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Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum

SUMMARY

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, where she was one of three Jewish children in her class at an Episcopal school and often found herself explaining Judaism to her classmates. Originally planning to pursue a medical career, she was inspired in high school when she met her first female rabbi, and in college decided to pursue rabbinical studies. She moved to Seattle in 2004 shortly after being ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In 2006, she co-founded the Kavana Cooperative, which takes its name and mission from the Hebrew word for “intention” and encourages members to fully engage in their nondenominational community. As one of seven members of the nationwide Jewish Emergent Network, Kavana, under Rachel’s leadership, is at the forefront of creating a new paradigm of communal organization for American Judaism.

Jeff Schwager: We'll have clips of it on the website for the virtual museum portion of this, and the actual exhibit will be at a gala event. We think it's going to be on October 7th. We think it's going to be in Belltown. Okay. Um, you will obviously hopefully be there and we hope you'll be there. Absolutely. So there will be an exhibit with boards like these at that. And then on the website we'll have, um, a long form version of the interview that we're going to do now. Okay. Uh, in text form. And then we'll have highlights in video and, um

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Super, Sounds good.

Jeff Schwager: All right.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Thumbs up.

Jeff Schwager: So, um, I don't really I don't really have questions. What I have are topics.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Great. That will work, and.

Jeff Schwager: We'll just talk.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Sounds good. Okay. I'll just pretend the camera's not there.

Jeff Schwager: Absolutely. Pretend the camera's not there. It's not.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: There. Great.

Jeff Schwager: Um, so tell me about yourself. What's your background? Where are you from?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Um. I'm from Charleston, South Carolina.

Jeff Schwager: Um huh.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I am, depending on the side of the family, fourth or fifth generation, uh, resident of Charleston, from from my childhood. And I've now been in Seattle for the past 13.5 years. Um, so this is this is a place that's been my home more than any other place in my adult life. I am the oldest of five siblings. I'm the first rabbi in my family. Um. I think that's that's a good start.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Was your family, uh, observant, religious growing up?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Um, Charleston was a really interesting place to grow up because the Jewish community is. It's historic. It's old. They've got their own version of a historical society with an awful lot of Jewish history there. Um, but small enough that people were really interconnected. And because I was from a multigenerational family, my mom had grown up in the Orthodox synagogue. My dad had grown up in the Reform Temple, and my parents moved away for school and then came back and joined the Conservative synagogue, and my grandparents were the other two. So I sort of grew up knowing the lay of the land, of the whole, of the of the Charleston Jewish community and being really connected.

Jeff Schwager: So your parents met in the middle.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Mhm. Exactly.

Jeff Schwager: And so are you a conservative now? Is that how you.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I'm a conservative rabbi by training. But the community that I'm, that I run, Kavana is not, doesn't have a denominational label.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Okay. Yeah. Um what was the role of Judaism in your life growing up? How did you how did you view the religion. And.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Well, my Jewish identity was like absolutely a part of me through and through. Um, one thing that not everybody knows about me is that I grew up going to an Episcopal school for 12 years. I think because the state of the public school system in South Carolina wasn't great. Um, this was a good educational space, but it meant that I had from from first grade on this very keen awareness of myself as a religious minority. And I think now, thinking back on it, I think my, my role as a rabbi probably started in first grade when we were learning Bible stories. And I would explain to people, these are my stories, or these aren't my stories, or here's why I'm bringing this funny bread, you know, to eat, uh, in my lunch box on Passover or whatever that, you know, I think I was constantly explaining traditions and holidays and all of that and and felt myself to be a bit of a Jewish ambassador growing up in this very Christian world.

Jeff Schwager: Were you the only Jewish student in the school?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: No. My siblings, my cousins, some others. I was one of three Jewish students in my grade. So a small minority. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: And in your home. Were your parents, uh, very observant.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Um, in my home, my parents were very Jewishly involved, and that means all sorts of different things. Again, it's a small Jewish community in South Carolina, and my parents were involved in the synagogue and we went to the JCC. So I did summer camps there. I did youth groups, um, kind of involved in the community in a whole variety of, in a whole variety of ways. And so from my childhood, I remember going to all of the different synagogues, and I remember going to lots of community events. I remember showing up at rallies for, you know, to have to, for Soviet Jews. I remember, like, just a lot of Jewish engagement and kind of a Jewish through and through life. And in terms of observance, um, well, I'm more observant now than my parents were when I was growing up. Um, Shabbat dinner was like a fixture. And so the rhythm was a rhythm of Jewish time. Um, yeah.

Jeff Schwager: And so the most obvious question I'm sure you get asked all the time is how did you decide to become a rabbi, and when did you decide that that was your calling?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I don't always get asked that question. I get asked all sorts of interesting questions. Um, I like that question though, like I did not. I did not know that I wanted to be a rabbi growing up. It's only looking back on it now that I can see that I was sort of that Jewish ambassador as a kid, but I think I first of all, I didn't even have an awareness that women could be rabbis when I was growing up. None of none of the rabbis in my world, in my community, um, the summer camps I went to, any of that were rabbis until I was in high school, and that was the very first time that I had met a female rabbi. And it was sort of like an epiphany of I didn't, you know, I didn't know that that was a role. And so now it's funny to me, um, to see kids who have grown up

in my community who sometimes have the opposite reaction. Like, they don't know that men can be rabbis. And that kind of cracks me up. Um, I didn't know it was a thing. I knew that I wanted to be in a helping profession. I was pretty sure that that was going to be somehow in medicine. And so I was going full force into the sciences when I was in college. Um, but I had been involved jewishly and cared a lot about my Jewish identity. And on the side during college, um, had the opportunity, the summer after my freshman year to, to get some fellowship funding and to do some work on behalf of the Jewish community somehow. And I ended up working for the planning corporation for Ramah Darom, which was a new summer camp that was getting ready to start in the southeast. And my job as the intern was to write thank you notes to donors and things like that, but also to travel from town to town in South Carolina and North Carolina and Georgia to these small, small Jewish communities, and to have parlor meetings or meetings in a coffee shop or a meeting in the synagogue library, and convene community members and start to talk to people about their Jewish identity and what they wanted. The specific question was like, what do you want in a Jewish summer camp for your for your children? And if there were a Jewish retreat center, a facility that had Jewish resources, what would you need? And so people started talking about their Jewish communal life in this really robust way and going deep. And I think that was probably the moment where I kind of got hooked on this idea that a helping profession didn't have to mean physical healing, but that a helping profession could also mean helping to build community and to provide resources for people for life. And I went back to campus the following fall and started taking some Jewish studies classes. Found out that academically, this was also a really interesting topic to me. Um, and the deeper I went, the more the more I started to think about whether there was a professional role that would sort of bridge that academic interest in Jewish studies, and also that that desire to to create Jewish community and help facilitate that for people.

Jeff Schwager: It's interesting when you talk about Judaism, you talk a lot about community, the communal aspects of it, but you haven't really mentioned the religious aspects of it. And I'm curious how that resonated for you from a young age and how you see that, uh, relative to the communal aspect?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: To me, it's one of the unique features of Judaism that it's very hard to pick apart the strands. Like, you know, I often hear people say, this is very Seattle. Um, you know, sort of rabbi, you know, I'm Jewish, but I'm not I'm not religious. And to me, like the cultural and the religious are also intertwined, that it's hard to even know what that means. So I think for me, the driver has never been theology alone. It's never been only about God belief. Although certainly for me, Judaism is about how we live out our vision of what it means to be in partnership with God, or what it means to to try to to live a life of holiness and that there are pathways to doing that. Um, but but it's so interwoven that those religious strands and those beliefs, those underpinnings, together with the culture and the practice that what we do in the everyday, how we make life decisions, how we celebrate important moments. So it's all of those pieces that I think are like the actual nuts and bolts, um, that kind of lead to that bigger understanding. And those two things are like an infinity loop. They're kind of self-reinforcing when you're inside that system. So to me, I think a lot about building community, the vehicles for building community are very much religious and cultural, and the more people are invested religious and religiously and culturally in that identity, the stronger the sense of community, the stronger the tapestry of that fabric of community becomes. Does that make sense that there's kind of this reinforcement and it's very hard to pick it apart?

Jeff Schwager: Very much makes sense.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Like what's Passover? You know, it's Is Passover religious or is it cultural? Well, you know, is it about the food? Is it about who's around your table? Is it about belief in God? Is it about this narrative of history that leads us to redemption, shared past, shared future? It's like all of those things and and it's hard for me to pull them apart. So I guess I'm trying to to create platforms that help people find their own, their own language. And I want Jews going to Passover, one way or another. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: That's it's interesting to me. I was raised in an atheist household. My mother's family, uh, fled Kishinev during World War two and were in relocation camps in West Germany. And after the war, my father was raised in the Bronx, and, uh, but they were scientists, and they both were atheists.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: And here you are with a Jewish professional hat on. How interesting.

Jeff Schwager: Is that? I'm wearing my Jewish professional hat at the moment.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: At the moment.

Jeff Schwager: I'm not wearing my.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Jewish.

Jeff Schwager: Right. But so it's it's a question that's always baffled me a lot, but that's sort of.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: What the motivation is.

Jeff Schwager: Maybe I'll come see you when you're wearing your professional hat and ask you about that, but it's always been hard for me to fully embrace, uh, the religion because of the religious aspects.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Right.

Jeff Schwager: Or the identity because of the religious aspects. And I'm, I guess if I'm if I'm looking for a question there, it's can you be a Jew and also be an atheist? And what does that mean?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Sure. I mean, I think so, I think that. I think Judaism, for me, it's like it's a lens for for how we look at the world. And there's so many different pieces to it. And it's not up to me to tell anybody else that the pieces that they come with, that are the motivators for their Jewish journey aren't the right ones. Um, that's kind of how I think of it. You have to have a bigger conversation about this with my husband, who's the academic who thinks more about sort of Jewish people? And you know what it means to be a religion versus a nation versus a peoplehood. And you know why, why it is. But but I think there is some fundamental mismatch, which is to say that in America, especially America, post-World War Two, 20th century American Jewish history, the acceptable mode of difference in America was religious difference. So Jews embraced this idea that we're just like our neighbors. The difference is they go to their church on Sundays and we go to our, you know, our version, our synagogue on a Friday night or a Saturday. And that sort of diminished the idea that there actually were significant cultural differences in values differences. And, you know, sort of all the all the other things that make up a civilization got diminished as the religion became sort of the acceptable way to be different in America, but actually sort of believe, this a little retro, and like bringing back the fullness of what Jewish identity can mean and can be. And I know that, practically speaking, not all Jews want to step foot in synagogue. It's not prayer or God. That's the that's the sort of the entry point motivator for the majority of Jews, especially in a place like Seattle that's so classically, you know, considered unchurched, um, you know, where there's so many people who who don't gravitate, who don't define themselves as religious. So I think opening up lots of pathways in becomes really important, maybe precisely for people like you.

Jeff Schwager: Um, yeah. It's, as I say, a question that's always baffled me. My favorite writer is Philip Roth, and, you know, you couldn't in some ways be identified more as Jewish than Philip Roth. But he's an atheist.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Right?

Jeff Schwager: What does that mean?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Right.

Jeff Schwager: And we'll talk another time.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Yeah, we'll continue that one. That's a good one.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. So so you once you decided to become a rabbi. Yeah. Um, how did your family respond and how did the the world respond? And.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Um, I remember coming home from college telling my family that I was going to be applying to rabbinical school. I had decided this was the path. And my parents were very supportive. They've always been and continue to be very supportive. I said before, I'm one of five kids and I think they see their role as parents, as, you know, let each child develop their own interests and help help launch them in the direction that they want to go. Um, so I always have felt that support and I'm really grateful for it. But my grandparents, and specifically my grandmothers were sort of taken aback at the beginning. Um, they're no longer alive. I think each of them, in their own way, came around by the end to really see the value in what I was doing. But their opposition to my being a rabbi at the beginning was expressed in two really, really different ways. Um, for one of my grandmothers, she said, you know, nice Jewish girl being a rabbi, a nice Jewish girl can marry a rabbi, but you're not supposed to be a rabbi. And she just was coming from a more traditional mindset where she just couldn't imagine, you know, a woman playing, playing that role. My other grandmother, it was, it was sort of a different opposition. Um, and I think for her, the feminist piece was like, that was fine. A woman can do anything that she wants to do. But she had defined herself as so jewishly secular in opposition to the orthodoxy of her parents, um, and had shed religion and religious trappings back to that topic. And she said to me, you know, but, Rachel, you're so smart, you're so talented. Why would you waste your intelligence? Why would you waste your talents and your skills on doing something that's so old, that's so old fashioned? You know, like, I think she saw history as, like, progressing away from religion. And why would I why would I do this? And I tried to explain to her at the time that the way that I understood, um, the way that I understood Judaism, like this was never going to be old. This was all about taking this old tradition,

but making it relevant for for our time, for a new generation. And I think once, once I actually was a rabbi and and doing that in action, she was able to see a little bit of, of what that meant for me. But but at the outset, that was her opposition was she just couldn't imagine why you would want to return to a system that she saw as being so regressive and oppressive. Um, and, and it took really having to build a positive case for. No, I think I actually think that every human being is searching for, for meaning in a very fundamental way, like that's what we're hardwired to do. We're looking for connection. And those connections go a lot of directions. For some people, those are about connections with God. For other people, it's about these lateral connections with other people. It's about connections with tradition, figuring out where you've come from, connecting connections to text, and giving people tools to do that is always going to be, you know, progressive as it were, but I had to make the case.

Jeff Schwager: Did you have any specific mentors or role models in your progression into the rabbi world?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Many mentors, many role models. I've sort of collected them. Um, you know, a few worth mentioning. Probably the first woman rabbi that I had that I met, who was a teacher of mine and has continued to be a teacher, um, for me and colleagues sometimes is Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, who's a rabbi who's now at Hebrew College. Um, when I was in college, I was at Duke and the rabbi of the local Jewish community in Durham, North Carolina, Steve Sager, was a Reconstructionist rabbi, but serving a congregation that was a conservative congregation that had an Orthodox minyan downstairs. And that model of, sort of people coming from multiple backgrounds, um, but being able to engage together as a broader community with Jewish learning at the core was something that I really took forward. So he was a really important mentor and continues to be. During rabbinical school, I took a, I don't know, self-proclaimed hiatus for a year. Um, just to go do something a little bit different and move to California, and was working in a congregation in Palo Alto, where the rabbi was, Shelly Lewis, and he was sort of nearing retirement age. And I went into his office whenever I could and kind of sat at his feet and said, like, open your files, show me what you have. What do you collect? How do you know? What do you learn? You know, how do you actually do this on the ground? You've been doing it for decades. So yeah, I have I have found many rabbis to mentor me over time.

Jeff Schwager: Um hum. Oh, good. Um, how did you end up in Seattle?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I ended up in Seattle in 2004. Um, that was I had been married for a year. My husband and I were both finishing our respective graduate programs I was doing. I was being ordained. He was getting a PhD and going on the job market at the same time in early 2004, and we were looking for two jobs, one academic, one rabbinic in the same city, and he was the limiting factor as an academic. There are actually fewer jobs than rabbinic jobs. And so I was kind of committed to looking in the cities where he had possibilities. One of his possibilities was at UW, and there were a couple of rabbinic positions open in the Seattle Jewish community. And so I came out in 2004 and interviewed for for positions and ended up taking a job at Herzl Ner Tamid as the assistant rabbi. And was there from 2004 to 2006.

Jeff Schwager: And, um, what was that like for you to come to Seattle from? You'd been in Palo Alto, but.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I'd been in New York most and most immediately before coming here.

Jeff Schwager: So you were an East Coast woman?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: That's right.

Jeff Schwager: For the most part. What was it like for you to move to Seattle and what was that change like?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Um, well, there's kind of a sweet story in that. We had vacationed out here. My husband and I. But before we were married, we took a vacation. And we were. We had driven all over the place in the Olympic Peninsula and all that. And we were taking a ferry back across to Seattle. We sort of looked around and said, gosh, wouldn't it be amazing to live in a place like this someday? So we were really drawn to the the physical beauty of the Pacific Northwest. Um, but the coming to, you know, from New York directly to Seattle, um, at that point felt like a huge culture shock. Um, we'd been living on the Upper West Side in Manhattan, you know, just like you walk outside and it's like everything. The world is Jewish. Everything around you is Jewish. And we came out here and, you know, it was hard to find a good bagel. Like, there wasn't so much Jewish. And I had a funny story that first year that we were here, um, we had found the Macrina Bakery in Belltown. We thought Macrina was great. We enjoyed the bread. I went in there at one point, and it was early in the year. We had just arrived and they were getting ready for the High Holidays, and they had round challah and I was like, wow, this is amazing. I didn't know there was so much Jewish in Seattle. And, you know, I said, there's round challah, like, we should buy a round challah. And the woman behind the counter had clearly, like, received the memo, you know, on what to say. She's like, yes, it's round in honor of the Jewish New Year because the year is round, you know, like, okay, great. Take one. Um, anyway, fast forward six months and it's April and we're getting ready for Passover. And on the day before Passover, kind of went back to this bakery for, like, our last chametz fix before, you know, eight days of not eating chametz. And we walk in there and they are ready for Passover with the round on the shelf. And we went away,

you know, like, okay, we're missing that. You know, that Jewishness of of New York and the Upper West Side and kind of. The robustness of Jewish life. And that's a little silly, but, you know. We missed we missed having like, I think, friends, a community that was. Like, so very steeped in Jewish life. Um, yeah. No Zabars. And so something like, you know, we sought to create in our own way. Here was like a higher intensity Jewish experience in a city where the Jewish community is actually, you know, it's in pockets, but really more diffuse as a whole.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, I grew up. I was born in the East Coast in Poughkeepsie, but I grew up in LA and like three great delis within a few blocks of where I grew up. And coming here, it's like there's there's not a decent deli in the whole city.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: That's right. If you go to Pico Robertson, though, like, you'll, you know, you can't find.

Jeff Schwager: A Doctor Brown's Cream soda anywhere. That only.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: For Passover. Huh?

Jeff Schwager: I don't even know. Then I don't know. It's, um. But Macrina does have good bialys.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: They do? It's very funny. It's not really so Jewish, but it's, you know.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Mm. Okay. Uh. Let's see. I think we're up to the point where you're founding. Okay, so tell me about, uh, tell me about that. You're here. You've taken a position as an assistant rabbi.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Have you talked to Susie? You probably already got part of this story, didn't you?

Jeff Schwager: A little bit. Just a little bit.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: You know.

Jeff Schwager: She talked much more about her ambassadorial.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Excellent. Okay.

Jeff Schwager: So she left for you.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Cool. I'll take it. Um, right. So the year is 2006, and I had been in Seattle long enough to to know the lay of the land. Um, had some friends who were here who weren't who were my age. I was in my late 20s at that point. And they weren't affiliated with any congregation. Many of them were living in the northwest quadrant of the city, north of downtown, west of I-5. Neighborhoods like Queen Anne and Magnolia and Green Lake and Phinney and Fremont. And you know, there are no Jews in those neighborhoods. Those aren't the Jewish neighborhoods. So if you kind of follow the Jewish demographic trends here, there had been a Jewish central Seattle, which you know very well about. And then Jews had kind of moved north and north to the north end and south to Seward Park, and east to Mercer Island and the east side. But there was kind of this conventional wisdom that Jews didn't live in these neighborhoods of northwest Seattle, except that I was finding out all over the place that actually they did. Um, lots of younger Jews, mostly transplants to the Seattle area, people who had come here for jobs, largely, and they weren't affiliated. But Susie and I started kind of playing with this idea that that not affiliated didn't necessarily mean disinterested in Jewish life. So our story is that Susie and my husband, Noam, had gone to college together. There was already a connection there. You know, they they knew each other from Hillel and at Brown. And when we had come out here, Susie and Eric had gotten to be friends. And we were out to dinner one night celebrating, celebrating some birthdays and having a conversation about Jewish community. And Susie and Eric had been really involved at at Hillel. Susie had been involved in J Connect's precursor, which was the Grads Plus program, and then felt like she had really outgrown that, having, um, you know, at that point, a baby and a and a toddler running around during high holiday services and, you know, a lot of college students and she's going, this isn't quite, this isn't quite right. Um, but she was really looking for something. And this is what she came to me with. Um, she's very type A, um, she knew what she wanted, and she described to me that what she really needed was something just like a Hillel, but for adults and families, because she and her husband were coming from different Jewish backgrounds and they wanted different Jewish things. She had this whole laundry list, I want these things, and Eric wants these things, and this is what we want for our kids, and which synagogue in town is going to offer us that model? And I laughed, and I was like, none of them are going to offer that. But when you're ready to create it, let me know. And that was kind of the beginning of these conversations. Like if we were going to create a Jewish community together, we knew that there was a population of people out there who weren't weren't kind of finding their way into the existing synagogues, maybe because of location, sometimes because because of the mentality of it or because of what they were looking for specifically. Could we create something really different, a model that looked really different, that would actually meet the needs of a broad swath of this younger generation, Jewish, Jewish community? And that's

where the Kavana idea was born. We started In discussing what that would look like, and decided pretty quickly that it would be an intentional Jewish community. And I went to a friend who's a Hebrew translator and was describing to her what that would look like, that people would be making Jewish decisions about what they wanted their life to look like in an empowered way, and they would be doing it not in a knee jerk way, but very purposefully trying to get to the Jewish life that they wanted for themselves. And, you know, I said, I don't know what we're going to call this community. We need a name for it. And it can't have any guttural. It needs to be a Hebrew word with no guttural letters in it, like no huhs. She said, okay, that's your name. Like, okay, great. Kavana is our name. So.

Jeff Schwager: And what does Kavana?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Kavana means intention. And it expressed exactly that, the goal that people were really thinking in an intentional way about how they wanted their Judaism to be manifest in their life. Yeah. So that was. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: And so what were the challenges of starting a new community? Uh.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Um, well, I think first, first, we thought about the opportunities of starting a new community before challenges. Like we were really thinking, you know, it felt like an incredible privilege as a relatively young rabbi, um, to know that I had gained from my time at Herzl some of the skills of being a rabbi, you know, being able to meet with people and do life cycle events and lead services and all those things. Like, I had some of that under my belt and had done work in other settings. But now I had this clean slate to get to play and experiment and, you know, take some risks and, and think really broadly about how if we were going to build a Jewish community that was a new one from the ground up, how would that be structured and how would it be hardwired, and what would that look like, and what would the culture of it be? So it felt like this incredible opportunity to get to to do something from scratch, um, and particularly to mesh with the local culture of Seattle. And, you know, at that point, most of the people who were involved in Kavana in that starting phase were younger adults, late 20s to early 40s, maybe. Um, many of whom were here because they were part of the, the world of tech or innovation. So these are like outside the box thinkers who had been trained to to be really creative in applying solutions to, to business problems. And, you know, and yet, Jewish community wise, they only knew sort of the very classic approaches. And, you know, here are blank slate. Like that was really exciting for people. Um, the challenges were that it's it's very hard to create something whole wholesale from scratch. I mean, it's hard on a lot of levels. We had to create a whole new vocabulary in a sense. Um, because we were thinking about creating this holistic Jewish approach, you know, which I described like similar to a Hillel model. But, you know, for everyone, you know, meaning this is going to be a place where it's sort of part synagogue, part JCC, part community, part educational institution. Like, what is it? It's a hybrid. It's a hybrid model, and we don't have a name for that. So we were sort of inventing a vocabulary and trying to explain the idea, but people still had like very strongly hardwired from their own upbringings, like they knew what a synagogue was, whether they had joined one or not. And, you know, that was sort of an expectation. So trying to undo some expectations and build up a new vocabulary, um, was definitely a challenge. Getting people excited about about new ideas was not a challenge. People started showing up. Um, the very first event that we did was a Friday night in the summer, like a Gasworks park, Shabbat in the park, kind of a thing. And almost a hundred 100 people came, like all word of mouth out of the woodwork, just to see what some kind of more creative Jewish something could look like. So the response has been, yeah, it was at the beginning and has continued to be really tremendous.

Jeff Schwager: So when you tell people about Kavana now, what's your elevator pitch?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I'm terrible at elevator pitches. Um, when I tell people about Kavana now I tell people that what we're trying to do together is to build a different model for a Jewish community where people are really empowered to create the Jewish lives that they want for themselves. Like, that's that's it in a nutshell. And I don't have one preconceived notion of how that has to look. And it can be a little bit different for everybody. But we're building the platform together. Um, and, and what we know from, you know, now, 11 years of doing this experiment work is that the deeper people get into being a part of a Jewish community, the more positive outcomes you're going to see. So, you know, people could name those positive outcomes differently. But I think of those as, you know, I can say Judaism feels like a meaningful framework for my life. I've I've gained, you know, I've grown in my Jewish knowledge from being a part of this. I have more Jewish friends, you know, from having been a part of this community. I have a deeper sense, a deeper spiritual life, or a deeper sense of connection to the religious aspects of Judaism or to God, you know, whatever that means to me. Like that. People could say all of those things as positive statements by virtue of having been involved in a community like this. Like, that was that's the sign of success. And what we found is that when people join and become a part of the community, you know, it really takes you deeper and deeper and deeper and, and you're more likely to have all of those things ringing true. But it takes some time. There's a long entry ramp.

Jeff Schwager: So you don't have a synagogue. Is that something that you ...

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: You mean a building? A building we don't have a building.

Jeff Schwager: Is that is that a future goal, or is it, uh, do you see it as a strength of the organization, that you don't have one particular place?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I will never say never, because the future could look different. But I will say that at this point, um, there's no aspiration to have a building. Like Kavana has actually succeeded, largely because the investment of the community has been in the people and in the programs and not in the physical infrastructure. But I see it as a tension. I mean, there's no there's no perfect solution for how to build a great Jewish community. There are lots of wonderful solutions, but each is going to come with their own pluses and minuses. And there are obvious advantages to having a building. And there are days where I wish I had a building. Most of those days are days where I have like a crate of siddurim in the trunk of my car that I'm, you know, carting from one place to another, or, you know, taking stuff to an event and setting up a new space and unpacking and taking that stuff back to what we jokingly call Kavana World Headquarters, which is, you know, really just some crappy classrooms, you know, that we rent from a from a church in Queen Anne. Um, you know, and it's very tongue in cheek that we call it World Headquarters because there's nothing grand about it at all. We have some office space and some storage space, and, you know, it's like, good enough space. Um, so those are the downsides that it's like small and scrappy and that we're that we're schlepping stuff a lot and that there's a lot of setup and cleanup and that as a rabbi, I've learned a lot about how to hang banners and, you know, do all kinds of things that I imagine my rabbinic colleagues in other places are not necessarily doing. So there are days when I envy the building, but not having a building has also sort of freed us of an albatross around our necks. Um, it means that nobody's paying building. We don't have to raise the money for a building, and we don't have building assessments to keep the roof on or the heater working or, you know, any of those things. And, you know, that's the tangible. And then the slightly more, um, I don't know, the looser way to think about it is that not having a building has also been a huge advantage, because it's given us a lot of elasticity to be able to say, where, where do we want to be for this? What would be the space that would make the most sense for this kind of an event? We want to do a Shabbat event and it's July. People want to be outside, like, we're going to do this in a park and people want to be inside, and we're going to do this in a coffee shop and, you know, this kind of thing. Actually, we want our learning to take place in a homey sort of environment, so it feels intimate. We're going to have learning happening in people's living rooms. So, you know, it's not having a building in that way has been very freeing because it's allowed Judaism to really be in people's lives, which I think it can be. But but this creates like that physical, you know, the muscle memory that kids have who are growing up in this Kavana community is that Judaism is happening everywhere. It's happening in their homes, it's happening indoors, it's happening outdoors. It's like it's their camping trip, like Judaism is their life, not a building.

Jeff Schwager: So on the holidays, uh, where do you.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Yeah, we need buildings.

Jeff Schwager: Do you all worship together? Do you go to separate synagogues.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: On the holidays? Um, well, it's evolved over time, but. But on the on the high holidays this year. Um, Kavana rented space from two different church buildings in Queen Anne and set up a whole slate of offerings in one and a whole slate of offerings in the other. And they were just a few, a few blocks apart, and people sort of walked back and forth between them. And there was this really lovely sense of community, and we put out a schedule for all of these events, you know, almost like a conference schedule, like if you want a family service, you know, it's happening here at this time and a traditional service is happening here. And discussion groups for teens are going to be here and a liberal service is there, and yoga and meditation is here. And, you know, people could kind of look at all of these offerings and pick and choose again with that empowerment philosophy, where as the rabbi, I see my job as setting up these options, each of which should be really content rich, should have deep Torah and deep tefillah and deep Jewish practice. Um, but the onus is on the participants who are walking in the door. You know where I'm saying to each of them, as it were, um, what is it that you want? Like Yom Kippur is a day for for doing this hard work of atonement and trying to figure out who we are and how we can be our very best selves. So that when you exit this day so you have a gift of 25 hours, how are you going to spend your time like, you know, and then the burden is actually on the person who's showing up to say, okay, look, I see this slate of options and I'm going to choose this one and this one and this one because that's what I need. And so people will say things like that to me. And I love the way that our High Holidays work, you know, that somebody can come up to me. I'm usually in the traditional services. That's kind of my own, my own hardwiring. Um, but then somebody can come up and say to me, I started my morning with a Jewish meditation session, and then I went to, you know, the traditional davening for a while, but but after a while, I realized that wasn't really where I needed to be. And so I went and took a walk outside and came back for this, you know, this Torah study discussion. And now I wanted to end my day, you know, back in a prayer space. And so, you know, that's where I am. And so the people have, like the fluidity, the flexibility, um, to make those decisions, but that it's all happening within the context of community, I think. Is that right balance, like if it were too individualistic, people would be living Judaism, you know, in isolation. And that feels very antithetical to me to what Judaism is

supposed to be, which is so connective. Um, but to expect that everybody is going to have the same, same experiences or needs or a one size fits all also doesn't sit well. So to me this is like how we try to get it. The right nexus there, the right balance.

Jeff Schwager: And how big is the community?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I don't know, how do you measure communities?

Jeff Schwager: I don't know.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I know that's the problem. Um, I mean, synagogues tend to measure through membership units. How many households are a part of it? If you measure that way, right now, we have like 135 households who are partners in the Kavana community, but there are probably twice that number who participate in Kavana activities. And if you ask them, do you have a Jewish community? They would name Kavana. So they're kind of part of the thing too, because we've created these different ways to to be involved in it. Um, they're like, I don't know, probably 1300, 1400 people on an email list who know about Kavana . Then we have our partners in other cities that we're working with. So there's some degree of like influence and idea sharing. So I think about this as like concentric circles that that start pretty small and, and really get pretty really get pretty big.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. What are your goals for the community moving forward?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Transform the entire American Jewish world, I don't know. That's modest right? No, but I say that, like, in all sincerity and with a high degree of humility, because, you know, I. And none of this is easy. Yeah. And nobody's going to do this work single handedly. But I think each generation has to make. I think this is like the eternal Jewish struggle and the and also the thread of continuity through Jewish history, like Judaism today, looks very different than Judaism did in medieval Spain, you know, looked very different than Judaism did in Talmudic times in Bavel, you know, looked very different than Judaism did in the days of Tanakh. Like, you know, we've been through all these windy Jewish roads and Jewish time and Jewish space, like, you know, where you are in Jewish history. Really, it changes the experience. and there are threads of continuity that run through all of that, like the shared history. And and our texts are really the threads of continuity. But in each generation, it's almost like that generation has to figure out what is the Judaism, how is it going to be manifest to actually be relevant and to add value to our lives here in this time and in this place? Like that's the question that I'm asking and that I think all of us are asking. It's not it's not all about me. It's not all about Kavana. That's the question that all of us are asking is, how is Judaism going to animate our lives and help us be the people that we want to be in the world in this day and age? So I guess that's the piece that I'm most most passionate about, is trying to figure out the answers to those questions.

Jeff Schwager: Wonderful. Let me see how we're doing on time. We're doing great on time. Awesome. I'm just going to glance at my.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Yeah. Is this getting at the stuff you wanted to get at?

Jeff Schwager: I think so.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Okay.

Jeff Schwager: Um. One thing you said that, um, jumped out at me, uh, was, God, whatever that means to me. Yeah. What does it mean to you?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Um. That's such a hard question. It changes from day to day.

Jeff Schwager: Um, it is a hard question, but it's the question I always want to ask people who are religious.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Because you grew up an atheist. Yeah, yeah. That's true shtick, I don't know, I mean.

Jeff Schwager: Woody Allen's shtick, I just borrowed it.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I guess so I guess so I don't know what God means. I struggle with the idea of God. I know that I don't believe in a God who is a being, even though that's the way that God is portrayed in a lot of our our stories. But to me, God is like God is the animating life force. God is. God is. Sometimes I think of God as the projection that we human beings make onto a screen out there of all of our aspirations for who we could be as human beings, and then we call that God, and then we have a target that we've set, and now we know where we're where we're headed. So it's very humanistic and sociological.

Jeff Schwager: It's not even acceptable for a rabbi to say that.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: I can say whatever I want, can't I? I don't know.

Jeff Schwager: You can say anything you want to me.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: And this isn't being recorded or anything, is it? As long as it's not on, on video and. Yeah. Just kidding. Um, yeah, I don't know, maybe that's a little iconoclastic, but I think actually the God definitions in our Jewish tradition have also changed throughout time. So I consider myself like a believer in God. But that definition of God is a very loose definition. And I see God as like the target of what we're aiming towards, and God as the as the life force that is. And to be really honest, like God as commander doesn't work particularly well for me. Like, I'm serious about keeping Shabbat, but I don't do it because I'm sure that there's a being out there that wants me to do it and has commanded it. For me, I keep Shabbat because it connects me through all the layers of of Jewish history. I keep Shabbat because my great grandparents kept Shabbat, and I keep Shabbat because Jews around the world keep Shabbat, and I keep Shabbat because it's a thread that that traces back in Jewish time. And I keep Shabbat because I can figure out ways that doing so animates my life and, you know, helps to make my life more meaningful. So it it's both all about God and not at all about God for me.

Jeff Schwager: Beautiful. Okay. Thank you so much.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: All right. I hope that was.

Jeff Schwager: It was fantastic.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Helpful. And there's some usable stuff in there.

Jeff Schwager: There's nothing but usable stuff in there. The whole thing I.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum: Get very self-conscious thinking about.