know, you, the Jewish community, you got out of prison, you rose and you left us behind. You abandoned us, you know, you don't remember. And the Jews, on the other hand, said the opposite. They said, you know, we were there for you. And then you turned. You turned your back on us and you. And there was, you know, Black anti-Semitism, and you supported you were you were you became anti-Israel. And so we had these emotional discussions through the study of the Bible. I mean, I often go back to a very famous Kurt Vonnegut story called It's in a Collection Called Welcome to the Monkey House. And the story is called Who Am I This Time? It's about two very shy people who, cannot form human connections, but they turn out to be great actors, and they end up acting opposite each other in a romantic place. Uh, and so, um, uh, they fall in love. But, they don't know what to do outside of the theater. So one day, the woman in the relationship comes up with a brilliant idea. She invites the man to dinner. She hands him a copy of Romeo and Juliet. And he plays Romeo and she plays Juliet. And, suddenly, they're together again. And so what happens at the end of the story is they get married and they spend the rest of their lives, you know, creating their own theater and speaking to each other through these great romantic plays. And, I think of that when I think of Bible study, the Bible for the Jewish people and also for Christians is very much like our Romeo and Juliet. Um, it becomes a vehicle for us to speak about things from the heart that might be difficult for us to say, but if we say, well, I'm not talking about myself. I'm talking about Moses. I'm talking about Joseph. I'm talking about Miriam. We project our own issues onto these biblical characters, and as a result, we're able to talk about things that mean a great deal to us, without feeling threatened by those conversations. And that's what's been happening in the Black-Jewish conversation. We now have not only a local conversation, but we have a national conversation where Blacks and Jews from seven cities are having these conversations on a monthly basis. We just had one yesterday that talked about Exodus chapter eight, and beautiful insights from ministers from Philadelphia, rabbis from Seattle and Atlanta and Chicago, New York, and Detroit. It's it's it's really been it's been great. We've been doing that one for about four years. Uh, and that led to,

um, we always wanted to do action. Um, and um, so we eventually, um, uh, we spun off another, another group called the Multi-Faith coalition for Restorative Justice, which is about criminal justice reform. And what the stimulus for that was a film called Since I've Been Down, which was produced by a wonderful woman professor from Tacoma. Her name is Doctor Gilda Shepherd. She made the film, and the film was about a young man, Kimathi Carter, who committed a murder when he was 18 years old. He was part of a gang, and he was in a drive-by shooting. And they thought this other car was a rival gang. And it turned out it wasn't. And they shot into this car, and a young black college student was killed, and he got a life sentence. Um, but when this young man was in prison, after about ten years, he started his own peer to peer education program called GoTeach, taking education and changing history. Uh, and he created this remarkable school for prisoners, prisoners teaching prisoners. And it was so popular that it created a level of harmony among the prison population that never existed before. The Blacks and Latinos who never got along. They all came to this program. Even white supremacists came to this program. Uh, and, um, the people in the prison officials said they never saw anything like this in any place in Washington State. Um, and so, um, Camonte is now out of prison and he's in his 40s. But when you see this film, what you realize is here's a person with tremendous ability, tremendous leadership ability, but nobody saw it when he was 18. Nobody saw it when he was 11. And his father died, and he joined the gang. Had he that potential been nurtured and seen? Imagine he may never have gone to prison in the first place. And how many cars are walking around today? Um, so, um, one of the, um, one of the principles that we talk about a lot because this is a multi-faith group and it's faith-based is, um, what does our faith teach us? What does Judaism teach us about why people hurt each other? I've taught some interesting classes about how the Bible, starting from the book of Genesis, which is the foundational book of the Bible, tells us, be wary of looking at the world as the good guys versus the bad guys. It's just not that simple. There's a little bit of bad in each of us. There's a little bit of good in the people we think of as bad. Uh, and, um, if you look at look at life in a more nuanced way, you'll end up creating much more goodness in the world and much more human harmony than if you simply say, well, the way we create a better world is to just kill all the bad guys, you know? Um, I had a teacher in graduate school who said to me that teachers classically make the following mistake. They think that if they just get rid of the three worst troublemakers in the class, their class is going to be heaven on earth. And what they find is that they get rid of those three, and three more take their place. Um, and what applies in a classroom applies in society as a whole. We sometimes think that if we just get rid of the bad apples or put them in jail, then everything will be fine. But unless we look at the larger picture, if we look at unless we look at the design of the classroom or the design of society, and ask, how can we address those issues in a different way? Hey, you end up putting more and more people in jail. Not really solving the problem. So, we had a lot of, um, uh, so we, you know, this multi-faith coalition is, is, uh, been around for two and a half years, and we're all learning a lot from each other. I should also say that one of my interests in doing this work is, believe it or not, has to do with Israel. I wanted to be sure that Jews have friends in the world. And when I saw that, you know, there was once a strong Black-Jewish alliance, and that Martin Luther King was one of the greatest supporters of Israel. And when I saw that support diminishing over the years, I asked myself, well, can we change that? Can we start to rebuild this relationship? And in rebuilding the relationship. Not only are we doing a good thing by helping promote racial justice in America, but we're also gaining some new friends and support when we're in trouble. Um, so, um, it's not a small thing that last night we had a big rally. Israel is in crisis right now. The worst crisis, really, in Israeli history. Uh, and, um, a thousand people showed up at Temple de Hirsch from across the Jewish community, but many non-Jews, too. And, some of those non-Jews were people from the African American community, people who we've studied the Bible with. Uh, and they were glad to be there. And they also wrote us very heartwarming notes, letters of support, and sympathy. And I don't know that that would have happened if we hadn't made the effort to cultivate this relationship and to show up for causes that were important to them. That's what friends do. They show up for each other. So, I found that this has had multiple levels of benefit, having, you know, cultivating these relationships. I recently had a conversation with Gilda Shepherd, and Gilda Shepherd is, fantastic lady. Um, and she's a person who's very much involved in a lot of left-wing causes. And the left in America lately hasn't been very kind to Israel. Um, but because Gilda knows me and I know her, and she knows lots of Jewish people in this, in our multi-faith group, we have a relationship with each other. And a couple of weeks ago, Gilda asked me a question about Zionism. She says, I want to know more about Zionism. Tell me about Zionism. And when I gave her my five-minute definition, she said, Well, wow, that's really interesting. It's a lot different than what my friend Angela Davis told me. Well, those who know Angela Davis know that she's going to have a very different perspective on Zionism and not very favorable. But Gilda is not Angela Davis, and she's curious and she's open. Uh, and it's because we have a relationship with each other that in a couple of weeks we're going to go out for coffee together. We're going to talk more about Israel and more about Zionism. And she's coming with an open mind. Uh, and that's, that's one of the benefits of, of, you know, I found, of creating these relationships over a period of time. And that's this whole all these experiences have led me to rethink my whole approach to social justice. And I actually really do believe that I would love to see the American Jewish community, especially the liberal Jewish community, do a paradigm shift on how we do social justice. And I've written a little bit about this recently, and I just I just sent a copy of my article to my nephew, who's an Orthodox rabbi in Israel, actually, um, and, um, what I, what I talked about was that when we talk about social justice in the Jewish tradition, we have two voices. We have a prophetic voice, and we have a rabbinic voice. The prophetic voice is the voice of the prophets, which is unequivocal. Uh, the prophets tended to see the world really, truly as the good versus the evil when they talked about the rich grinding the poor, there was no nuance in their, conversation. They were powerful. They were strong. They knew what was right.

And there was no discussion. And sometimes you need that sometimes, you know, with some issues. I mean, you know, there's no nuance when you're talking about slavery, it's either right or wrong. There's no nuance when you talk about segregation; it's either right or wrong. But most of the world, most of the problems we face in the world require a very different kind of approach. And I would call that the rabbinic voice, rabbinic approach. And the rabbis were famous for arguing back and forth and having different points of view on what the right thing to do is. In the Bible, it says, justice, justice, you shall pursue. That's what passion is: prophetic passion. But when the rabbis read that verse, they said, well, maybe this, maybe there's two ascetics because there's a little bit of ascetic on each side, there's a little bit of right on each side, and a little bit of wrong on each side. And those people have to learn to compromise with each other, and they have to learn to see each other's point of view. And when I think about the problems in the world today, especially the problems in America, I think most of those problems require more rabbinic voice than a prophetic voice. The prophetic voice isn't important. It is. Um, but if you think about the problems of homelessness or drug addiction or racism or Israel in the Middle East or immigration reform, none of those issues have easy, simple answers where you say, well, this is simply this we're going to do this and we're going to solve that problem. I'm really very passionate about this when it comes to, uh, you know, social justice today, that social justice has meant primarily prophetic. We know what's right, and we're going to do it, and we're going to defeat the bad guys. Um, but, you know, it's usually not like that. Um, so for example, um, I mean, here's an example of how you can you can use both of those lenses at the same time. So, Donald Trump on January 6th, what he did to the government his an attempt to overthrow the United States Constitution by not accepting the results of a legitimate election. That, to me, is an example of where you need the prophetic voice. There's nothing complicated about that. Simply wrong. Right. However, the problems of red and blue in America what's divided America. Um, you know, just the ability, our ability to solve the key problems of our society. That's much more complicated. Uh, that's where you need people in dialogue. That's where you need Republicans and Democrats to talk to each other. You need not just senators and congressmen to reach across the aisle, but you need everyday citizens to sit down together and work things out and hear each other's point of view and come up with something, something in the middle that's rabbinic voice. Um, when we don't know which voice to use, we get ourselves in big trouble. Trump and Charlottesville. Trump and Charlottesville thought he was doing the right thing. When he used the rabbinic voice, he said, Oh, there are good people on both sides. Well, that was a moment he should have used a prophetic voice, Nazis walking and saying, you know, the Jews will not replace us. There's nothing to argue that there's no nuance there, nothing to argue about that, that just deserves a blanket condemnation. However, if you're talking about how we deal with American history, when do we remove a statue? And when do we put up a plaque explaining the context, or do we put Robert E Lee in the same category as George Washington? Those are legitimate questions that would. Which are many-sided. And you, when you need people to talk to each other that's that's rabbinic voice. Um, look at the current crisis in Israel. It's a perfect example. I was pleased to see that so far, most of the world has understood that what we need now in the wake of these horrible atrocities is a prophetic voice. There are two sides to this, to Hamas. This, these these these are, these are these are barbaric acts. People who attacked civilians, killed babies, and raped women. There are two sides to that. That's a prophetic voice. Clear and simple, black and white, good and evil. Um, on the other hand, if you look at the larger picture of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, between Israelis and the Arab world, between Israelis and the Muslim Jews and Muslims over the past 75 years and more. Well, there's there's there's there's a lot of complexity there. And that's not something that's purely black and white, purely good and evil. So knowing when to apply each lens and knowing that sometimes in a particular situation you can apply both lenses, I think, is really important. And you know, I spent a lot of my time trying to deliver that message. Um, what else? What else can I tell you? Oh, you want me? You want me to keep going, or do you want or do you want to ask me something? I started talking about Israel. You wanted to know a little bit about my connection to Israel. Um, I guess I'll say what I've said to many people recently. I consider myself and this whole generation to be incredibly fortunate to be born into this moment in time. We live in a moment. We live. I would argue we live at the best, best time ever for Jews and all of Jewish history. Um, because we have a State of Israel and we never, ever had anything like this State of Israel, ever in our history, even in the days of the Bible, even at the height of biblical Judaism, we had King David and King Solomon. We never had anything like a state with 9 million people and flourishing economically and intellectually and spiritually, and culturally. This is just unprecedented. And it's just amazing to be part of that generation that has the State of Israel. Um, I remember when I was eight years old and my cousins, I saw my cousins off on a voyage to Israel by boat. My uncle was an Orthodox rabbi, and he had a sabbatical coming. So they went for two months. A month and two months were spent by boat, two weeks by ocean liner to get to Israel, and two weeks to get back. So we saw them off. We went to the dock and I got the autograph of an Israeli sailor. That would seem so naive today, but in 1958, Israel was only ten years old. The whole idea of Israel was so miraculous to us. The idea of an Israeli soldier who spoke Hebrew. It was like mystifying and mystical, and beautiful. Um, that's the atmosphere that I grew up in. I lived there for a year in 1972. I lived there, as I mentioned, in Kiryat Shmona. I took numerous congregational trips. I took my congregations to Israel six separate times. Um, by the time I retired, I was going to Israel pretty much every year for the like for the past 6 or 7 years. I would, you know, of my career, uh, and my daughter actually lived in Israel for six years and became an Israeli citizen. Now she's back in Boston, but I would often go and visit her and then study at the Hartman Institute. And I became very active in AIPAC. Um, so, um, so when it came time for, um, and people in the congregation knew me and knew me as somebody who would, who would always stand very firm for Israel and, um, you know, defend Israel. Um, and so when it came time to do something more difficult, which is to to

speak out, um, against something that an Israeli government was doing. I believe I had the credibility to do that because people people knew that I wasn't I wasn't somebody who who typically did that who or whoever did it. Um, and so, um, when the Israeli democracy movement started happening and Israeli Israelis across the board were alarmed by things happening in, in, in the Israeli government, the most right wing government Israel has ever had. And they were concerned about threats to Israeli democracy and, and and Israelis who never, never criticized Israel in public was saying to the American Jews, we want you to speak out. And so what I did for the when I did that for the first time, um, in downtown Bellevue, my speech was picked up by Haaretz, uh, precisely because I was somebody who had been a supporter for my entire career, and they thought they saw this as kind of a kind of man bites dog story, like, wow, even this apex supporter is part of this and that. That just showed that this was not really about politics, but it was really about that. Right? Right or wrong. So, you know, I love Israel and I want the best for Israel. And I'm now participating in a small group of people who are, uh, you know, right now we're preoccupied with this crisis. But God willing, Israel will get through this, and then we'll turn to the exciting task of figuring out, well, what do we want? What do we want Israel to go from here? How do we want Israel to rise to the next level? Um, and you know, what's our vision of the Israel of the future. What's the Israel that we want our, our grandchildren and great grandchildren to experience? Um, and now's the time to be thinking about those things. And I'm excited about being part of that. Part of that conversation. I also think, by the way one of the unique things and I've said this to members of my congregation frequently, one of the unique things about living at this particular time is that in spite of the anti-Semitism we see and in spite of what we saw in the past week we Jews are still vulnerable, and there's still so much hatred of our people. It's hard to believe that 75 years after the Holocaust, we still see such intense hatred of the Jewish people. In spite of that, we're in a position right now that we have not been in 2000 years, and maybe we've never, ever been in this position before. Um, we are strong enough because of Israel, because of the strength of the American Jewry. We're strong enough to finally be able to play offense and not just defense. And what I mean by that is we've been so preoccupied with defending ourselves against attacks for the past 2000 years that we really haven't had the bandwidth emotionally or physically or any anyway, to concentrate on our true mission, which is to be a light unto the nations to be a blessing to the families of the earth. I mean, hoo hoo! How could my Zaidy think about things like that? Living in Poland, where he had to be worried that if he walked down the street, he could get killed by somebody who just was an anti-Semite. He didn't have any way. He just was, you know, he just wanted to survive as a Jew in those circumstances. But we are living in a situation because of our strength, in spite of our vulnerability, we actually can speak to the world today and with a reasonable confidence that the world will be interested in what we have to say. Um, we've made huge contributions to human history. But we're not done. We're not done. It didn't stop with our giving the world the Bible. It didn't stop with our giving the world the belief in one God. That was 2000 years ago. What do we what are we giving the world today? We're in a position now to be givers, to participate in a world conversation, the global conversation about human ethics, about making the world a better place, and have a place at the table, have a serious place at the table, and have people listen to what we have to say. And of course, we'll be listening to what other people have to say. We don't have all the answers ourselves. But, um, so that's what makes me an optimist in the long run. I see a lot of challenges. I see a lot of hurdles this week. Those challenges are particularly prominent. But you can't be a Jew and be a pessimist. To me, a Jewish pessimist is an oxymoron. Uh, we were created to transform the world in good ways. And you can only transform the world if you love the world. You can't transform the world if you hate the world, or if you think the world hates you. Um, there's plenty of hate. But there's a lot of love, too. And there's a lot to love in the world and other people, in other cultures. And so I feel privileged to live at this time in history. And I hope in a small way, I can I can contribute to our speaking in new ways to the world. How are we doing on time?

Ruth Sassoon: So, now I'm bringing up what was called our 911. And I know it's a question of applying now that the initial horror is over. We're now that we're in the reaction period. Uh, do you want to say something about the prophetic and rabbinic voice in reaction?

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: Sure. And I'll go a little further, too. So I'll say the prophetic voice is the first thing we have to do is we have to unequivocally condemn these atrocities against the Jewish people. No excuses. Don't talk to me about root causes. Don't talk to me about. Don't tell me that the State of Israel has held the Gaza, the Palestinians, Palestinians in Gaza prisoner, and they're just exploding because they can't help themselves. There's no excuse for attacking innocent civilians. There's no excuse for killing babies, deliberately killing babies. There's no excuse for rape. That's not a liberation movement. That's just pure barbarism. And we have to say it, the world has to say it. And thank God, right now that's what most people are saying. That's a prophetic voice. Rabbinic voice is How do we make peace? That's harder. That requires a lot of listening, that requires compromise, that requires sacrifice. Um, and I'm hoping that when Hamas is defeated. God willing that there'll be opportunities for a different kind of leadership in the Palestinian people, between the United States and Egypt and Saudi Arabia and Israel, and the Palestinians working together, it can be a different kind of relationship between Jews and Arabs and between Jews and Muslims in that region. Um, it's possible, but this it's what's achieving that, getting to that. It's not simply a question of wiping out the bad guys. The first step is wiping out the bad guys. The first step of the Jewish people leaving Egypt was to defeat Pharaoh. He couldn't negotiate with Pharaoh. They had to. They had to defeat Pharaoh. But when they defeated Pharaoh, that wasn't the end. Creating a righteous society. That was hard. And you know, there's a very famous scene when Moses goes out the first day, he kills an Egyptian who

was beating up a Jewish slave. The next day, he goes out and sees two Jews fighting, and he tries to break up the fight. And one of them says to him, You're going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian. And he realized there are bad guys among the Jewish people. It's not just that I can't say. All the evil in the world comes from Egypt. I got people, Jews fighting with each other, Jews being cruel to each other. If I'm going to kill every person, if I'm just going to get rid of, I say, I'll just get rid of all the evildoers. I'm going to have to get rid of half my own people. That's when Moses's first understanding of humans, the complexity of human behavior. So, first, get out of Egypt. Then build something. Build something new. They're building something new. That's always harder. That's always the hard part. But I'm confident we can do it. We've done it before. We've achieved miracles. The Jewish people. And that's maybe one final point that I want to make. Um, one of your questions was how my rabbinic training prepared me for this kind of these kinds of conversations and dialogues? And what I like to say in my when I just when I distribute my bio, what I say is that I'm trained as a rabbi to create harmony between two texts that seem to be not remotely connected to each other. That's classic rabbinic sermon technique. That's a technique I always use as a sermon. I would start out with an idea, and people will be wondering, What the heck is he talking about? Where is he going with this? What does this have to do with the weekly Parsha? And if I did it right, by the end of the sermon, I would show a connection between two things that people thought were not remotely connected. That's the way, classically, rabbis always gave sermons. There was an element of surprise. There was an element of the unexpected. And most of all, there was the element of connecting to ideas that seemed impossible to connect. And the theory of Torah study is if you can connect two ideas that way, if you can connect two passages or verses. That way you can connect two people in the same way you can connect two people who would seem to have nothing in common, who would seem to be irreconcilable, who would seem to be unconnected. I think that's the heart and essence of Jewish practice. When we say the Shema and we say God is one, and when we follow that by saying, You should worship this one God by day and by night. What we're really saying is we want you to connect. We want you to connect people who are as different from each other as day and night. We want those people who are as different as day and night to see their own underlying unity, to see that they were created by the same God, and that they both had the spark of God, God's presence in them. Um, that's what makes the. The Sh'ma is a dream. It's not about an abstract belief in monotheism. It's a Messianic dream that we can connect the unconnected. The Messianic dream, as stated by Isaiah, is Ze'ev. The wolf will lie down with the lamb. Well, that seems impossible, right? Those two seem unconnected. But we believe that it's possible. Maybe not literally. Right? But those are meant to be metaphors for two people who are as different from each other as a wolf and a lamb. And those people, we can. We believe we can. We can, we can. We believe those people are connected. And that's and that's and we're pledged every when we say the Shema, we pledge to make those connections. We pledge to overcome those distances. Um, and there's a principle, I believe it's embedded in Jewish life, and I call it distance traveled. Meaning? Meaning the greater the distance. The distance, greater the emotional distance between two events, the more powerful the meaning. When we. When we can show that those events are actually connected. So I mean, I'll give you some very quick examples. And that is you know, Jacob in the Bible when he's, when he's running away from home. Um, no, I'm sorry. When he's returning home he's, he's facing his brother Esau. And he says to God, he prays to God. He says. He says, I left. I left home with only a staff in my hand. And now I have become two full camps. So he's taking two moments in time and showing that they are part of one life. And who would have imagined? Who would have expected that? With this, nothing could get to the point that I am today. And yet here I am. When people stand under the Chuppah and their parents say, as in Fiddler on the Roof, Is this the little girl I carried? There, taking two moments of time, this little infant and this beautiful bride under the Chuppah. And they're saying, these are connected. This is the same person; this is the same life. Um, and when the State of Israel was established in 1948, only three years after the Shoah ended in 1945, you're taking two moments in time that would seem to be two experiences that would seem to be impossible to close that distance. How do you get from the Shoah, the lowest point in Jewish history, to the State of Israel, which is the highest point in history? You have to be radically optimistic to believe that that kind of distance can be overcome. And we have overcome that distance over and over again, and we've overcome it in our own lifetime or with or within close, close range of our own lifetime. So we don't have to go back a thousand years. We've seen miracles in our own lifetime. We've seen that gap closed in our lifetime. And, and and we're infinitely stronger now than we were in 1945. If we could do that, whatever we're facing today is small potatoes. If we could overcome those challenges, if we could rebuild the state after 2000 years from scratch, what could we not do today? So that's why I'm a Jewish optimist. We're a skeptical people. Uh, because questions change the world. But we're not a pessimistic people. You can't be a pessimist and be a true Jew. Um, to be a Jew is to be an optimist. And, uh, that's a message of hope that I, I hope I have, have conveyed and will continue to convey to my people.

Nancy Blaze: What a fascinating life with many, many accomplishments. And you've included in your talk today with us, uh, so much interesting information that, uh, we are very, very grateful. And it's, uh, we appreciate your sharing so much with us. And now it'll be with those who see this video in the future. So thank you very, very much.

Rabbi Jay Rosebaum: Thank you for inviting me.