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Rabbi Joshua Samuels

SUMMARY

Rabbi Joshua Samuels reflects on his path to becoming the rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in Bellingham, Washington, describing how he was drawn to the community and helped guide its growth and development. He discusses the opportunities and challenges of leading the region's only synagogue, particularly in serving a congregation that encompasses a wide range of Jewish traditions and perspectives. A central theme of the interview is his effort to promote greater inclusivity, including advocating for a policy change that allowed him to officiate at interfaith marriages, which he views as an important step in strengthening community connections. Rabbi Samuels also reflects on the personal experiences that inspired his calling to the rabbinate and shares his hopes for rebuilding engagement and deepening communal bonds in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Martina Lancia: Okay, so today is December 9th, 2021. We're here to do this interview for the project with the Jewish Historical Society. Welcome. And thank you so much for giving me, giving me and us this time to talk. I would like to ask you to begin with a brief introduction and a brief whatever, whatever you want. Like, background story, let's say.

Joshua Samuels: Okay. How long would you like the background to be?

Martina Lancia: Whatever makes you comfortable. Whatever you want.

Joshua Samuels: Sure. I'm Rabbi Joshua Samuels. I'm the spiritual leader at Congregation Beth Israel in Bellingham, Washington. I'm in my 10th year of being the rabbi and this community. Before I was in Bellingham, I was a rabbi at Temple Beth Hillel in Valley Village and in Los Angeles, California. Before that, I was in rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College in the LA and Jerusalem campus. Before that. I guess I'm just going back in time. Before I entered rabbinical school, I worked in the financial world in San Francisco and Los Angeles. When I was in college, I never dreamt of becoming a rabbi or a professional Jew in any capacity. Um, but, um, but I, you know, my whole life, I was really connected with Judaism, growing up in a pretty committed, reform household with a lot of people in my family who served their Jewish communities in a number of ways, but never as clergy. So I was always very connected to my Jewish tradition. But again, I never thought I would become a professional. And I took many classes at Wisconsin. I got a minor in Jewish studies, not because I wanted to go into a career, but just because I love learning about history and literature, and everything like that in Hebrew. It wasn't until a few years into my career in finance, which I did for and I can't remember five years or so, that I realized I needed to be doing something different with my life. I felt like I needed I wanted to, kind of, help people in a more personal way than helping, you know, hedge funds grow their portfolios. And so I started to meet with some rabbis. Not because, again, I want to be a rabbi, but because I just wanted their advice. And I soon kind of discovered that was the path I wanted to go on. And so I started to pursue that. And, I mean, there's a lot more to that story, or you know, a lot of my clergy, you know, peers refer to as like, a calling. But I'm so glad I made that switch. And I love doing what I'm doing, and I love being here up in the Pacific Northwest.

Martina Lancia: Nice. That sounds very interesting. So, I mean, you're welcome to share any more details if you want to. Maybe we can come back to that later. It's interesting about, you know, how, what, and why I brought you to such a sudden change. The next question I want to ask you is about Bellingham. So what is your relationship with the area? I mean, you're, you know, the spiritual

leader. And, so that connects you in so many ways. So if there's anything, you want to share about that?

Joshua Samuels: Sure. So I.

Joshua Samuels: You know, I was a rabbi in Los Angeles area for a couple of years. I have no family or any connections to the Pacific Northwest. My contract was up, at Temple Beth Hillel, and my friend from the Seattle area whom I went to rabbinical school with told me that I needed to look into this position up in Bellingham, and I probably answered, Where is Bellingham? I've never heard of this town. And she said that my wife Nicole and I would love it up here. So I did some research, and I realized it was a small community at that time, about 180 families or so. And, you know, I grew up in San Francisco at a really large reform synagogue called Sherith Israel. And then, you know, I went to Temple Emanu-El, another one second. I need to let someone in.

Joshua Samuels: Sorry.

Joshua Samuels: Emanu-El, as a young adult, you know, both congregations had thousands of families. And so I never dreamt that I would be in a small community. Even Beth Hillel was, you know, a decent size. I can't remember maybe 700 families or so. It felt. It felt big. And I always thought I would be, you know, a rabbi following the footsteps of some of my rabbinic mentors. That's really all I knew about, except, you know, I was a student rabbi for several years at really small communities, but I never imagined I'd be, you know, a full-time rabbi at a small place. So, I did some research, and I interviewed, and the interview went well, and they brought me up here, and I fell in love with the area. Just the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest. And Bellingham is just a gorgeous town right on the water. You can see the San Juan Islands, and it's just a beautiful place. And everyone said this is the perfect place to raise a family. At the time, I had my son Ethan, who was around two at the time, and my daughter Shoshana was yet to be born when I first interviewed. She was born just right after. I think I interviewed, perhaps, so everyone really was selling it as a great place for a family. And since everyone was saying that, I started to like, not believe it, I was like, they just, you know, they're looking for someone. But it turns out that it has been exactly that. And now I use that same line with young couples when they call me and they're thinking about moving to Bellingham. So anyway, I moved here again. I never thought I'd be a solo pulpit rabbi. I always thought I'd be part of a huge clergy team, and I was nervous about taking this leap because I only had two years of experience, you know, in the rabbinic world after school. But a number of my mentors, Rabbi Steven Pearce and Rabbi Martin Wiener, and others, you know, I was older than a lot of my classmates at the time because I had a first career. In contrast, a lot went right out of college, and they assured me that, you know, I had the maturity and I could do it. And so I feel like I took a leap of faith and did it. And, it's been a wonderful experience. People here kind of brought, took in our family right away, and so we had instant friends and community, and it wasn't like going to a big city where you could be anonymous, and you don't have that kind of support. And so it was just a wonderful transition for us with two young, uh, an infant and a, and a toddler. And so we got here, and there's about 180 something families. I can't remember maybe 50 kids in our religious school, not many young families with kids. And now we're approaching 300 families with about 100 kids in the school, a ton of young families, and even a growing young adult community. And so, it's just been wonderful seeing that growth, that, you know, I just couldn't even imagine at that time, when I came here. You know, I've loved the community, and it's a unique community. I'm happy to talk a little bit about it if that's okay. So, they're not, a huge Jewish population here. As I said, we're approaching 300 families, which is big for this area, but this is the only synagogue around. The closest one is in the south of us in Everett, which is north of Seattle, and then the one to the north is in Vancouver, Canada, so I pardon. Me. Okay. Sorry.

Joshua Samuels: No problem. So the other one is in Vancouver, Canada. And then I think to the east is probably in Spokane or something, which is pretty far away. So we're isolated when it comes to others, just me having rabbinic colleagues. There is Chabad up here, in Bellingham. They're attached to the Western Washington University campus, so they cater a lot to students, because they're right there. They've kind of been a de facto Chabad, even though there is Chabad. But anyway, this started as an Orthodox Shul, started by Lithuanian immigrants at the turn of the 20th century. And our synagogue building that I first started at, which was on Broadway Street in the Leonard Streets area in Bellingham, was a little shul, you know, with a balcony, two or three classrooms, and it didn't seat that many people, and so it was Orthodox for a long time, and then it transitioned to a conservative or conservadox community, and then, you know, things were changing. And in the 1980s, they hired their first reform rabbi, I believe, Michael Oblast, and they joined the reform movement, started paying, you know, mum dues and and ever since then, they've only hired reform rabbis. That being the case, there's still, you know, a good number of people who would identify as conservative or more traditional. And so that has always been an interesting kind of balance is how to create, a synagogue, cohesive synagogue community for, you know, reformative kind of Folks, you know, I don't know how many exactly there are, but maybe there's 85% reform, you know, 15% conservative. But those who are conservative are quite outspoken, and they know what they want, and so I've tried my best to kind of balance, different ways of participating and services and everything like that, a lot of my colleagues don't really have to deal with. And so I've enjoyed the challenge and I've learned so much, and I feel like I've become a better rabbi because I've had to cater to different groups of Jews in one community.

Martina Lancia: And, how has that experience been going? Like, was there ever a moment of conflict? Like, I'm sure there were,

but like, was there ever a moment of conflict where you thought it could turn into a separation of the community? Maybe.

Joshua Samuels: Yeah. So I can't remember when this happened, but in maybe the early 2000s, there was a separation from the more traditional conservative community in the larger Jewish community here. And I think it depends on who you ask. What were the reasons? From what I understand, it had to do with who could be buried in our Jewish cemetery. We have our cemetery and in Hebrew Kadisha, and everything like that. And I think there was a question of, you know, non-Jewish spouses, can they be buried within the gates of our cemetery? And the more traditional members, you know, said, No. And the majority of people, I think, probably said, One second. The door is open on the left. Sorry. And I think that the larger majority was probably thinking. You guys are out of your mind. Look at our demographics. You know what? This is a non-issue. Like, the more conservative people held their ground and said, Well, we're going to start our own community. We're going to splinter off. And so they started what's called a time. And they found some space, and they had services. They brought in rabbis from Vancouver from different places, and then my predecessor, Rabbi Cindy Enger, became the rabbi, and she worked hard in bringing the two groups back together, and so she did that, which is amazing that she did that. So that was one huge issue. There have been other issues in the past, I think, that they had to deal with, who can vote, which members can vote when it comes to congregational votes. And some people said, Look, anyone who's a member can vote. And some people said, only the Jewish members can vote. And the compromise was that every household gets one vote. So there has to be, you know, a compromise within a household. And so that's how they dealt with that one. But in my time here, the biggest issue that I've dealt with, and I would say it's my biggest, I don't know if I would call it a triumph, but, something I feel really good about was that when I got here, when I was interviewing, I was told that I would not be allowed to officiate at interfaith marriages. And it wasn't that, it was a policy from the synagogue, but that was just written into my rabbinic contract, which is unusual because in most synagogues, it's a policy that the rabbi, you know, has freedom of the the pulpit, and it's up to them how what they want to do. And if there are multiple clergy, the senior rabbi will say, Look, this is what we're all doing as a team, or this is what I'm doing. You can do what you want to do. That's certainly how it was in my last synagogue that I worked at. You could choose how you wanted to do it, and people would respect that. So it wasn't a policy, but it was kind of like this unwritten policy. But they kind of put it in my contract. And so I knew right away that was something I was going to have to deal with. Even though I started rabbinical school thinking I would never officiate at interfaith marriages, I had come to understand that, no, this is something I must do as a rabbi. And so, I would bring it up often every time there was a contract negotiation. And it was always kind of like a non-starter. And then, you know, at some point, I was working with one of the presidents here who was just really wonderful. And I said, look, I'm going to do some research, and I want to present it to the board, and so I did kind of some demographic research of our community and showed how the vast majority of, you know, our members don't identify as conservative or traditional. But reform. And that's pretty much the practice, you know, throughout the reform world. And the practice of most reform rabbis is that they have the freedom to decide what they want to do. And I also found out that over 50% of our families were, in fact, in interfaith relationships. So what does that say when, you know, I wouldn't be allowed to say, renew their vows in our synagogue on our Bima. We also had our youth group advisors, who were a couple that were planning on getting married. And they, I mean, reinvigorated our youth group. One is Jewish and the other is not Jewish, but living as Jews. And, you know, an argument I had was how could I possibly tell them that they can't get married here by their rabbi? And what does that say to all of our youth as well? And so I went to our ritual team ritual committee and talked. We had multiple discussions about it, and I said, I think we need to create a policy that allows clergy to officiate at interfaith marriages for all these reasons, and so they signed off on it and kind of created this policy that I helped write, and sent it to the board for discussion, and then the board, you know, had a lot of talks about it and finally adopted it, which is wonderful, but there were a few people who are more conservative who were upset about this, thinking that, okay, if you do this, then what now? Are we going to start serving pork at, you know, own eggs, you know, nonsensical kind of leaps? And I try to say, well, you don't have to go to those weddings if you don't want to go, especially if you're not invited, but one thing that they wanted was to have a congregational discussion about it. Like, everyone's kind of sitting in a huge circle, and people can express their thoughts about it. And at first, I was really against it because I said, you know what? If you know, in this discussion, they want to change it or something like that. When I've worked so hard, I ultimately felt it was my decision anyway. It's not it's not theirs. And I was fearful that the more conservative folks would kind of band together and do something. I didn't want to give them that offer, that opportunity, but it turned out to be an incredible experience where people who supported me and supported what we did just showed up in force and shared their experiences of either being turned away at a younger age, because of, being part of a community where the rabbi didn't accept interfaith marriage or what have you. And so it was incredible. And some people say, look, we wouldn't even be members here if it wasn't for, you know, the rabbi and how the community is made up, you know, and we're very active. And so that was just a really powerful experience. And it's been wonderful since then. And, I tried to tell some of the more conservative members that nothing is changing; we've started a lay-led conservative minyan, a monthly minyan, and other things as well. So I feel like we've even become more conservative and more traditional. We didn't use to have Saturday morning services and Services. Now we have them like four times a month. So it's just this one thing that changed, and I haven't heard anything since it's been going well, but that's, you know, something that could have been a huge issue. But I'm grateful that we were able to stick together through it.

Martina Lancia: Right? Absolutely so, speaking of this community and the characteristics it has, I don't know if you know anything about the other communities in the area, and if there are some considerable differences, like in terms of holidays and or traditions that Bellingham may or may not have.

Joshua Samuels: So the other Jewish communities in the area. As I said, there aren't too many, I mean, there are other groups of Jews who get together. So, for instance, just south of us, there's a Havurah in Skagit County. A lot of them are members, but they all get together for holidays, and they go from one house to the other. And that has grown up. So they are able to keep Judaism alive there. I was just asked to do a public lighting on San Juan Island in Friday Harbor, a week ago. And so they usually have had Chabad come out from Bellingham and do that. They felt that they were not an Orthodox community. I mean, if they were, they wouldn't be living there. And so they thought it would be a better fit if I came. And so I did it, and it was wonderful. And now people want to connect with our community. So, you know, there aren't larger, large kinds of Jewish communities right around us, except for the synagogue communities in Everett, which is a reformed community. I think they have a part-time rabbi. I think my colleague is not full-time, but don't quote me on that. She's, you know, wonderful. And then, the other one north of us in Vancouver, Temple Shalom, is a reform. But what's interesting about reform in Canada is that it's a little bit more traditional. It's more conservative here. For instance, reform rabbis are not, nor are any rabbis allowed to perform interfaith marriages. And so my colleagues up there, Rabbi Dan Moskowitz and Carrie Brown, when a couple comes to them, and they're in an interfaith couple, and they want to get married, they say, Look, we're not allowed to do it, but to his contact, our friend and colleague, Rabbi Joshua Samuels in Bellingham. So most of the weddings that I've officiated have been couples from Vancouver. Which has been wonderful. I love doing it. But I remember when I, in my first year here, reached out to the senior rabbi, Rabbi Philip Bregman, who was the senior rabbi at Temple Shalom before Dan Moskowitz came. I introduced myself, and he hung up the phone on me. And it was strange, and I didn't understand. But I learned later that reform up there is quite, quite different. And so I realized that I probably offended him by even suggesting that I'd be doing them. I'd hoped for a friendlier call, but since then, it's been really great to have them up there. So in terms of. So that's a big difference there. A little more traditional up there. But um, yeah, I don't know if I can answer that question.

Martina Lancia: That's okay. That's no problem, so coming back to the community in Bellingham, um, since you've been there, a spiritual guide for some time now, um, where do you see it going in the future? Like a community?

Joshua Samuels: Where do I see this community going in the future? That's a great question. I mean, it's been hard with COVID, obviously, the past two years. And so, right now, I'm just thinking about how we can get more people back into the building. You know, it's been wonderful to have a hybrid approach to everything. That means that a lot of people are choosing to stay home when they could very well come back in the building, and perhaps they're not coming because we're still not offering food consumption at this time. Uh, so I don't really know. But for me, in the immediate future, it's trying to figure out how to get people back in the building, because there's nothing like, you know, a room full of people singing and celebrating together. I just miss that so much. So that's like goal number one, uh, is just to do that. I mean, our community, our religious school community, has been back, and it's been wonderful every Sunday, just completely overtake the whole building. And it's amazing just the buzz. And like when other people come for whatever reason, and they witness it. They're just, like, amazed, you know, how much energy there is. And that's something we used to have anyway with adults, with adult education and services and everything like that. But we just haven't had these past two years; everything has been virtual. And so again, that's the immediate future. That's like what I want to work on. But like further down the road. Um, it's a great question. I mean, to continue to grow the community. I mean, there, every you know, when I first started, and for the first several years, I was always told that there's just as many unaffiliated Jews in the Bellingham, Whatcom County area as our affiliated Jews. And I was like, Why would someone not affiliate? We're the only synagogue in town. And it's not just about Davening and Shabbat and High Holy Days. You know, we offer a lot of, uh, programs, and we've had a lot of adult ed classes and concerts here, you know, book readings. We've partnered with local bookstore Village Books, which has been wonderful. Why wouldn't someone want to support all of this? And so, I try to do as much as I can just to get out in the community, meet people, and speak in high schools at Western Washington. I just want people to know that, um, we're here, there's a presence, and we're trying to do good, good things. And whenever I, you know, speak to someone, I'm trying to figure out, like, what are they into? And I want to be able to connect them with someone else so they can form friendships. I mean, that to me, building community is more important than really anything else, you know, especially with our youth. Like, I want them to have Jewish friends, you know, if they forget everything they learned in Hebrew School? Fine. But if they make a lifelong Jewish friend like that is. That's huge. So that's what I'm trying to work on.

Martina Lancia: Absolutely, and it's very, you know, pleasantly surprised of how all the people that I've interviewed so far in the Bellingham community is what they keep telling me and how important the community, the community is for them and how they, nurture it and how warm and welcoming it feels to them and how it's a point of pride for them. So it's very nice for me that, you know, every time I interview someone, it's a constant in the interviews. And it's very nice because it means that it's, you know, it's working. People feel appreciated.

Joshua Samuels: Yeah. And I think people support one another because we're small enough that we know a lot of most of the people here, and people show up for one another. You know, even though different groups get together, you know, the community shows up for a bar mitzvah, for instance. It's not just like an invite-only. And we try to have, like, intergenerational events, because I want different groups of people to know each other, and that's really what I love.

Martina Lancia: That's very nice. So you were mentioning some of the aspects of the community, in terms of, for example, observing holidays, you know, traditionally, or, or let's say, keeping kosher, or you were mentioning learning Hebrew, so be able to read it or speak it. How is the community, um, how does the community present itself for these, for these types of things? Like it's very, I imagine it's very different. You know, it varies. Given that there is a conservative component. Um, so I don't know if you have you will have more insight about.

Joshua Samuels: Yeah. I mean, in terms of observances, I remember again, my one of my first years, you know, knowing that I had to lead a second day of Rosh Hashanah service, I was like, why would I have why would I do that? There are enough services, like, do I need to do a second day? I remember saying to a Torah study group, you know, it's going to be my goal to do away with second-day services because there's no reason for it. Like, we have a set calendar, like we understand this, but then realizing that obviously for some, as custom becomes, you know, deeply embedded in one's Jewish observance, I've accepted it. And so obviously we have the second day. We do other festival morning services on the festival itself, as opposed to a lot of reform congregations, who will kind of hold festival services when it's most convenient on a Friday night or something like that. So we do everything according to, like, the Jewish calendar, and I think people appreciate that. We've had a wonderful kind of cadre of Torah readers. So, like, before COVID, you know, a steady stream of people who would, you know, come on a Saturday morning or festival and chant or haftarah, which has been terrific. In terms of, like test routes, we have we're, kosher style. I mean, it's a vegetarian congregation. So it's really kosher by default. We don't check, you know, labels of jars, you know, non-meat items to see what the Hechsher is. I think going forward, we'll probably stay the same, although there are a number of people who would love to have meat or, like, have a barbecue in the summertime on our back patio, and I totally support that. Um, and so I, I would love to help our community figure out how we can, how we can accommodate that. I mean, most people don't keep kosher. I mean, we should be an example in some ways. But, you know, we should be able to figure this out. A lot of homes have. But I know a lot of people just don't even want to go there because it's just extra work. Um. there's something else I was going to bring up, but I can't remember.

Martina Lancia: It'll come back. It usually works out. You talk about something else, and then it comes back to you. Oh, that was the thing I wanted to say. Um, so now going back to your experience, you were mentioning that there was more to your life where you realized this was your calling? I don't know if you can expand on that.

Joshua Samuels: Oh, sure. Yeah. So, I grew up, as I said, in a pretty committed Jewish family. My parents sent me to a Hebrew day school for nine years. You know, I went to Sunday school too. I mean, all of that bar mitzvah was a breeze compared to a lot of my friends. Just because I had that background, you know, went to Israel several times, fell in love with the country and the history. Went on the march of the living. Did a lot of, you know, Holocaust studying, and so I was just really deeply embedded in Judaism, although the worship aspect was not something that I connected with ever. Really. Until rabbinical school. I remember when my wife and I, Nicole, would go to our young adult services at Temple Emanuel in San Francisco. Everyone would be singing, and I would just be kind of observing it, loving being there, but not really singing with everybody else. But in any event, at that time I was working in the financial world, and again, I didn't feel like I was really helping people in a deep and meaningful way. And I look around the trading desk, and people were excited about what they were doing, but I was never excited about that, and I was like, Why am I getting paid all this money to do this? It just doesn't feel it wasn't fulfilling personally. So again, I met with a few rabbis, Rabbi Peretz, and Rabbi Wolf. Stephen Pierce, Martin Weiner, and a few others. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner is just trying to, like, talk to them about life and what I should be doing. And then I reached out to a career counselor because I really didn't know what I wanted to do. My parents thought I was just going to quit and move up to Lake Tahoe and be a ski bum, which I was never planning on doing, but they were just really worried that I would quit this incredible, lucrative job and not have anything. So I reached out to a career counselor, and he said, Before our first meeting, I want you to write two essays. The first essay is written about the most meaningful, the most influential people you've had in your life. And the second one is to write about the most meaningful moments you've witnessed. So the most influential people were some of my rabbis, people in my family, because they served their Jewish community, like my grandfather, who started a Jewish community in Fargo, North Dakota, after, you know, leaving the Pogroms in Lithuania. And, you know, all of this. And then the most meaningful moments were like Passover seders with families or life cycle events, bar mitzvah, you know, going to Israel. And I was like, Oh, something is going on here. Judaism is, you know, totally like jumping out of the page. And so I remember calling him to set an appointment and saying, You know, I don't think we need to meet. I think I know what I need to do. I think I need to explore being a rabbi. And he was like, that's what people pay me to figure out when I read these. And so actually, whenever I meet with, a Western Washington University class or a high school class here, before I start talking about Judaism or anything, I always tell them to do that activity because they might

just figure out what they should be doing in life. Before, you know, they might have normally figured it out, so I did that, and then I started to meet with rabbis again to explore it. I started teaching Sunday school. To get in there. I started meeting with a Hebrew tutor because I hadn't taken Hebrew in some years, but the moment when I realized I wanted to become a rabbi was in my childhood. Rabbi Martin Weiner was retiring. And so, the synagogue had, like, a retirement dinner banquet for him at a hotel in San Francisco. And I went, and the moment was when whoever the emcee was called up, all the rabbis and cantors who were there to the front of the room, the stage to lead everyone in Havdalah blessings, and when I saw everyone get up from all these different kind of tables and kind of embrace each other like they were like these long lost siblings, it was just like, so wonderful and loving and seeing them walk up to the stage with their arms around each other. They shared something that I was never going to share with these stock brokers on my trading desk, and then when they all in unison kind of put their hands up, you know, during, um, you know, getting the reflection on their nails and everything. I was like, This is just so beautiful, I love it. I was like, getting the chills. I was just like, I want to be a part of this group. I want to, I want that. So that was like the moment when I was like, all right, like I've thought about it. I'm all in, and so then I applied, and that's how I became a rabbi.

Martina Lancia: That's very interesting. It's a very interesting story. Absolutely. I can't imagine, you know, the things you're saying about sharing something with your colleagues at a desk.

Joshua Samuels: But it's different. Like a lot of my colleagues, when I first started my first year, a lot of them were young, like right out of college. And they knew early on that they wanted to be a rabbi. And so they were working like every year and Sunday school, and summer camps. And even though I went and did summer camp, like, I was like, why would I be working at summer camp? Like what? You know, but they knew. And so it was great. And so I felt like on the one hand, they had so much more experience and I felt behind, but I also felt like I had this life experience that could serve me well, like, you know, speaking with congregants, who are in different places in life. I could connect with them on a different kind of level because I haven't always been, you know, so laser-focused on the rabbinate, and also just to go back to what I was saying, how prayer worship was not something that attracted me to Judaism. I didn't connect with it. I didn't think it wasn't until, you know, taking classes at rabbinical school in Jerusalem, when we were learning about all this, like, why these prayers were written, how they were written, that I started to develop a love for them, and then that's when that kind of began. But a lot of people started because they were very religious, and I wouldn't say I was religious. I was a deeply committed cultural Jew when I applied to rabbinical school.

Martina Lancia: Thank you for the story. It was very interesting. So is there anything you would like to discuss or share that we haven't, you know, related or not, to the questions I've asked so far? So if there's anything else you would like to.

Joshua Samuels: I don't know if anyone has just talked about how we moved into a brand new building. You probably heard about that story. So that was, you know, a pretty momentous occasion in the life of our community. And I remember, when we were dedicating the community, everyone met at the base of our property, which is a long driveway, and we brought we walked to the Taurus up the long driveway, brought them in, and, you know, affix the Mezuzah to the doorposts of pretty much every doorway, that was just a beautiful moment, an event in our in our community, because they've been building this for so, so long. So that I feel so fortunate to have been part of this community. The transition from our old synagogue to our new one.

Martina Lancia: And how has that been, people prefer? There are some people who prefer the old one more than the new one.

Joshua Samuels: I think a lot of people at the beginning, I don't, I wouldn't say they were upset, but they were nostalgic for it. It was hard because that's all they had known. They loved how quaint it was, how intimate it was. But realistically, I mean, you know, you have three classrooms. We were busting at the seams. It wasn't accommodating us. We couldn't even hold High Holiday services there. Simhat Torah. I mean, there are so many people in that room when we're, you know, opening up the whole Torah scroll. I couldn't even move. We couldn't have Purim or Hanukkah parties there. Like, it just didn't make any sense. And so I told people that this is a good thing, you know, and that we can bring some of these things that are from the old synagogue to our new synagogue to remind us. But this should not be a sad moment at all. This should be a joyous one. But, you know, everyone has different connections to places. But I think now everyone's pretty used to our space.

Martina Lancia: And the old building is used for

Joshua Samuels: A Christian youth group bought it. And it's being used as their kind of community space. So, it was not a historical building. So it got a major. They gutted it and gave it a facelift. But, I mean, you can still see the bones of the old synagogue. So it is weird driving by and just seeing how different it is and remembering some of those precious moments, like a wedding or baby namings or things like that that happened in there.

Martina Lancia: Interesting. This detail didn't come up in other interviews. The details of the change of building are for sure, but I didn't know that; it changed so much that it must be.

Joshua Samuels: Oh, yeah.

Martina Lancia: That must be, you know, something to see. And, you know, it has a completely new life.

Joshua Samuels: Totally. And.

Joshua Samuels: You know, even though we don't have much in common with this Christian youth group, I imagine only good things are being discussed and talked about and done in there, you know, and, uh, I think that's wonderful.

Martina Lancia: Oh, absolutely. It's a beautiful you know, it's a beautiful thing that the space has a new life, but it's still producing good memories, so as far as the questions that I had prepared, I don't have any more. So if there's, if there is anything even later on that you feel like should be part of our interview, you can always reach out to me, and we can add anything that you feel like adding. Otherwise, thank you so much for your time. It's been a very pleasant time, and I enjoyed talking with you. Um, so thank you so much for it.

Joshua Samuels: How many more interviews do you have?

Martina Lancia: I have a couple scheduled. I have two more for now.

Joshua Samuels: Well, thank you so much. You did a great job.

Martina Lancia: Thank you, thank you so much. And, I hope you, um, you know, the community will, uh, will will be going this way in the future more, uh, and it's very, very nice for me to have a peek into a world I don't belong to, but that was so nice in letting me in and telling me more about their story. So, again, thank you. And, you know, thank your community as well for doing that with me.

Joshua Samuels: I will thank you so much. Thank you. You too.