Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

Recording Date: May 19, 2022
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

Rabbi Rachel Kort

SUMMARY

Rabbi Rachel Kort discusses her congregation at Temple Beth Or in Everett, WA. She describes their Mitzvah Corps, community care through grief and mourning, addressing housing insecurity through Jewish Family Services, and other work from diversity, equity, and inclusion to addressing antisemitism.

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

Melanie Kay: Today is May 19th, 2022. My name is Melanie Kay, and I'm interviewing Rabbi Rachel Court on behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. So I'd love to learn more about your congregation's commitment to Tikkun Olam - I hope I'm saying that right-your congregation is deeply devoted to social action, both within your local community and also internationally. Can you speak a little bit about your Mitzvah Corps, the equity challenge, and the overall services that your congregation provides? How does the work that you do help individuals, your larger congregation, and your community, and strengthen and reinforce your faith?

Rachel Kort: Well, Tikkun Olam is the Jewish value of bringing healing to our broken world. And in many ways, Temple Beth Ora is modeled like a traditional Jewish community. And I'm thinking of rabbinic texts that talk about circles, of concentric circles of giving. And from a traditional Jewish perspective, first, you're responsible for the needs in your family, of your local Jewish community, of the local broader community, and then working outwards. Now, these are texts that were written for a more ancient societal structure. And now we find ourselves living in a global village, right? We're hyper-aware of how interconnected we are during this pandemic. So, leaning on tradition, but also asking ourselves that question, what is our responsibility in a more global society as one teeny tiny Jewish Community located in Everett? So first and foremost, we create a culture of care within our community. And it was traditional that when Jewish communities from the Old World were establishing themselves in the New World, oftentimes the burial society was actually the first institution to be established. And I would say that within our Beth, our community, we are amazing at caring for our folks who are experiencing loss, and we have a dynamic bereavement committee. Right. Like, we not only make sure that there's food at the Shiva Minyan, but we also make sure that, like, things are cleaned up afterwards, to you know, really beautiful, simple attention to detail, and I would say that after that bereavement piece, our community does a really good job of checking in on one another and making sure that individual needs are met. Um, during the pandemic, we made three rounds of wellness checks to the community at large, and we're able to do that because we're only 125 families. You know, that's our priority. I have a dynamic Mitzvah Corps team that helps care for our people. And we utilize Helping Hands, websites, meal trains, those sorts of things, but folks are always letting me know who could use a wellness call. We also know our limitations as a small community, that we maintain really nice connections with Jewish Family Services in Seattle, which also serves Snohomish County, and other social service organizations, making sure that immediate needs for our community members are met. I would say that something that probably makes us a little bit different than the urban Seattle congregations is that a lot of our families and individuals choose to live in Snohomish County because they've been priced out of Seattle. And we have a lot of congregants who are of humble means; they're still fairly low cost of living in north Snohomish County and Marysville, but whereas I would say, I've been with the community for five years, and I served a congregation in Orange County, California, before coming here. And, I never had to deal with housing insecurity until I landed in Snohomish County. That's something that, unfortunately. Right. But, with a lot of dignity, we've helped a couple of community members who've been experiencing homelessness and have made sure that they get set up with safe housing, and Melanie, I think that our

approach to Tikkun Olam starts inwards. So I'm thinking about your question about our diversity, equity, and Inclusion task force. First, I think it's important to know that Beth Ora is unique, that we're an egalitarian community. And I'm not just talking about like, women's roles in leadership. I'm talking about like, organizational structure. I, we are not a congregant or excuse me, we're not a rabbi driven community. I work in partnership with our lay leaders. Sometimes folks like to look at a family systems model by looking at a small congregation, but you can't simply name like the matriarch or patriarch, right? You know, the avatar of Arc. It's not just one couple. It's like a handful of people who are incredibly, incredibly invested. Um, so one of our amazing members, Sonia Siegel Wexler, founding member of our community organizing powerhouse, has also been active with leadership in the Union for Reform Judaism. Um, she created, with a handful of others, a multiple-month challenge of not looking externally at how we can address diversity, equity, and inclusion, but really looking inward. And I'm thinking about different pieces that I've read during this time, where, right, we as an American society are looking at diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I was reading some resources from the coalition, which is a Jewish organization that addresses diversity. And I'm sorry that I'm forgetting the name of their, of their leader who shared this, but they shared transparently that we can't think that we as American Jews are doing it right just because we're a minority group in and of ourselves, that we have to look inwards to see how we are perpetuating ableism, how we're perpetuating Asian normativity. Right? Uh, and, um, a lot of communities have been nervous about turning right. Turning the tables and looking inwards. And I've been really proud that our community is doing this work for ourselves. I work in conjunction with the DEI task force. And, there were some, like, really specific requests which were right, like, can we highlight the voices, um, more of a more diverse swath of Jewish representation in sermons and articles, and I really feed off of their energy and feel empowered. Right? To give High Holiday sermons on the mixed multitude that's always been traveling with the Jewish community, right? We call that the era of Rav in a biblical sense. Um, and that's really been a through line of my teaching and preaching over this past year. So first, right, looking inwards before we can have the audacity to look outwards in the community.

Melanie Kay: Great. Sounds like you're doing so much great work. I was so impressed by, you know, what I saw on your site?

Rachel Kort: You know, I always say that our congregants try to walk the walk, right? That we can't do everything as our community, but our community members are really active in some amazing social service organizations addressing housing needs in Snohomish County. We have a close relationship, and we have members who are board members at Housing Hope and also the Interfaith Family Shelter. So we tend to do a lot of work with them because we're not one and the same, but we're connected.

Melanie Kay: Awesome. Yeah, I'm actually from Snohomish County, so I can understand the housing issues.

Rachel Kort: I would say it is somebody with whom I shared this openly with my community. I'm a carpetbagger. I live in the north end of Seattle. I live a mile from where I grew up. I live close to my mom and to my sister, and I'm sort of just getting to know Snohomish County, but. Right. Like, Seattle also has a horrible housing problem. I'm not seeing amazing organizations like Housing Hope, right? There's actually amazing work that's happening in Snohomish County that I know is inspiring our local area. But also, we can amplify that out to the country. Right? It's a problem in so many places. Where'd you grow up, Melanie?

Melanie Kay: Mountlake Terrace, I'm actually in Mountlake Terrace, so. Yeah. Not too far. Not too far.

Rachel Kort: No, no. Yeah.

Melanie Kay: Not at all. So this is an oral history that will be available to future generations to read and listen to. Is there anything that you would like to say to future generations about leading your congregation in this particular moment in history, at this particular place in the world?

Rachel Kort: Yeah, I mean, there are so many big things happening, right from waking up to systems of structural racism in the United States. I've been really proud as a community that we're not afraid to have difficult conversations, right, about how we benefit from white privilege, right? Even though we still feel the effects of being a minority group. And I think that we're pretty, like, keenly aware of that, especially in Snohomish County, where unfortunately, there's quite a bit of white supremacist activity. I want to speak a little bit more about the moment of the pandemic. Um, and wow, I've just been so proud that our community has been willing to be creative in this really difficult time. And I think it is a rabbi who studied organizational change. I've been impressed by how we've been able to seize this moment to really make values-driven decisions. So much of what we do in the Jewish world is right, drawing from tradition. And sometimes you can get stuck in the way we've always done things, and the pandemic has really invited us to ask because we had to ask what is sacred community, and how do we build it, and what's the purpose of what we do, as opposed to simply having Shabbat services? Simply having High Holy Days, right? Uh, what's the purpose of gathering? There's a really great book that a lot of us in the Jewish world are reading, The Art of Gathering. It's really working backwards. Um, we've made some changes, especially to how we celebrate our most sacred time in the calendar, our High Holy Days, that really better align with who we are as a community. And they're here to stay. So, for example, we gathered

last year for Rosh Hashanah, not in our sanctuary because, frankly, people were too nervous to be inside, even with masks on and the Omicron Variant. Delta, I think it was Delta back then, whatever freaking variant it was. And we met at the Union for Reform Judaism camp in Arlington, where most of our congregants are only a half an hour drive away. And right, our current building is not physically accessible and is not ADA accessible. It's outdoors. We have enough space to be able to offer children's programming for the first time. And right, we also named that, you know, we come together to pray. But really, people want to like, catch up, and be with a community and not simply offering a service. Right? But offering opportunities to go hiking and to schmooze and to just be together and enjoy. And, that's here to stay, right? You know, the community hands down said, we would have never made this change had it not been for a pandemic, but this is who we are. Um, as, uh, is a group of Jews in Snohomish County, and our people want to be close to our beautiful trees and nature. Right. I would say that one of the dynamics of who Beth is is that we're a community that really appreciates and is grounded in the natural beauty of our area. Um, people really choose not to live in, right? Like the urban center, they want to be surrounded by trees and nature.

Melanie Kay: I love it. I'm glad to hear that at least something good came out of the pandemic. That's encouraging to hear.

Rachel Kort: I know we call them Covid keepers in our community. So, uh.

Melanie Kay: Wait, the people in the congregation.

Rachel Kort: Yeah. Like we call like leadership. We call it a Covid keeper, right? Like this one.

Melanie Kay: Oh, I like it, I like it.

Rachel Kort: And we're all like. We're all tired of the pandemic fatigue, right? Like, we're not a superpower congregation. We're doing all right. So.

Melanie Kay: Yeah. Yeah. Um, there's a bit of information on this topic on your website, but could you speak a bit more to how your congregation has addressed anti-Semitism in your community?

Rachel Kort: Again, looking inwards, but also knowing that. Hate in America is not only directed at Jews, and anti-Semitism is intimately connected to the broader hate movement that we're experiencing, their voice and actions being amplified in our country. I've been with the community for about five years now, and I was only with the community for a few months when the terrorist attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh happened. Right. The most devastating terrorist attack on a Jewish community in America in our history. I was greeted in Snohomish County with an outpouring of support from our local interfaith community leaders. And, quickly became acquainted with the Everett mayor, with our county executive, with the Everett Police Department, with the sheriff's department, with the Anti-Defamation League. Right. And, unfortunately, their relationships were out of necessity, that at the same time as the Tree of Life shooting, there were actually some pretty high-profile arrests of white supremacists in Snohomish County. And, my story is a rabbi. I had a congregant in Orange County, and their grandchild, their grandson, was murdered by a white supremacist; he was home on vacation from college. Blaze Bernstein, a nationally recognized case and a former classmate from high school, had been radicalized by the neo-Nazi group Otto Waffen, and, you know, on the one hand, it was like a lone wolf. But on the other hand, it wasn't right. It was somebody who had been radicalized on the internet. Right. In my first few months in Snohomish County, there were like two high-profile arrests of people connected to Auto Waffen. So, the real threat is not lost on me, and, you know, I see these relationships with elected officials and government officials are being critical, right? Having a relationship with the county prosecutor, asking him, you know, why aren't you trying? It is a hate crime, right? You know, learning that it's really important that they just wanted to get this guy behind bars and wanted to make sure that the charges would stick. Um, and, you know, being in a relationship makes us safer and better allies in the community at large. Um, there was something minor, maybe like a year and a half ago, someone wanted to open up a restaurant in Everett with the name Soup Kitchen, and The Everett Herald got wind of it pretty quickly. And like, we're already organized, right? We were we like, knew as a community how to shut that down. And two days later, it was. Incredible. And, you know, talking to the mayor. Right. Uh, government officials sometimes have their hands tied, and what they can do is a direct result of that incident and some others in Everett. The Everett City created, inclusion campaign, right, of businesses being able to put up signs, provided by the city, that we celebrate diversity in the Everett area, in terms of being an ally to other minority groups in the area. Um, after the Tree of Life shooting, our community, I was so proud that we created this beautiful County event. Our members, our social action committee, are working with county officials to bring out Eric Ward, who is a nationally recognized speaker on the connection between hate and antisemitism. Um, he actually got his start, addressing hate through the punk rock scene, in California. And we brought out this nationally recognized speaker. He speaks all the time on PBS NewsHour and NPR, and Temple Beth has hosted him in Snohomish County. Hundreds of people came out. It was mostly not Jewish folk. Right. It was really a community education opportunity, and you know, as I talked to my colleagues, things have, like, everybody's a little more isolated now during the pandemic, and this is one of those areas where I'm glad the world is opening up a little bit and meeting more regularly with

Snohomish County community leaders. So, we've been kind of quiet, but I know that our efforts will expand over time.

Melanie Kay: Definitely, as things are lifting. Yeah, hopefully. Yes.

Rachel Kort: Ironically. Right. Like, because now that we're gathering, we have to think about our security needs again. Like, it was kind of nice to have a year and a half respite of not having to worry about building security.

Melanie Kay: Definitely. So you've worked in various capacities to serve people throughout the world in your career. Is there anything that you found to be unique to your congregation and the larger Jewish community of Snohomish, Snohomish County?

Rachel Kort: Oh, man, I love being a Jew in the Pacific Northwest. When I was a student rabbi, I had the opportunity to serve congregations in Russia and Ukraine, and Mumbai, India, and central Pennsylvania was probably the most different culturally than anything I had experienced. A community where they have like a day off from school for the first day of buck hunting, right, of deer hunting. Right, in many ways. Right. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, like, this is a homecoming for me. Um, my mom was born in Tacoma. Um, my great-grandmother was born in eastern Washington. So I'm a fourth-generation Washingtonian. A little more self-oriented, but now it's amazing to get to know the dynamics of Snohomish County. Getting to know the culture of our local tribe, the Tulalip people. Um, and you know, again, I would say that our community members are choosing to live closer to nature. I would also say that our community is really unique in our leadership model. Right. Being audacious enough to go against the grain of hierarchical religious authority? Right. And really look at more of an egalitarian partnership model. And, um, we're a small community that's not pretending to be large, right? We stay within our budget. Right? I work for the community part-time, and if it weren't for the level of commitment and partnership, we wouldn't be able to thrive. So I'm in awe of my community members every day. For their level of elbow grease, sweat, sweat equity. It's not like, Rabbi Schwartz community. It's. I'm like one person around the seat of leadership. It's wonderful.

Melanie Kay: Oh, it sounds like a great community to be a part of.

Rachel Kort: I love it. I'm never leaving right now.

Melanie Kay: Lucky you. Lucky you.

Rachel Kort: Hopefully.

Melanie Kay: So, what do you want future generations to know about your congregation, your faith, or the Jewish community of Snohomish County?

Rachel Kort: I think Temple Beth Ora really lives by the Jewish values. But tell him that everyone is created in God's image, and we are firm enough in that belief that we can live by it within our small community, offering that intimate sense of care and support. And we also feel comfortable expressing that value outside of the walls of our synagogue, engaging with our local community, and representing our Jewish values, and it's nice to be a part of a community that feels pretty secure in who we are. I used to make a joke about South Orange County that nobody moved to South Orange County for its thriving Jewish life, right? And I would probably say that the same is true for Snohomish County, right? It's not the primary reason why we live here. And at the same time, it creates more of a sense of commitment, that there's no way to just be Jewish through osmosis in Snohomish County, right? It's not that there's no grateful bread. There's no Zilberstein. Right, those folks really need to come together to feel that sense of Jewishness. And in some places, that could feel like a burden. Right. Being the only Jewish kid in high school. Right. But it's just such a celebration, here, knowing that we're not doing it alone. We're doing it with a handful of committed, diverse, amazing families. One thing, too, that I want to name that I think makes us unique, for generations, really, since the founding of the progressive community here in Snohomish County in the 1980s. We're a community that has embraced other non-Jews who are members of Jewish families, and other Jews by choice have been synagogue presidents since the 80s. Other non-Jews have been active members, even committee chairs, that I think we really represent who American Jewry is, um, that we've never had that culture of, uh, you know, shaming interfaith families, whereas other progressive communities are still like, doing the work and figuring out what that means to be inclusive of interfaith families. So that makes me really proud.

Melanie Kay: Oh, it's so great to hear. Always a good thing.

Rachel Kort: I know everybody.

Melanie Kay: I like it, I like it.

Rachel Kort: When I became a Bat Mitzvah, you know, in liberal Seattle in the mid-90s. Right. Like, there was no thought that, like, my non-Jewish grandparents would be able to participate, like it didn't even cross anybody's mind, like my mind. Right? And to

this day, I still feel a little bit bitter that my whole self and family didn't have a place in that sacred space of my Bat Mitzvah. So it's definitely something that I like to. I love that it's not the culture that I inherited that I needed to change when I came before.

Melanie Kay: Absolutely. It's great. It sounds like you're being the change that you want to see in the world. To that old. Cliche, though, right?

Rachel Kort: This change was already there, you know, as somebody whose mom is a Jew by choice, right? Like, occasionally more so on the East coast, but you get the comment of like, but you're so Jewish, and your mom isn't really Jewish, right? And I'm like, no, that's not the house that I grew up in, right? So, definitely breaking stereotypes.

Melanie Kay: Well, awesome. Awesome to hear. Um, so your congregation grew out of cooperation, compromise, and love between different affiliations of Jews. Do you see that legacy reflected in your congregation today? And does embracing difference inform the work that you do?

Rachel Kort: I really loved this question. It made me scratch my head, and one of the reasons why I was scratching my head is over the past 30 years, um, there's been more of a like separation between Liberal Judaism and Orthodox Judaism, and I wonder if the relationship would be the same today, right? I also wonder, and I think a lot of people from the Montefiore community, too, right? Like what made the community traditional or Orthodox, right? And I think that for the members who are a part of the community, you know, our building was built in 1913 as a synagogue. Right. My understanding from the Washington State Jewish Historical Society is that we are the longest continually used religious building in Washington state, right? So it's not a mosque. It's not a church. It's like our synagogue here in Everett. So I think it's really embracing that, like, Jews have always been a part of this community. And I think that it's probably the way that we imagine Orthodoxy today. There's no way that the members of Montefiore didn't eat out in restaurants, right? I think the religious services were traditional, but people weren't living traditional lives outside of the synagogue. We still have a handful of folks who are members of Montefiore, who are members of our congregation, and they definitely do not identify as Orthodox. Right. Uh, one person, Sally Rubin, is in his 90s, but Sally's been married to a non-Jew for, like, 70 years, right? Which would have been, like, unheard of in a traditional Orthodox community. I think I think that because we're like the only progressive thing going on in town. We do need to be mindful that our folks are coming from all different sorts of Jewish flavors. Um, and I would say sometimes in the Jewish world, we tend to defer to the most traditional practice, and we're actually really good about not doing that at Beth or right, that really looking at what our community's needs. I'm also very aware, as the rabbi, that people are coming from more of a traditional context. And, you know, again, the pandemic helped to make some changes. So I would say that we had been our Shabbat morning services would last two hours. Right. Going through most of the traditional liturgy, our High Holiday services would last 2.5 hours, right? Also leaning on most of the traditional liturgy I know from a very traditional perspective, that if you go through all the liturgy, those services are 4 to 5 hours. So we were already making some cuts, right? But it was simple enough to be able to meet everybody's needs. Right. So not every service is framed in that traditional sense. But I know that speaks to some. And I make sure that in our service offerings, there are services that use the melodies that people grew up with. Right. And they're a conservative congregation. Right. Use a more traditional format of our service structure. So, trying not to be everything for everyone, but making sure that everyone has sacred space within our community. Um, you know, I think that I grew up in sort of this milieu of post-denominationalism, right side that I grew up in a reformed congregation, but am married to somebody who went to an Orthodox day school and kept a kosher kitchen. And, you know, among my generation, we don't talk about denominations a lot. Um, with that said. Right. Like, we're proud to be progressive Jews and hold liberal values in our community, and I think I've also been impressed. I have a lovely relationship with the Chabad rabbi in Lynnwood. Rabbi Berel Paltiel. I think both of us know that it's like, it's so funny to be a rabbi in Snohomish County. And here we are, right? Like, you know, we can talk about, I lived in Crown Heights for a while, and rabbinic school. So we can sort of, you know, chit chat about the Chabad Lubavitch neighborhood and like, just talk about how different it is in Snohomish County. And, there's a nice sense of collegiality that I know you don't find everywhere in the United States between reform rabbis and Chabad rabbis, but Beryl and I also choose to like, work in a more remote area. So I think it's self-selecting.

Melanie Kay: Well, that's great to hear. He's someone that we are hoping to interview for this same exhibit.

Rachel Kort: So I got in touch with him.

Melanie Kay: That'd be great.

Rachel Kort: He does a bunch of prison work, so you gotta talk to him about that, too.

Melanie Kay: Oh. Good to know. I'm going to write that in my notes here. Okay, I'm at the end of my questions, but is there anything else that you would like to say about this interview? Anything else that you would like people to know, who might be

listening to this in the future?

Rachel Kort: I'm just so proud to be a child of the Pacific Northwest. Really, growing up in the Jewish community here, my family lived for a year in Puyallup, and we were members of Temple Emanuel in Tacoma for a year, and then I was raised by the Seattle Jewish community. And it's just my sacred privilege to be able to offer some of that energy back to the community that I think is just really, really special and unique. Right? Being Jewish on the West Coast, right? We're not a very religious area of the world, and I think it allows us as a Jewish community to be more creative. Right. To not always do things the way that we've always done them. Um, and I actually think that allows us to do a better job of meeting our individuals where they're at. And I see bright things for the Jewish future of Snohomish County and western Washington.

Melanie Kay: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for doing this interview with me. I really appreciate it.

Rachel Kort: You're welcome. Yeah. And know you always have a Jewish home. Right. Like, don't be a stranger. There's like a small but mighty group of I'm like, reading your Punim. I also have, like, a ridiculously young face, but I know some other, like, folks in their 30swho, I could connect you with if you're looking for some Jewish community locally.

Melanie Kay: So awesome. Well, thank you so much. I'm going to go ahead and finish the recording, and then we can continue the chat. Okay.