Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Rabbi Bruce Kadden

SUMMARY

Rabbi Bruce Kadden reflects on his move to Tacoma in 2004 to lead Temple Beth El, drawn by the congregation's unique history as a merger of Reform and Conservative synagogues and by the welcoming nature of the local community. He discusses his appreciation for Tacoma's unpretentious character, civic revitalization efforts, and commitment to addressing community challenges through progressive leadership. Kadden highlights the congregation's diversity and inclusivity, particularly its openness to interfaith families and LGBTQ+ Jews, as well as its balance of traditional and Reform practices. He also describes key accomplishments during his rabbinate, including expanding musical programming, strengthening family engagement, and helping establish the Brotman Early Learning Center to support the congregation's long-term vitality.

Eleanora Anedda: All right.

Eleanora Anedda: So today is the 9th of December, 2021. My name is Eleonora Anedda, and I'm interviewing Rabbi Bruce Kadden on behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. So, um, just to start off, would you like to tell me what your relationship to Tacoma is?

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: So, um, after serving a congregation in Salinas, California for 20 years, um, I started looking for other opportunities. Our, uh, youngest son was graduating high school and thought that maybe it was time for a change, and, um, saw that, uh, Temple Beth el in Tacoma was, uh, looking for a rabbi. I hadn't been, uh, to hear my wife had. She was a Jewish educator and had come up to the Pacific Northwest and held workshops up here. So she knew a little bit about the community. And, uh, we, um, you know, we're impressed by it. Uh, it was a really, uh, nice, uh, synagogue. Nice city, uh, livable. Uh, and, uh, so, uh, things worked out in the interview process where they offered me the position and I accepted it. So we moved up here in June of 2004. I began the position in July of that year and served for 16 years until retiring in, uh, the end of June in 2020.

Eleanora Anedda: And can I ask you, what do you like about Tacoma?

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: So, um, you know, it's a real, um, I would say, you know, middle class town. Uh, it does not pretentious at all. Uh, it has gone through some challenges. I know that, uh, you know, there were issues people would not go downtown for, for many years. Uh, one of our, our members basically had one of the last private stores downtown. A jewelry store, Leroy Jewelers. Uh, and, uh, but it worked hard to, you know, rebuild the downtown, locating, uh, University of Washington Tacoma down there. Uh, a number of museums and, uh, really, uh, worked to change things around and saw that develop during, you know, my time here. Uh, and I think that it has very thoughtful, progressive leadership, uh, you know, politically, uh, to, uh, tackle the challenges that we face as a community. Uh, and, uh, so it's been really, uh, great to, to be a part of this community.

Eleanora Anedda: That's lovely. And, um, what was your impression, um, when you served? Uh, but also now if it changed, um, your impression of the Jewish community in Tacoma.

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: So one of the things that attracted to me to temple Beth-El was that it had this history of being a merger

between a reform and a conservative synagogue. Uh, so probably a little more traditional than many reform synagogues where I came from in Salinas. It wasn't a merger, but it was sort of like it had merged because there was a traditional element and a more, uh, reform element. In fact, there we, uh, used a conservative prayer book on the High Holy Days and a reform prayer book for Shabbat during the year. That was the compromise they had agreed on when they had actually officially become part of the reform movement. Uh, that wasn't exactly the case here in Tacoma, where we always used a, uh, reform prayer book, uh, for both Shabbat and the High Holy Days. Although when I first came here, we did use a conservative prayer book on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Uh, so I like that. Uh, it was, uh, that type of a diverse community. And, uh, you know, there were, uh, members who appreciated, uh, tradition. Uh, also, uh, the other thing was that it was a very open, welcoming community to people who, uh, wanted to be part of it, uh, to, uh, interfaith couples, uh, to more recently, um, Jews on the LGBTQ plus spectrum. Uh, and, um, it has always, uh, opened its doors and understood that we need to be accepting to those who who want to be part of our, our community. Uh, you know, I knew a lot about its history. I had met Rabbi Rosenthal at a conference many years ago. Didn't know him that well, but knew him by reputation, uh, and felt that, uh, a congregation that he had served for so long, uh, must have something significantly going for it. Uh, and I think, you know, he had left a strong impression here, you know, on the people and on the community. Uh, not just in terms of the synagogue itself, but his role in the greater Tacoma community. Uh, for example, teaching at Pacific Lutheran University, where I, uh, taught, uh, most of the time when I was a rabbi and continued to teach even in retirement, uh, in participating in many interfaith, uh, endeavors in the community, um, you know, and been able to continue that. Uh, and that's also something that the community greatly appreciates. They want its leaders to be active in the community and to, uh, take apart, uh, take part in, uh, various efforts, uh, within the greater Tacoma community, uh, so that, uh, you know, people know about, uh, the synagogue, Agog. And it's true of the members. We've had members who've served on the city council, on various other, uh, civic endeavors, uh, and on, of course, many nonprofit boards in the community. Uh, so, um, you know, so just, you know, impressed with that and following their, uh, lead and, uh, trying to do that, uh, while I served as the rabbi of Temple Beth El.

Eleanora Anedda: Um, and, uh, what was the most important thing for you during your rabbinate in Tacoma?

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: Well, that's hard to say. Um, I think that, um, you know, in many ways, we were a congregation in transition as, uh, some of the older families moved away after retirement and, uh, you know, some of, uh, new, younger families came. And integrating them was a challenge, I think, in terms of, you know, looking at overall accomplishment. Uh, there were a couple of things. Uh, first of all, was, um, going from, uh, a, uh, part time cantor to a full time initially cantor, educator, and now Cantor, uh, and really upgrading in that regard, the overall musical program of the congregation, uh, that was a transition that took a lot of effort, but is really, I think, uh, helped the congregation as a whole. Um, so that was one thing. And then second was the creation of the Brotman Early Learning Center, uh, our preschool, uh, that we were able to establish. There's a history there where the synagogue had a part time preschool gone. They called it, uh, for many years. And then for various reasons, mostly demographics, uh, closed down. But we ended up with the opportunity, uh, because of Jeff Brotman, who had grown up at the synagogue and gone on to found Costco, uh, for his generosity to take one of the wings of our building and to, um, uh, redo it so we could open a full time preschool, which, uh, we have been able to do. And that was just really, uh, great for the, uh, the synagogue and for the community. So, um, so that's another thing I'm particularly proud of. Uh, and then I guess the third thing is the continued openness of the, the congregation as as new people came and integrated in and, uh, the ability to welcome them and have them feel a part of the community.

Eleanora Anedda: Um, and you did you mentioned the merge previously. And so I was wondering, um, it did happen many years before 2004. Um, I was wondering if it, um, um, if you've ever experienced some difficulty, um, uh, because of the merge.

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: Not really. I think that, you know, certainly by that time, any of the, you know, challenges had been, uh, overcome. And I don't know that there really were that many. And part of it was probably due to Rabbi Rosenthal's personality and ability to, you know, work with, uh, different groups of people. I mean, there were, uh, people, long time members who, you know, still were proud that they were members of Temple Beth Israel or Temple Sinai. The two previous communities, uh, but generally, unless you really got to know them, you wouldn't know that necessarily. Um, but, uh, you know, they they knew the history, uh, and, uh, you know, and they were also very proud that they were able to, to come together and stay together. Uh, and, you know, eventually, uh, you know, build, uh, the new building, uh, which I think was first completed in 1967, um, uh, and then expanded in the 1990s. And, uh, so, um, you know, and uh, really, uh, you know, felt that, uh, you know, by, uh, offering, you know, services, uh, on Saturday morning that were, uh, a little more traditional than our Friday night service, that, uh, that, uh, you know, generally served the needs of the, the community. And so they're really, you know, I don't think we're, uh, significant issues because of, um, because of that, um, you know, people, uh, understood, you know, you know, the history. Understood that. Yeah. There's some people who are, uh, a little more traditional than you might find in some reform synagogues and and others who, uh. Were committed, more committed to reform ideologically, but, uh, you know, wanted to make sure that, uh, it was a place that everyone felt they could worship be a part of and, uh, you know, be one community.

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: Yeah. That's great.

Eleanora Anedda: Um, I have one last question for you.

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: Sure.

Eleanora Anedda: Before I ask that, I wanted to ask you if there's anything that we haven't talked about yet that you'd like to share.

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: Um, you know, I think that, you know, obviously, with with my retirement, uh, temple Beth-El is going through a transition and still in the process of, uh, looking for, uh, the next full time rabbi, partially because of Covid. Uh, and I think though, it's, uh, you know, uh, has a really good, you know, solid foundation to, uh, to move forward in that regard. You know, good, uh, financial stability, good leadership. Uh, and, uh, I think it's a place that, uh, you know, someone can come to and really, uh, continue to help it develop and grow in positive ways.

Eleanora Anedda: Yeah. So my question was very similar, actually. So I wanted to ask you what you hope for for Tacoma, for the future.

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: Yeah. Well, you know, as I said, I think that I hope it, you know, continues to develop in, in positive ways with, uh, you know, new, uh, rabbinic leadership, uh, continued cantorial leadership, uh, from Cantor fine. Uh, and, uh, you know, continuing to be an important part of the broader Tacoma community, uh, doing interfaith work, doing, uh, uh, outreach, doing, uh, tikkun olam with various, uh, local organizations, whether it's the food bank or, uh, the, uh, groups that, uh, serve the immigrant community, uh, and uh, continuing to, you know, take its place, uh, in, uh, our, our city is an important, uh, religious institution. Uh, you know, I think that, uh, again, you know, the lay leadership that really understands that, uh, you know, for the synagogue to continue to grow and prosper, it can't just, uh, you know, focus on what it's done in the past, but has to, you know, look at, uh, you know, the future and, uh, look to continue to, uh, you know, make, uh, uh, it a place where, you know, everyone who comes in feels it's their home.

Eleanora Anedda: Perfect. It sounds great. Um, so if there is, um, if there isn't anything else that you'd like to say, I can go ahead and stop the recording.

Rabbi Bruce Kadden: Uh, yeah, I think that's about it.

Eleanora Anedda: All right. Perfect. Thank you. I'll stop the recording.