Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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# Albert Maimon

## SUMMARY

Al Maimon discusses his personal connection to Jewish history, highlighting how his family's involvement and community experiences have shaped his understanding and appreciation of traditions. He emphasizes the importance of preserving history through personal efforts, community engagement, and effective communication, especially in capturing stories and documents for future generations. Maimon underscores the role of historical societies in transmitting historical messages and maintaining a connection to heritage.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: So I'm just going to adjust this to your height. And if you wouldn't mind just stating your name for me, please.

Al Maimon: Hi, this is Al Maiman.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Sounds great. With the lapel microphone, I like to remind people not to...

Al Maimon: Sit on my hands [laughs]!

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah, don't gesture too wildly.

Al Maimon: Okay, I can hold this there.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, yeah, you can hold that for sure.

Al Maimon: Okay.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Just people whack it, and it's like...

Al Maimon: It hurts your ears [laughs].

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: It does. Okay, so it's currently recording. And I just want to ask you for your verbal consent to record the interview.

Al Maimon: Let's do it. Yes.

Al Maimon: I'm going to keep this here so I can have an eye on the time. I don't have a watch. Um, this is Ruth Kodesh-Eskin, and it's May 7th, and we're at the WSJHS office on Mercer Island. You've stated your name and offered your consent to record the interview. Um, we're here today to talk about the importance of preserving Jewish history. Can you remember being taught about Jewish history when you were growing up?

Al Maimon: Before we get started, if you don't mind, I just-in my mind-framing this conversation and more generally, uh, there's a couple of background assumptions that I'm making. Um, one is that this is essentially an example as a model of communication where there's a sender and a receiver and there's a message and a medium and a time. And so the notion of talking about Jewish history in this context is, um, related to me personally. And that has to do with my background, where I was born and where I

grew up and all of that. And it also has to do with, um, a distinction that I want to make between history and memory- or not, not so much a distinction, the relationship between history and memory. And so now remind me of your first question.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Do you want to talk about history and memory?

Al Maimon: Yes, I do.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: And and the distinction you see there?

Al Maimon: Yes, yes. Um, one more thing, I guess, about my background. I was born and raised in Seattle. My my mother was born and raised in Seattle. She comes from the Island of Rhodes. My father was born and raised in Turkey, and moved here when he was a teenager with his father, who became the rabbi of Sephardic Bikur Holim,the synagogue that I go to. And so…and my mother's father, for many years, was the cantor of that synagogue. So, I [am] deeply rooted in Seattle and deeply rooted in the Sephardic synagogue in Seattle, in the community. From there, we'll find out about where I've gone to as as well. And so, history are sort of dates and places and things and times that happen. Memory is how we sort of process that and how we interpret those facts and data. Although, and so, um…it's important to me, and I'll close with this as being a link. We are links in the chain of Jewish history and memory, and it's important for us to have the memory and the knowledge and awareness of where we come from, so that when we create our link, it's a straight line chain-now it can be the same-because time and place change, but it's going to be recognizable and rooted in our history. And that requires our memory.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, yeah. I wanted to ask about, you know, what your early memories of being taught about Jewish history or about Jewish memory. Um, like, do you remember being a kid and having anyone talk to you about preserving Jewish history?

Al Maimon: I don't remember anybody really talking to me, per se, about history, except that we would learn the Bible. We would learn from the books the Jewish history, but on a personal basis, it was sort of our practice and the relationships that we had and the customs that we had. It was implicit history and memory. So, I guess everything that I grew up with-the foods and the synagogue services and the and the community events that we had, and all of that-were just not points in time; they were related to to our history.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: To that chain.

Al Maimon: To that chain. Yes.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Do you think that's a particularly Jewish way of looking at history or memory?

Al Maimon: I think it's a universal way…it can…should be. And for sure; it should be a Jewish way of doing it. I myself thought for the longest time, in this building the links on the chain, that our job was to preserve the customs and preserve the practices and all of that. And someone once pointed out to me, do you think that the cafeteria, the cafe, in Istanbul 200 years ago, was the same and life was around there the same as it was 100 years ago? No it wasn't. There was a change that happens. And so it's important to to have that view in general. And when you think, as a human being in this place and time on Earth, that we're not we're not orphans, and we're not independent of what came before us, what is now and what will come.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: We want to gather some stories about WSJHS as a Jewish history institution. What's your connection to the organization?

Al Maimon: So I've never been on the board [laughs]. I have been on certain committees. I've been a pretty active attendee and customer of the historical society. And I also have [participated] informally, through my brother in law, Eugene Normand, who is past president, Lilly De Jaen, Anita Kaplan, and Sonny Gorasht, and on and on. I've had many conversations with each, and all of those people about what their interviews are for, what they're about, and how they fit…and the place of residence at the University of Washington Library, and the -good thing about that and the challenges about that. So I was at one time, I don't know, it may have been right around the time you came, maybe even just a little bit before,there was some conversation about there being a Jewish museum in Seattle that everybody said, "Yeah, we should," but there was no energy about it. And then what you've done say, "Okay, we may not have a bricks and mortar place, but we're going to have…" Let me see [laughs]. I've been a sometimes active but always interested observer of what has been happening in the historical society.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: It sounds like you've been a part of a lot of conversations behind the scenes. Does that sound accurate?

Al Maimon: Yes.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah.

Al Maimon: Um, excuse me one other thing. And we talked about this briefly that the University of Washington's Stroum School Center and the Sephardic Studies Program in it is another piece of the puzzle between the library and the community. I mean, the historical society is prime in the community. And politically, I sort of realized that it's come to understand that the way around the table to light with the library, maybe sometimes it needs to have an academic presence there, as well as the communal presence. And I'm pretty involved in that too [laughs]. Um, from the Sephardic Studies Program, you know, you're very familiar with the digital library. When they were collecting the items, I was...I don't know if I had the idea at the beginning, it sort of came to me that there's leverage now that the Jewish community has because it filled up Devon Naar's office. [Laughts] And so, to try and negotiate the the understanding between the library and access of the community and "ownership" and what it means and what it doesn't mean with being a public university and the question of having some religious parts of the Jewish experience in a public university reads all kinds of questions. So in part, that's still an ongoing discussion, actually, in many ways. But I think we're making progress. And in the maturity of the historical society and in the emerging importance of the Center and the Sephardic Studies Program in the university world.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Would you do me a favor and just walk that back a little and talk about those early days, you know, before, you know, when we're talking about we need a Jewish museum and what the Sephardic Studies Department looked like or how it how it emerged.

Al Maimon: It wasn't there then. It's been around just a little over 10, 12 years, something like that. And the committee, I mean, you've been in a position in...I don't know how long. It's been a long time.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Like gesturing to...[gesturing to Lisa Kranseler off camera].

Al Maimon: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Yeah.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: We're just going to we're going to pretend she's not here.

Al Maimon: Okay. That person has been the Director, now, I don't remember exactly how long. It's 12, 15 years. Huh? 20. Wow. Okay. How time flies. So the committee that I was talking about with Sonny, about the museum, preceded that, actually. And I was surprised when I was talking with Sonny about the limitations on access that existed then. And the question of of having a museum should be independent from, or still be connected with, the university and the library and all of that. And so nothing came of it. But I learned a lot about what some of the dynamics were. And then the idea...just the leadership of the of this society and the community in general wasn't sufficiently interested in a Jewish museum as to make it a priority for fundraising and for energy...I think to our communal detriment, but that's what, that's what I'm talking about back then, way a long time ago.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, and how did you see the energy to work on those things generate?

Al Maimon: Well, there was a committee, and I was -in my professional life, I was sort of a consultant, a management consultant- and working with teams and groups for how to talk about things and discuss alternatives and come up with a plan, a course of action. And so my official role on that effort at that time was sort of to be a consultant of the committee that Sonny was the chair of to explore the the possibility of the idea of and what a museum would look like.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Got it. Um, can you say what the purpose of an organization like is in your eyes?

Al Maimon: So we use the expression "preservation of Jewish history." Um, so first of all, one thing that came to mind recently is that, um, "Who's the audience?" Right? And I think there are two fundamentally two different audiences, and they have different needs and maybe, of course, different courses of action. One is the Jewish community and the other is the community, the general community at large for the historical society, for the Jewish community. It's an idea, and it's a place, that says we're not living in a vacuum. We have history, and that history is expressed in ideas, it's expressed in thoughts, it's in, it's in words, it's in practices. And the historical society is a place to sort of capture and organize all of those expressions of our being from that time. And that's a very broad and ambitious goal. And, there's a lot of other things that are addressing that as well. So, for me, the Jewish Historical Society looks at the community of which it's a part, and looks at where there needs to be more attention. There needs to be some collection of our history that complements everything else, the synagogues and the schools and, and and and other other organizations. And the book that came out, the Washington state book, that was a that was a perfect example of, "Here's the history, and then here's what happened when, and here's the relationships that were there." And that, I think was a perfect example of what the purpose of the Jewish Historical Society is. And in my mind, that's mostly for inside the Jewish community. I'm not so clear in my mind, and I don't know if it is even an actual active part of the historical society, to see that it's the voice, not the voice...a place for the general community to learn about, and understand, and figure out how our Jewish society and community fits into the larger... That's the difference. So that's it.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah, that that second piece is more of an open question.

Al Maimon: Yes, I think so.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, switching more to a personal note, can I ask how you keep your family stories alive? I'm just going to ask you to drop your hands.

Al Maimon: Oh, sorry. Thank you, sorry! Um. How? It's time for the stories. Well. So, um. To who? When?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Well, yeah. It's another form of preservation.

Al Maimon: Yes, yes. So in my family is my children, my wife, my grandchildren and great grandchildren. And that's one level. And then my mother had 12, was one of 12. My father was one of eight. And my wife's family has a lot also. So our...that next level of family is. uh, they're living all over the place. And then, um, there's the what I consider to be a member of the family of people and organizations that have been very constant sort of part of my life just where I'm at. So to answer your question, for our immediate family, we have a WhatsApp group. My granddaughter gave the name Mashallah [laughs]. And so through that that what's one main means of communication we're sharing what's happening in the family. I sort of try and put a context about what's going on and where it is and how it fits, like with, say, Shabbat Shalom, instead of saying Shabbat Shalom, Shabbat Yitro, this is coming here, this is it. Or if there's something that's going...that we as a as a family do that is sort of unique...we, not everybody in the family has experience or knows as much as they can or should. I will put information on the WhatsApp chat group. Papu, that is what they called me, um, he always asks questions and they say, "Oh no, Papu." [laughs]. But they hear and they see that we have artifacts. We have, uh, the books that my father got from his father, and they're studying...so we're looking at books not just for what the printed content is, but also who owns it, how we used it, when he used it, and all of that. And that is something that I use in my family. It's also what I was talking about before as being an archivist. I have a lot. My wife would say, "Way too much." And for examples of books and things and papers that that, uh, I share with people when it's when it's an opportune time. And like I said before, there's communications. There's a sender and a receiver. I think another aspect-another real big purpose of the historical society is that senders don't always think it's time for them to send. Like, how many times do you have your grandparents...you wish you asked that question? "What was it like when they did that?" Right? So they either told us and we didn't pay attention, or they just never thought to ask it because that was part of their...who cared what they've done. And receivers have their lives full, and they're living day-to-day life, and they're they're going and pursuing whatever part they're doing. And so when the sender is ready to send, the receiver is not ready necessarily always to receive. And so what I personally try to do, and I think is the role of the historical society, is to be two things. One is a place where the sender decides to capture the information, the interviews and all of that. And so you've got what the sender wanting to send at least part of it. And so it's there for when the receiver wants...is receptive, and it's that stage of their life or that have that question I wish I had asked. And so being the keeper of of sending...of messages being sent to be ready to be received by them in their time and in their way, is one. The other thing is, and this is a much harder thing to do, but I think that you're working on it. This is something I think is a priority-is to say, because you have all these special, uh, looking at special part of our history, of our community and all that. So there you're saying...you're looking out there for receivers who can be prompted and attracted to come and see that part of the message that you're wanting to send.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: I love this sender and receiver framework. Do you know where that came from or are you just kind of inventing it? Where did that come from?

Al Maimon: It has to do with my with my work life [laughs]. I may have just coined those terms, but it has to do with communication theory. It's-I mean, it's...and the other part of communication is that it's two way conversation as well. And so the idea of the sender and receiver and...you can carry that analogy and say what's noise [laughs]. Right? Because there's not always a message content [laughs] what's going and what's and what's being transmitted. So it's sort of-I'm sure I didn't make it up. It comes from somewhere, but I can't tell you what book or where I got it from.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, okay. So using your framework, or using the communications framework. I'm curious about, um, still in your kind of family history zone. Who are the...are there other people who act as history keepers or story keepers? People who like kind of similar to the role of the historical society, who hold on to stories and pass them along in your family? Is there anyone you want to mention who plays that role?

Al Maimon: Um, for different parts of it. My brother-in-law, Eugene Normand, he his...his nature-I mean, like from his historical society experience, and also he was...I mentioned I'm Sephardic. And some of my best friends are Ashkenazic [laughs]-my wife [laughs] and my brother-in-law and all that. And so when he came to the community, when he came to the family, it was like eye opening and he was aware of some of the questions of things that we just took were as that way, because we always did it. So he

would be asking, and then he definitely is a person who has in over the years in the family, uh, performed that function in our immediate family. There's a couple of very interesting, um, neat thing to see: young people who are living in Israel, New York, in New Jersey, who who are part of the family. And I hear and see them, first of all, asking questions. And also some of them are...when we say, well, okay, we came from this particular place in Turkey. Well, there's, you know, Hazzan Cantor, Isaac Azose, okay. There's cousins. Okay. And his son is a young man who lives in New York. He is scholar of the first degree, and he's used that scholarship to go into archives and to study rabbinic correspondence and literature that is focused on the places where we, our family, came from. And so he has he has discovered information that was not...that we didn't carry here with us, but it was a very much a very important part of who we were. That answers questions about why we do what we do. I don't know, the synagogue has a newsletter called La Boz and in this Pesach edition, Yossi Azose, he wrote part of his adventure, his journey about how he found people and references to the synagogue. The synagogue where my grandfather was the rabbi of in Tekirdag was on the Sea of Marmara. And it was, when they built it on waterfront...more than waterfront. It was built over water. And I remember hearing stories of Lilly De Jaen was talking to her family of hers, that remembers that that synagogue was over water. You can look in one part of the synagogue, you can look down and you could see where the beams had holes and you see the water underneath there. But then came urban renewal in that city. And they destroyed that... and they got rid of the waterfront. And so there was no way of seeing that. And so all we had was the oral history that Lilly and her relatives and others, my dad and others, had. But then Yossi found this in writing, and it talks about how wonderful it is and how special it is for a synagogue-to have to have it synagogue over water, because there's a verse in Psalms that says, "God will listen to prayers that are coming from the water." So yes, there's other people around and thankfully not just my generation. Next generation is coming up and curious and looking into things.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thanks for sharing. That's a really great story. Um, I'm curious about...it sounds like your family is spread all over the place, but if there are certain places that act as keepers of memory or keepers of history for you or for your family.

Al Maimon: So we used to have family reunions. We haven't had it...we figured that a couple of years ago...we figured the the geographical mean would see we should have our conference somewhere in Kansas City [laughs]. Um, so. Nothing formal that comes to mind. But the place where there is concentration of the community, not just the family, but also, you know, the family there informally coming together. My daughter lives in Ra'anana and she has a couple of cousins who made Aliyah. They live in Netanya. And she said, my grandson, he loves to help make boyos in Sephardic food. So they'll get together and they'll do the...making food. And then that process is a platform for them to remember things and to talk about, and what's going on with you and where it's happening. And so those are informal centers and, uh...and over the years we haven't really um, addressed the issue of where the engine of our keeping our family history and memory is going to is going to land.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Sure. Do you want to talk at all about your move, your upcoming move?

Al Maimon: Well. Um. No, I mean, yeah, we can I mean, yeah, but I'm not sure how it relates to the subject that we're talking about now, well how it relates is that you asked me how I'm keeping examples of my family, the next question...is how am I playing a role in preserving the Jewish history in Seattle? And, um, that there is something to say because... and I have-over the years-I've collected, without any much organization or intentionality or anything. A lot of organizations that I've been involved with over the years, which include the synagogue, all the schools, the family service-not The Family Service-the Stroum Center, the Kollel, the Va'ad, and the list goes on...local and national organizations. And I don't throw away very much. And so I have a lot of material and I also have notes to myself and notes that I was just sort of saving that sort of define critical moments in the history of the organizations. And so, it's always just sort of been there. And every once in a while someone will ask a question or I'll think of something and, and I'll dig out, remember that when we got that note, or did you think we're thinking about this now? For the first time, it's been discussed at least three times that...in my notes. And so, talk about sending and it's probably a good thing that I'm doing that now because I have not been a very good sender, systematic sender. And this idea, the move and going from 3000ft² to less than 1000ft² [laughs] and the importance of that not coming with me, but rather staying, finding a home, staying here, is what I've been thinking a lot about for the move. It's important to me to do that. Some people will say, "Oh, you don't think you're a traitor, you're leaving the community? You're so important." No. Not yet. I don't feel that way, but I do feel that I have something that's worthwhile sharing, or at least having it be more organized such that in case a receiver is ready for a message, there's some place to go and have and have that done. So as far as this conversation is concerned, that's really...it's a good thing. It will be a good thing when I get... [laughs] when I figure out how to do it, to have sorted through what I've got, and found a place for people when they're curious or when they want to know something, they go and be able to to see if there's something that is there that is useful.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah. So we're talking about meeting notes, newsletters, all kinds of materials related to Seattle Jewish heritage and community organizations for the last-

Al Maimon: 50 to 60 years. From my knothole. And it's that. And that's another thing. The objectivity is a very relative term

[laughs], right? And so what I have sort of what I've kept reflects some randomness, but also my interests and what I think is there. Yep.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah. Um, you mentioned, um, like, conflicts that occurred in the past, that...or conflicts or areas of tension or areas of growth, even for positions that that may just recur, and being able to kind of like pass along, you know, look this has happened before. Um, I think that's a really cool possibility that your collection could provide. Um, I'm curious about how you could support the context for people, for the receivers in the future.

Al Maimon: Yeah. Um. Some of them have gone through some folders and some of them, um, I've forgotten, even because I see what it is today, and I forgot how we got from there to here and and, um...I don't know if it's going to be enough just to organize things by date. I think there's a subject orientation or perspective. Right? There are certain things going on in the various day schools. And we landed the way we were as a result of planning. As a result of conflicts, some of it, some of it be being ideological or philosophical or just different approach to education, but some of it also for better or for worse being personal. And so how that could be useful in the future is, first of all, to understand why we are where we are. And it's not...it was not a given that says it has to be. This is the way it has to be, and that, um, it can stay true to the original goal and mission in the in the context of the current situation. And having that insight, I think is it would be important.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: I see this really circling back to your links on a chain?

Al Maimon: [Laughs] Yes. Yeah.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, is there anything else that you want to mention before we close it up here?

Al Maimon: Just again, I think that metaphor to me resonates with Jewish history. The whole Jewish experience is that that we are here in our time and our place living. And it's our job to figure out, from a Jewish religious point of view, from a halachic point of view, from a historical point of view, from every dimension, every aspect of Judaism that we can think of. And not all. Not everybody holds all of them or not everybody holds them up in the same priority. But anything Jewish that we that we are experiencing, individually and societally, unfolding...it's important for us to know as much as we can about where, who we are, where we come from, who we were, and how we got here. Not so that, as I originally thought, that we can duplicate it and hold onto it and all that, but rather to say that was then and this is now, in this time and in this place, we have to be informed by our history. I said before, we're not orphans. We can make ourselves orphans. But we're not orphans. So we have to understand where we came from and then get to how we build our own link in the chain, and then look around over there and see one of the things for me, all of a sudden, I realized a couple of years ago, maybe a little bit too late, that it's my shift now to be the sender [laughs]. And that's who, me? I don't know if you can stop it. I'll tell you something else.