Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Roby Blecker

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.

Martina Lancia: Okay, so good morning again. Today is November 19th, 2021. We're here with Roby on Zoom, and-

Martina Lancia: -it's Roby.

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

Roby Blecker: 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 14 years and then I was sent back by a nun who became one of my best friends. May she rest in peace and I started, uh, just following what, what called me. And so, um, I intermarried at a time when there was only one rabbi in Los Angeles who had intermarried couples and we were married for 35 years. We were together for 36 and he died. He was my beshert, 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's out of town, and I have been a Jewish author for Guideposts, which is a Norman Vincent Peale 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.

Martina Lancia: Um, okay. Thank you for this very interesting background. You did a lot of things. That sounds like a very interesting life to to live. Um, speaking of the community you're part of, could you tell me more about your relationship with Bellingham, the community and the city and more in general?

Roby Blecker: 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, and 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 Bellevue, I think, and or Everett and Vancouver. So it's a very eclectic community and I love that.

Martina Lancia: That sounds very nice. So. What, what would you recall- so you've you've been living in Bellingham since 2005,

but, um, over, 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 that, maybe was told to you by somebody else in the community?

Roby Blecker: Look, Bellingham, the city is wonderful because you can get any place in 15 minutes. I came out of Los Angeles where you couldn't get anywhere in less than an hour. So that's marvelous, from- and also I'm a change of seasons person and Los Angeles does not have weather, it has climate. Um, the synagogue community, I, they're all- with only a few notable exceptions really warm, welcoming Hamish of people. And, um, 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. Um, and there's a family up here. Uh, the family is composed of husband, wife and five kids, all of whom converted to Judaism. When the older, when the oldest boy, uh, 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, uh, I now have family up here, unofficial family. Family of the heart, I call them, rather than the blood and ended up with grandchildren, even though I never had kids, so.

Martina Lancia: That sounds wonderful. That sounds. That sounds incredible. So, so do you- I don't know, maybe you'll tell me a bit, so, do you have any recollection of, um. How does Jewish community in Bellingham has maybe different from others in the region? Or like in terms of like the holidays, they might celebrate the traditions they might have, they might be different from different community communities in the area that you might know of.

Roby Blecker: Well, the only other Jewish community in the direct area is Chabad and we are, we are found- we were founded in 1905 or something as an Orthodox congregation and they, before I got here, they went straight from Orthodox to reform without pausing for a moment at conservative. But we have, um, 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 a resource for all parts of the Jewish community, including people who have never affiliated with the synagogue but who want a Jewish funeral. I've participated in minyans there to allow someone that we didn't know to have a Jewish burial, because that was their wish. Um, the synagogue has a haver Kadisha, we, we make ourselves welcoming as much as possible for Jews anywhere on the spectrum of Judaism and I love that. I'm also, 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".

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

Roby Blecker: Well, when I joined, there were, I think, about 140 families and you're a small synagogue up to 250, 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, but provided the, um, non-vaxxers and non, 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. Um, so I'm really happy about that. I can't see that getting worse, only better.

Martina Lancia: Um, as part of the community, do, do you know if most people that are part of it, observe- I'm sure there's a great variety, considering what we've talked about so far. Um, but do you know if, like most people can read and speak Hebrew, observe kosher diet or it's very different in that as well in these types of...

Roby Blecker: You know, um, 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 20 and another one of those people is on rung 400. Which one is the better Jew?" And the answer to that is it depends on which way they're moving on the ladder. So 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. So 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. Um, 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've 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. Um, it's, I used to talk to Jewish groups in Los Angeles about spirituality in a Jewish context and so I talked to rooms full of people who would say they were they didn't believe in God. They they were atheists. I never spoke to anyone who said, I don't believe I have a soul, and so 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, City. Um, turned out it 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.

Martina Lancia: Um, in terms of the history of, um, of the community. Do you know anything about the history of, uh, Temple Beth, uh, and the community that built it?

Roby Blecker: Not as much as our historian knows. Uh, it's, you know, 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. And so, [laughs] I really was more interested and 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 my most, important concerns are the people now and the kids who will be the people in future.

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

Roby Blecker: I think it's important. That the tools and techniques of spirituality are exactly the same across all religions. Um, the meditation, the music, whatever, and by the way, I am the world's worst meditator. Um, I belong to an interfaith group in Los Angeles, um, 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 up. 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.

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

Roby Blecker: 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 11, and I was raised by, well, partly my dad, um, but kind of adopted, uh, 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, um, knows the Jewish service just about as well as I do and, um, celebrated Hanukkah with me, and our third really good friend, Jenny, is now a Buddhist priest. So you know, it's my entire life, from the time I was little, I learned to love Christians. With the monastery, which, if you're interested, I wrote the lead op ed piece of the Washington Post, um, on Easter Sunday of 1993 about how I became affiliated with the monastery. It was a meant to be. It was something that I had to follow. Uh, you get called in various ways, and we make a lot of noise in Judaism, you know, for Jews, five opinions and I love that. But it's when I've run the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon ten times, and one of those times was a kosher whitewater rafting trip that I put together specifically. So my rabbi and his wife could come. It's the only kosher whitewater rafting 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, i's only recently that they've 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 14 years that I was just alienated, I guess I still fasted every Yom Kippur. Um, and I did that because 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, but never fasted and so for the next, however many years I fasted on Yom Kippur so Howard Stein could be a better Jew.

Martina Lancia: Wow. This was, I'm really, um, I'm not Jewish. Um, I was raised Catholic. Um, you know, Italy is, it's a mostly Catholic country and this was an incredible, uh, answer of understanding and being open to what's different and what's the other

from us and I think it's, it's a beautiful, it's a beautiful point of view. 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, to other people. Um, so, so you would say that teaching to listen and having, being, being an example to the generations of tomorrow. Um, that's how we can go forward, in the right, in the right way?

Roby Blecker: Um, because you said you were Catholic, are you aware of the Focolare movement?

Martina Lancia: Um, well, I was raised Catholic, but I growing up, I, my my faith went different, different ways. But, so no, but I'm happy to to learn if you have a-

Roby Blecker: -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, her last I never remember her last name, 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. Um, it's just marvelous and if I can take one more minute-

Martina Lancia: -Of course.

Roby Blecker: 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. 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.

Martina Lancia: Thank you.

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

Martina Lancia: Thank you. Is there anything else that you- I don't have 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, to listen.

Roby Blecker: 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 years and years. And that's what life is really. You know, 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, while I have minutely planned every minor decision of my life, every major decision has taken me completely by surprise. 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. Um, I edit, I teach, I'll, I teach Torah study sometimes when the rabbi's not here, and it's all my learning experiences. So that's about it.

Martina Lancia: Um, I think that while while you were saying this, I actually do have another question, feel free to- I don't know if it's too personal, but, I was reflecting about what you said of having of being married to a Catholic, and I wonder how how did that happen in the sense that was your family open to that? Um, was it like a moment of conflict or it was just you know, accepted from the very first moment?

Roby Blecker: I didn't get married until I was 34 and 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. Um, 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. So 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, 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. Um, my parents were not there for that. Uh, because we'd already been married for eight years.

Martina Lancia: Right, right.

Roby Blecker: Um, but I did, um, 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, and that was part of what I wanted to do. So, I now work with some of the conversion students here, and we have a lot of converts in the congregation. We also have a lot of mixed, a number of mixed marriages where for familial reasons or whatever, somebody can't convert, but they're very active in the community. So when I say we're a broad tent, we really are here. Um, but no, but by the time I got married, my parents would not have cared if I married a sled dog. [laughs]

Martina Lancia: Okay. Um, how did, It's interesting how, how was how was it for him? Like, was it was it, you know, I imagine if

you were 35, it must have been more or less the same age, so I imagine his parents were also, I guess, okay with it. Um, but how was it for him? Like…

Roby Blecker: His first wife had been Jewish, and they divorced. So, um, he was already familiar with Judaism. Ultimately, because I was so- well, first of all, he wasn't, it turned out he wasn't Catholic. He didn't know that he was actually Lutheran. He said the candles fooled him, but, um, he had been stuffed in a children's home by his dad, who then killed himself. Um, and 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 seven, six or seven years older than I am, depending on the time of year. So if I was 34, he was already 40. Um, and it it was just something that happened that and like I said, we were married for 35 years, so, 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.

Martina Lancia: That's, that sounds like a lovely, I'm very glad. You know, it's, I'm always very happy to hear stories where people are, um, authentically happy and they can look back and and it was, and it was a loving experience to have. It was, it was very nice. Thank you so much for, thank you so much for your time, for sharing, 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 it was very it was very nice. It was it was lovely for me to hear all of this. And, um.