Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Roby Blecker

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SUMMARY

Roby Blecker shares his background as someone born into a Jewish family who experienced a period of alienation from his faith during college, reconnecting later through a close friend. He describes his life in Bellingham, highlighting his active role in the community, including interfaith efforts, his work as an author, and his marriage to a non-Jewish partner who converted to Judaism. Blecker emphasizes the inclusive and evolving nature of his synagogue, the importance of interfaith understanding, and the community's growth and support for diversity.

CONTENT WARNING: This interview discusses themes of death and mourning.

ML: Okay. So good morning again. Today is November 19, 2021. We're here with Roby [pronounced *rob-ee*] on Zoom.

RB: It's Roby [pronounced *row-bee*].

ML: Sorry—with Roby—and I'm here on the behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society, so welcome. My first question would be if you could tell me briefly about your background, anything you want to share about your life story?

RB: Well, I was born Jewish. I was raised in a reform environment. In college I drifted away for a number of reasons, and I was probably alienated for fourteen years. Then I was sent back by a nun who became one of my best friends, and may she rest in peace. I started just following what called me. So I intermarried at a time when there was only one rabbi in Los Angeles who would intermarry couples, and we were married for thirty-five years. We were together for thirty-six and he died. He was my *bashert* [destined] and he died in 2013. So I've been without him for a while.

I'm active at the synagogue; lately, mostly through Zoom. I give backup sermons on Friday nights when the rabbi is out of town. I have been a Jewish author for Guideposts, which is a Norman Vincent Peale's publishing company since 1997. I also was involved with, and edited for several years, the *Western States Jewish History Journal*, which is one of the reasons I was interested in your project.

ML: Okay. Thank you for this very interesting background. You did a lot of things; that sounds like a very interesting life to live. Speaking of the community you are part of, could you tell me more about your relationship with Bellingham, the community, and the city, and more in general?

RB: My husband and I moved out of Los Angeles in 2005 to be up here because I have been affiliated as a Jew with the Benedictine monastery for nuns on the island—on Shaw Island in the San Juans—and they became very much like our family. They gave us great support, but I had to live where there was a synagogue and Bellingham was that place.

I'm also an author. I've written a number of books. I encountered Bellingham because I came to the monastery so much, they considered me a local author and I participated at a local author panel at Western Washington State University, which of course is in Bellingham; fell in love with the city. And it is the only synagogue between Everett and Vancouver. So it's a very eclectic

community and I love that.

ML: That sounds very nice. What would you recall—so you've been living in Bellingham since 2005, but over these years what would you recall being the most important event in the history of the community so far that you had a chance to be part of, or that maybe was told to you by somebody else in the community?

RB: Bellingham the city is wonderful because you can get any place in fifteen minutes. I came out of Los Angeles where you couldn't get anywhere in less than an hour, so that's marvelous.

Also, I'm a change-of-seasons person and Los Angeles does not have weather; it has climate. The synagogue community—they're all, with only a few notable exceptions, really warm, welcoming *heimisha* [homey] people and they've gone out of their way in a lot of areas to help others. And that's one of my goals in life now: is just to be a help to other people.

There's a family up here—the family is composed of husband, wife, and five kids, all of whom converted to Judaism. When the oldest boy, Michael, had a *bar mitzvah,* they didn't have anyone to pass the Torah to them to give to Michael, and they asked me to be their grandmother. So I now have family up here—unofficial family; family of the heart I call them rather than the blood. And [I] ended up with grandchildren even though I never had kids, so—

ML: Oh yeah, that sounds wonderful. That sounds incredible. So do you—I don't know, maybe you'll tell me—do you have any recollection of how this Jewish community in Bellingham is maybe different from others in the region, or like in terms of like the holidays they might celebrate, the traditions they might have that might be different from different communities and communities in the area, that you might know of?

RB: Well, the only other Jewish community in the direct area is Chabad. And we were founded in 1905 or something as an Orthodox congregation and, before I got here, they went straight from Orthodox to Reform without pausing for a moment at Conservative. But we have a wide variety. There's a Saturday morning service sometimes, not just Friday nights.

There is a Conservative *minyan* that gets together. It's needing to be resource for all parts of the Jewish community, including people who have never affiliated with the synagogue but who want a Jewish funeral, and I've participated in minyans there to allow someone that we didn't know to have a Jewish burial, because that was their wish. The synagogue has a *chevra kadisha* [sacred society].

We make ourselves welcoming as much as possible for Jews anywhere on the spectrum of

Judaism, and I love that. I should probably tell you: I'm also certified as a spiritual and retreat director, but I did it at a time when there were no Jewish programs, so I've been certified by the program from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. I was the first Jew to go through their program, and I'm told now there are more joining, so I'm happy about that too. I said years ago if I was ever going to write an autobiography, I might call it *The Only Jew in the Room*.

ML: I interviewed somebody else from the community in Bellingham, since I was assigned to this city, and I could really tell how welcoming and warm the community is and how warm it feels, and that felt very nice even to listen to stories. So given this aspect of the community that is so important, where would you see the community going in the future in terms of the structure, maybe; or I'm sure they're going to keep this very welcoming and open aspect of it, but do you see it going somewhere in the future?

RB: When I joined, there were, I think, about one hundred and forty families and you're a small synagogue up to two hundred and fifty, and we've now graduated from being a small synagogue, and so there are growing pains because there's a lot that we're not used to being that big. Provided the non-vaxxers and non-maskers in other parts of the state don't come in and force us into some sort of bunker mentality, I see us growing more and more. And there's a lot of support in the community for interfaith work, which of course has been the work of my life as well. So I'm really happy about that. I can't see that getting worse; only better.

ML: As part of the community, do you know if most people that are part of it observe—I'm sure there is a great variety, considering what we've talked about so far—but do you know if most people can read and speak Hebrew, observe [a] kosher diet? Or it's very different in that as well in these types of—?

RB: You know, I had a rabbi who taught me in Los Angeles, and he always said, “Look at two Jews: one of them—if you view Jewish observance as a ladder, one of those people is on rung twenty and another one of those people is on rung four hundred. Which one is the better Jew?” And the answer to that is: it depends on which way they're moving on the ladder. I think that, like Dennis Prager said—and I don't agree with a lot of what Dennis Prager says, but he did say “If you study and you understand where things came from and how they relate to you and then make your choices, you've done it right.”

It used to be next to impossible to get kosher meat in this town until Trader Joe's moved in, and then once Trader Joe's got here, there was at least a source. So for the first number of years that I was here—and by the way, I only keep kosher during Passover and from the beginning of Rosh Hashanah to the end of Yom Kippur. Those are my two absolute—that's when I will only eat kosher. The rest of the year—I was married, like I said; I intermarried. He didn't convert until we were married for eight years. He converted after that, but he was a carnivore like nobody's business. And I was not going to stop him. So we developed this compromise for the good of the marriage and I just kept it going. But you know, there are people here who are creating their own rituals, which I think is wonderful.

The idea is to remember that God or spirit or whatever people want to call it, is behind everything and the big thing is to understand that that dimension of life is just as much a part of Judaism as it is any other faith, except possibly Buddhism, but that's another story. I used to talk to Jewish groups in Los Angeles about spirituality in a Jewish context. So I talked to rooms full of people who would say they didn't believe in God; they were atheist. I never spoke to anyone who said, "I don't believe I have a soul." On the level of the Jewish soul, which frankly, many people—about a third, who went through the conversion class at the University of

Judaism, which is now the American Jewish University—it turned out they had been born Jewish and they just didn't know it. So there is something like a Jewish soul, and to look at that influence on modern Judaism is extremely rewarding.

ML: In terms of the history of the community, do you know anything about the history of Temple Beth Israel and the community that built it?

RB: Not as much as our historian knows. Like I said, I know it was built to be Orthodox, but we're not that anymore, and so I didn't look back. I know some things about a number of the rabbis who were here before the one we have now, but I was not part of the community back then. I'm not that old. [laughs] I really was more interested in—and am—in moving forward than in looking back. We have a historian and I've seen a lot of pictures—mostly of people who I never knew and don't mean anything to me. So my most important concerns are the people now and the kids who will be the people in future.

ML: Yeah. I mean, that makes absolute sense that we need to be looking forward. Is there anything that you would like to share today that is not related to the questions I've asked so far? It can be really anything that you would like to be part of this interview.

RB: I think it's important that the tools and techniques of spirituality are exactly the same across all religions: the meditation, the music, whatever; and by the way, I am the world's worst meditator. I belong to an interfaith group in Los Angeles where, when the Buddhists took over and we were meditating, I got special permission to either go out and do Tai Chi or to put a little flashlight on and write because that's part of how I express what's coming.

When someone says—which hasn't happened all that often—but when someone says to me,

"Christianity is the only way," what I say is, "Yes, it is the only way for Christians; and Islam is the only way for Muslims; and Judaism is the only way for Jews; and God made us that way, so that getting back on the path—it's our own path." And I think that's vitally important today.

ML: It really spoke to me how you said that you think it's important to know the history, but the most important thing is to keep looking forward—taking care of the children of tomorrow, and the people that are part of the community right now. What are the things that you think are the most important to foster this idea in the sense of, like, really putting the work into helping the children grow in their path of part of the community? And what you envision is— what [do] you think should be done in order to have this realized?

RB: I think it's really important to teach Jewish kids growing up that it's perfectly fine to love people of other religions without feeling you need to become part of it. I think that that's been the message, I guess, that I've received all my life. My mom died when I was eleven and I was raised by—well, partly my dad, but kind of adopted into a family with a twin of mine. We were born on the same day and raised together because our moms were friends. That family was Roman Catholic. I baked Christmas cookies and helped decorate the tree, and now my twin knows the Jewish service just about as well as I do, and celebrated Hanukkah with me. And our third really good friend, Jenny, is now a Buddhist priest.

You know, it's my entire life—from the time I was little, I learned to love Christians and with the monastery, which, if you're interested, I wrote the lead op-ed piece of the *Washington Post* on Easter Sunday of 1993 about how I became affiliated with the monastery. It was a "meant-tobe." It was something that I had to follow. You get called in various ways.

We make a lot of noise in Judaism. You know [the saying]: four Jews, five opinions, and I love that. I've run the Colorado River

through the Grand Canyon ten times, and one of those times was a kosher whitewater raft trip that I put together specifically so my rabbi and his wife could come. It's the only kosher whitewater raft trip that's ever run through the Canyon, but we did it right. In the Canyon, what I discovered is that God is a lot quieter than we are, and that sometimes you just have to listen. The most amazing stuff happens when you do, and it can happen to everybody. It's available. It's just that in Jewish seminaries it's only recently that they taught anything about pastoral work. It was all teaching—how to teach, how to interpret Torah, how to argue about stuff.

Now they're coming around and I'm really happy about that because I think that's one of the reasons that we—I don't know if we're still doing it, but we went through a spate of kids joining Jews for Jesus or whatever because they found the love and the spirit there that they needed. With me, those fourteen years that I was just alienated, I guess, I still fasted every Yom Kippur and I did that partly because it just felt right, but also when I was in grad school one of my professors said he always went to synagogue, but never fasted, and so for the next however many years, I fasted on Yom Kippur so Howard Stein could be a better Jew.

ML: I'm not Jewish; I was raised Catholic. Italy is a mostly Catholic country, and this was an incredible answer of understanding and being open to what's different and what's the "other" from us and I think it's a beautiful point of view, and I'm happy that you were saying that the community is coming around and is understanding that that's how you create human connections and open to other people. So you would say that teaching to listen and having— being an example to the generations of tomorrow, that's how we can go forward in the right way?

RB: Because you said you were Catholic, are you aware of the Focolare Movement?

ML: Well, I was raised Catholic, but growing up my faith went different ways. So no, but I'm happy to learn if you have a—

RB: Focolare is a small movement within Catholicism that most Catholics don't know about. It was founded during World War II in the shelters of Rome where a woman named Chiara, I never remember her last name,[1] listened to guns exploding overhead and said, "This is not what God wants for us." And she founded this movement, which is international, interfaith. It's about loving in a Catholic context; loving other people. It's just marvelous. And if I can take one more minute.

ML: Of course. Absolutely.

RB: She created a metaphor saying that "If God—or the central spirit or whatever—was the sun in the sky, rays go out from that sun in every direction. Each of us has a ray. We can't get back there on anybody else's ray but our own, but the closer you get to the sun, the closer you get to all the other rays," and that was her metaphor for creating the group. So I suggest that to you, but I also want to say that if you develop any serious questions about Judaism that you want to ask for yourself, you have my email address.

ML: Thank you.

RB: You are welcome to inquire. I would be more than happy to answer.

ML: Thank you. I don't right now as of this moment—I don't have any more questions I can think of, but if there's anything else you would like to talk about, I'm more than happy to listen.

RB: I tend to be a responder because, by and large, what you learn in spirituality study is that I'm not in control. What happens, I respond to, and that's been true [for] years and years, and that's what life is really. Life is a time machine and you move forward one minute at a time. It's what happens. My first book—one of the things I said in it was, "Well, I have minutely planned every minor decision of my life. Every major decision has taken me completely by surprise. And that's the way I live my life."

So I respond when people need something or want something. If I can be the one who supplies it, great. I edit it, I teach Torah study sometimes when the rabbi's not here, and it's all my learning experiences. So that's about it.

ML: I think that while you were saying this, I actually do have another question. I don't know if it's too personal. I was reflecting about what you said of having—of being married to a Catholic, and I wonder: how did that happen? In the sense that—was your family open to that? Was it a moment of conflict or it was just, you know, accepted from the very first moment?

RB: I didn't get married until I was thirty-four. When I called my parents to tell them that he and I were getting married, my stepmother said, "Thank God, thank God. All my prayers have been answered" because we were living together at the time. I married him so that I could get him on my medical insurance because I knew I would be responsible. He was a swimming pool man. He went around and cleaned the pools of the rich and famous in Los Angeles, and I knew I'd feel responsible if something happened to him and I didn't want to have to pay for it.

We got married in the rabbi's living room with only my father and my stepmother there. My big wedding had eight people in it. And there were only eight, but that was my big wedding and that was in my living room after Keith converted, because once he converted, we were living in sin. So the rabbi told us to get married. My parents were not there for that because we'd already been married for eight years. But I went through the conversion class with him so that he wouldn't think I was just sending him there. I think it's really important to take responsibility for the people you love. That was part of what I wanted to do.

I now work with some of the conversion students here and we have a lot of converts in the congregation. We also have a number of mixed marriages where, for familial reasons or whatever, somebody can't convert, but they're very active in the community. When I say we're a broad tent, we really are here. No, by the time I got married my parents would not have cared if I married a sled dog. [laughs]

ML: Okay. It's interesting. How was it for him? Like, was it—I imagine if you were thirty-five he must have been more or less the same age, so I imagine his parents were also, I guess, okay with it; but how was it for him?

RB: His first wife had been Jewish, and they divorced so he was already familiar with Judaism. Ultimately, because I was so—well, first of all, it turned out he wasn't Catholic. He didn't know that he was actually Lutheran. He said the candles fooled him. But he had been stuffed in a children's home by his dad, who then killed himself. It's a very long story and I won't go into it, but it wasn't that there was anybody on his side of the family to judge, and he was six or seven years older than I am depending on the time of year. So if I was thirty four he was already forty and it was just something that happened. And like I said, we were married for thirty-five years. And it was wonderful. I have a friend who says I am the only woman ever that she has met who has not had one bad thing to say about her husband. And I don't.

ML: That's sounds like a lovely—I'm always very happy to hear stories where people are authentically happy and they can look back and it was a loving experience to have. It was very nice. Thank you so much for your time, for sharing some of your stories, and for having such nice words for your community and the people you have the chance to work and live with. It was very nice. It was lovely for me to hear all this.