

Humboldt in the time of COVID Project: Interview with Rabbi Naomi Steinberg of Temple Beth
El, Eureka, California

Interviewers: Zayne Nordberg (HSU History Student) and Madeleine Wilson (HSU Religious
Studies Student)

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Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Zayne and Madeleine, nice to meet you both.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer)

Nice to meet you.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

I just want to let you know that I just started recording.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

that's fine. Sure, sure. Yeah, you're both are you both full time students?

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Yeah, I'm a full time student, the history department.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

And I'm a religious studies student.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Oh, wonderful. Great. Great. Great. Great. Oh my gosh, how's it going online? Yes. Your Online
only?

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Yeah, entirely. I think in person classes are like science departments, and even then, I think are
limited.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Yeah. Yeah, it's crazy.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

It's going much better than I anticipated, which is what I've been saying to everyone that's asked, I really had low expectations for the term. But fortunately, a lot of my professors have taken online courses themselves and are like using those experiences.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Yeah, the I think the younger professors are totally with it. They've got it. They've got it. Because they, you know, they're, they are children of that age. The older professors are, like, oyeval. They are, you know, harder for them, I think. Yep. Yeah. Yeah. Well, hopefully it won't last too long. take up too much time in your college careers, you know?

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Yeah. unfortunately, it looks like it's going to be at least next semester. And I'll be graduating then. And so I think I'm going to graduate virtually.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Ah, okay. But you'll but you'll be getting done. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But it's it's absolutely for the best. It's crazy to risk getting sick. Crazy. Yeah. Yeah. So this is so this is this a joint project of history department and Rs?

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

So this is the Humboldt in the time of COVID. project. And to my knowledge, it's independent from...I don't know Madeline is the same project?

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

They are like, overlapping goals. I think they're the same project, but run separately. So the Religious Studies Department is doing it in just honing in on how religious organizations across the county have adapted. And then I know that history departments going a little broader in terms of any organization.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Uh, huh. Great. Great. That's a very wise idea to document it while it's going on.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

Yes. And I'm excited to have you here because I had the good fortune to tune into some of your rashanna services. So I've seen a little bit about Temple Beth-el and how you've adapted. So I'd love to, I can't wait to get into talking about how that came to pass.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Okay, let's do it. Let's do it.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

All right. I guess we'll just begin with what your name is, and what is it that you do?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Yeah, I'm Naomi Steinberg. And I'm a rabbi and I serve temple Beth-el in Eureka and B'nai ha vets in garberville, the apostrophe in a second word, capital H, a, hyphen, capital AR, etz, which means children of the earth. So I've been doing that for 25 years or so.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Okay. I guess just to begin, before the pandemic, how active would you say your community was and have you had to restrict how active your community is?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Before the pandemic, our community was very active, we have full range of classes and religious events and rituals. And we've just had to completely change the format for how we do things completely from in person, to nothing in person, we're not doing anything at all in person. Everything is online. And that's a huge change for us. But I would say that the amount of activity to me feels about the same. You know, in certain activities, there feels like there's less participation, because it's online, and other feels like there's more because it's online.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

So there are some things that people are actually more engaged with now that it's online.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

I would say so. Yeah. People are lonely. Yeah.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

I'm curious to hear what specific activities. You've seen more participation.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Um, well, our adult ed Committee, which had been kind of kind of inactive for a couple years, got all fired up, and they're just organizing classes and recruiting people to teach because there's a need for people to feel connected. And what's important to understand about temple Beth el is that we're really a regional center, because we have Jewish families and individuals living all over the county and we're the only like, long time Stable affiliated institution in the area. In addition with banayha, banayha arts, the garberville congregation is a smaller one, very loosely knit, and unaffiliated. It's a wonderful group of people. But it reflects the spirit of Southern Humboldt. And it's just not as tightly organized and not as active. They do a few very, very nice events every year, and have an ongoing once a month radio show. So that's what they do with

temple Bethel. They do lots of classes and services and events and cultural events all through the year. So oops, lost my train of thought there.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

You can just move on if you'd like.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

No. I haven't enough coffee this morning. Let me think about this...

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Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

we're talking about the events...

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

okay. Okay, I got I got back up back. So So temple Bethel. Even it becomes, you know, Beneyhal has a small board and limited. I'm sorry, my camera just does that. My husband just does that to , tell the southern Humboldt congregation small, a small number of offerings per year. So in Eureka, Eureka congregation has to serve everybody who wants more, both the people from Southern Humboldt and the people from the eastern reaches and the northern reaches. So imagine the the traditional model of a Jewish community, it would be that people live near their synagogue, they walk there for Shabbat services, and the synagogue becomes a big center of their social life. Well, in America where everybody lives, so spread out and everybody has cars, you know, everybody's far apart from each other. So temple Bethel has this challenge of people want to attend something, but maybe they don't want to drive from Trinidad to Eureka on a Wednesday night for a class, or they don't want to drive from Fortuna up to Eureka for a Saturday morning thing. They just don't, they don't want to do the schlep we say in Yiddish. So the great thing about online, no schlepping. You hit the button, and you're there. And the other cool thing is that when we do big events, some people are always in the back of the hall. But hear nothing. So they're good here, everybody gets a front row seat. Everybody can see is that was just everybody gets the exact same picture. So because of how we're spread out here, it's it's really a great model for people to not have to drive. Add, of course, we're very progressive congregation. And we don't want to be polluting our county with all this extra driving. So yeah, it's really nice to drive to town and sit in the class and visit with people and you have snacks and you know, you schmooze with people. But you also have to burn the fossil fuels to get there.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Yeah, that's a good way of looking at it.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Yeah.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Do you remember when you first started knowing that you had to make changes? Was it when the county delivered their ordinance? Or did you know before then that you would have to make some changes because of the pandemic?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

I like what you asked, Do I remember? Because I am pushing 70. So there's a lot that I do not remember. And you know, there's a lot that wasn't worth remembering. But yes, I remember. It was pretty much an early in early March. I think it was before any particularly edict from the county. Oh, Mm hmm. Right. In mid March. I think there was some edict from the state. But we just the board of directors and I, we just discussed it, we realized right away. Oh, no, this is not Oh, sorry. My camera does that. I move and I don't want to sit like a statute. You just have to cope...

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

I think it keeps autofocusing

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Right. Probably made in China, but you know, it lifted millions of people out of poverty. So that's okay with me. So, um, so yeah, really early in mid March. Right away. We figured it out. Okay. I can't remember exactly the date. But we just said this is we're not going to do this. It was right before Passover. And Passover is a very big deal for us. And we said right away, nope. canceling the Passover Seder. We're not going to do it. And then we pretty much you know, figured it out. We saw the writing on the wall to use a biblical expression from the book of Daniel. And we said, No, we're not gonna, we're not gonna be able to gather we have to reorganize. So the Passover Seder that happened, I can look it up. When did it happen? The Passover Seder was the first thing that I led online. And it was fun. I'll tell you when it was. Passover Seder was, doo doo, doo doo doo doo doo. It was the week of April 7. So I think it was, it was Sunday, the 12th of April. So that was the first thing that happened to happen to coincide with Easter this year. The first thing that I'm that I'm just not gonna close the door, my nephew just came in. We are blessed with a teenager living with us. Really fun, fun, fun teenager who can't go see any friends and can't go to school? Oh, yeah!

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

Speaking of teenagers, did you have to break any little 13 year olds hearts and postpone bar and bat mitzvahs at that time?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Exactly. We did that right away. We did that right away. Because we didn't have any bar Bat Mitzvahs that were coming up immediately, like in the next week or two. They were mostly scheduled for the summer. And those events serve as wonderful family reunions. And that component is as important to me as the religious ritual. I'm glad that the kids study, they learn Hebrew, they learn to interpret the biblical text. But it really matters that they make a loving connection with family members. And as you know, living here in Humboldt their love people who come here for school, and then stay, and their families are far away. So that aspect is super important. And it's not like, it's not saying that the party is more important than the service. It's great to have a party, but to have your relatives in the synagogue for them to be with you. They're to hear you teach to hear you give over an interpretation of an ancient text to hear you sing. And and to do it with you. Hmm, very meaningful, super meaningful. So we cancelled everything. And all of a sudden, I have a whole bunch of free time. Oh, which is just fabulous. And they're rescheduled for next year, but some of them are rescheduled for 2022.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

So as you instruct your newer class, are you preparing them for eventual in person? Or is there an idea of potentially having them run zoom services?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

I think we're pretty much going to wait. Or I haven't heard anybody expressed interest in doing zoom. I've asked them if you want to do that. But they mostly No, no, because of the family reunion component. So no, no plans to do it by soon, though, I know synagogues where that has taken place. And we attended a zoom button. That's right after the shutdown. So friends in Berkeley, but that student had, it was like going to be the next two weeks. So that would have been very hard to put that on hold for that student.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

So you mentioned earlier that the you started doing restrictions. You saw the writing on the wall, you said before the state ever mentioned anything. Do you think that there's anything that the local or the state government did or didn't do that you think could have been better?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

You mean, specifically for for our community, or for community in general? Sure. I would have liked to hear that masks were a good idea. much earlier, we had misinformation from the CDC that told us don't use masks, leave them for the health professionals. But that was bad advice, because they should have said make a mask at home as soon as you can. And of course, the President did nothing. And we should have had a national mask mandate and he should have invoked the like, you know, the War Powers, the whatever it was that he had at his disposal to produce masks and ppe. So yeah, they could have done things dramatically differently. That would have spared so much suffering. Whatever they did would not have impacted our

operations specifically, because even with masks available for everybody, we still would not have had in person events. But we wouldn't, you know, have been burdened by the sorrow and the misery and the worrying about everybody that is a tremendous burden

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

As a faith leader in this time, how would you characterize your role in dispelling misinformation?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Oh, good question. The, the Jewish community tends to be very well educated people who decide that they want to be affiliated, they want to take part. And in general have a very, very high level of education. They know critical thinking. Um, years ago, I was chatting with a friend of mine, who was a Methodist minister, retired, sweet, sweet man, wonderful guy. And he had moved to England in his retirement where his wife's people were from his home on a visit. So happy to see him. And he said, Oh, I'm getting to do some preaching. You know, even in my retirement, I preach, like twice a month or something and a little church somewhere near where my wife grew up. And he said, and I have to stay on my toes. There are three PhDs in the congregation. And, you know, and I thought, whoa, I just started counting PhDs in the choir, I thought, okay, let's see, I've got six PhDs in the choir, two people with master's degrees, two doctors, one lawyer. I mean, that's in the choir. So because we tend to be a community with a huge emphasis on education, because we are not a community that pushes a set of beliefs on anybody says you should believe this in an unquestioning way, I won't use the term blind faith because I find that really offensive, and in using disability metaphors, as metaphors for indifference or insensitivity, but what they used to call blind faith, which we can just call foolish faith, we don't do that. So we tend to get people with really high level critical thinking skills, you may have heard of those. They don't exist in public education very much in this country, but the two you by virtue of what you're doing, obviously have those skills. So I don't need to tell people wear masks we say, however, with that said, right before Passover, I wrote an essay in the time standard, which is for general consumption for the broad public about Passover. And I said, be safe. Stay home for at least the next two weeks, because that's what we were told, we're gonna stay home for two weeks. And I forgot. But good thing we didn't know. Um, so I did feel that that was very important for me to take that stance publicly. And people thank you for Oh, thank you. Well, I guess we're gonna stay home for two weeks. But in general, that's not something I need to do. Because people in my congregation are our response, you know, I'm making their own wise decisions. Um,

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

excuse my ignorance. I'm not exactly familiar with faith itself. But um, have there been any teachings or lessons that have been more poignant during this time, that you've thought had more effect on people?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

I'm the teacher that I've been focusing on is something from the the literature that we call the Talmud, capital T, A, L, M, U, D. And the Talmud is an encyclopedia sort of, of teachings of rabbis, ancient rabbis over a period of hundreds of years, starting from about what is my camera doing, starting from about 200 BCE to 400 or 500 BC, and move away from it would be happier. So it it's it reads like a discussion among hundreds of rabbis over hundreds of years. And there is a little teaching that says, Do not separate yourself from the community, (Hebrew). And the word for community is a word that also means sort of like a heap, a pile. So you can also translate it as don't separate yourself from the masses from the throngs. Um, so I wrote it, I wrote an article for the congregation or camber where the articles for about, you know, here we have this teaching that says, Don't separate yourself. And yet right now, in fact, we need to separate ourselves, especially from the throngs, from crowds need to separate ourselves physically. But while we're separate, physically, we need to make an even stronger connection, emotionally, socially, intellectually, politically. So we're separate, physically, but we need to stay more connected, and not just connected to our own sphere, our own group, but really to the masses, to have awareness of the masses where there are throngs of people, they are going to be affected. You know, we're doing so well here in Humboldt with our super low positivity rate. But wow, you know, look what's happening. And it's just starting, it really hasn't even fully hit what we call third world countries. And that's what we've all been just my daughter is a doctor. And she said to me, in January, she said, something really bad is on its way mama hits, it's going to be terrible. And especially terrible for countries with poor sanitation and crowded housing situations, and intergenerational living situations which are usually love that idea but so don't separate yourself from the masses, from the throng from the community. It's the same word that's used for the religious community also. That's been kind of my main main teaching for this.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

When you for your Shabbat services, as I mentioned earlier, I had, I was able to watch one of them with you a few months back, but it was clear that it was just you and maybe one other person in temple on the bema. Speaking to a computer, maybe with limited ability to see your congregation, how, what is going through your head when you're leading a service in that way, just yourself maybe one other person in the room working to stay connected to the masses?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Hmm. Well, when I'm Le-, I'm not sure what, which, if it was High Holidays you attended, then I was in the synagogue?

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

Yes. So your Rosh Hashanah

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Rosh Hashanah, most of the services I've done, I've done from my home. So usually from my dining room table, where I celebrate Shabbat regularly with my family. And there's a teaching that since the destruction of the temple, you know, 2000 years ago, that the table, the dining table becomes the altar. And the person conducting the service, the ritual at the dining table is acting as the high priest. So we give very, very strong respect to the home onto the table. So I've done services from my table at home, and from my picnic table, because we live out in Carlotta, and I am an outdoorsy person. And we love having a Shabbat dinners outdoors. And some of our neighbors have come over and been able to join us for that from a distance. So when I'm leading up from my home, I can see everybody on the screen like I see now. Sometimes it's with a lot of people they're little, but it's very personal because like oh Zayne, Great to see you. Great to see you again. I love your shirt one is that is that a crocodile on either on your shoulder? What is that? Oh, Katie, Madeline I know a Katie Wilson. Madeleine, good to see you. Where are you at home? Is that your house? You know? So a lot of schmoozing and connecting. When I found that in the zoom services, when everybody sees each other's faces and sees their homes, there's a warmth and there is a discipline of connection that is sometimes hard to foster in the actual synagogue when people are there in person. They're sitting in their own chairs. There may be shy to get to know other people the way I conduct services I'm always turn to the person sitting next to you introduce yourself, tell them blah, I give prompt for people to connect because we also have a teaching also from Talmud. That to welcome another person is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence. So I'm always saying welcome each other get to know each other. So here obviously I have to because it's on zoom and I'm the host I'm coordinating who's talking. But I say let's go around. And everybody tell us where are you? And how are you? I started with that for quite a while, in the spring, I was always where somebody says, I'm at home, in my house in Trinidad, I'm at home in Fortuna, I'm at home on the weekends, hi, am I I'm depressed, I'm worried, I'm scared, I'm doing fine. I'm enjoying my garden, I have a new cat, I have a new puppy. You know, whatever it is. And that's, that's very important. So that's, that's easy to do, because I'm a very social person. And also, I've been serving the congregation for so long that I know most everybody. And I know. And it's also been fun being with zoom, because people have popped up, who have moved away and are homesick for this congregation for this group. So I like oh, my goodness, how's life in Seattle? Oh, my gosh, I can't believe you're, you know, you're New York. It's three hours later, what are you doing awake still, you know, so there's a lot of fun. And people go, Oh, look, see who's here. So that's been actually very, very enjoyable. And each time I start one of these things, I think, I tell my family, okay, I'll be finished in like 45 minutes, you know, it's who's gonna want to stare at the screen and then longer than that, now, I know that I need to allow at least an hour and a half or two hours for what is what would regularly be a 45 minute ritual, in person followed by dinner, or refreshments and visiting. So I get it that and I've got quite a few people who are home alone, or people who are home taking care of somebody who is disabled, or ill, or very small and demanding. And no one's cooking Shabbat dinner for them. They don't have anything to look forward to for the rest of the evening.

This is it. So I just let it go on and on. And I do a lot of instead of doing the prayer service, get up the book, open to page 10, turn to page 12. Turn to page 14. I'm hardly using the prayer books at all. I'm doing some of the basic prayers and blessings that everybody knows for this Shabbat evening ritual. And when I'm doing lots of discussion, I'll bring up a teaching and ask people to respond to it. Lots and lots and lots of as interactive as possible. And try to always call on the people who have not spoken. Just like a good university, professor would and just say, Okay, I haven't heard from you. Let me let's hear from you. Um, so that aspect is really enjoyable. For the High Holidays that you observed Madeline. I have some concerns about well, how is this going to go because usually, we have a very full room most empty seats. We have a big choir, we have musicians and soloists, and a lot of people participate. So I thought, Oh my gosh, is this gonna work at all, with just me talking? Again, I had was able to have people participate from afar in wonderful ways. But I couldn't see everybody's faces because there were, you know, like, you know, over 100, 100 homes are so tuned in and that I couldn't see all that and I didn't want to see was distracted. So that was a little more demanding. When you asked what was going through my mind. What's going through my mind was I was reminding myself to look at the camera, though. So you're looking at so now I keep looking up to see your faces because my camera isn't up. Your faces are kept telling myself look at the camera people are there they are there. Now I'm looking at you in the camera and telling you what I want to tell you without looking at your face. So I'm fortunate because I have really been theater training. I studied theater in college, I have a Bachelor's of Fine Arts. And so, you know, I can do that I can use those skills. I know how to direct my attention. And I know how to focus my own inner feelings to get across what I want to communicate. So I hope it is it was a challenge. But once I got into it, I really enjoyed it. I can speak directly to you. You're not in the back of the hall. If you're falling asleep, I'm gonna you know, I've got this is it was fun. I couldn't see them but it actually I really enjoyed a lot. Okay, am I supposed to do anything with this meeting has been upgraded. Yeah, that's my long answer to how I enjoyed it. So I find that I've enjoyed both formats. And I will continue doing really informal things but I look forward to a few more formal programs too. And we got great response. People said they loved it. So...

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Yeah, I've noticed a lot of similarities. Just doing online classes, it takes on an academic experience, where everybody usually focused on a single lecture, and makes it a little bit more of a more intimate, you know, experience, not necessarily in the way that some people would like, because it's you're very aware, when people aren't doing what they should be doing. Are you put into the groups you have to face people that are, you know, saying, like, if someone did the reading and someone didn't, then it's a lot more obvious, it's a lot harder to stay quiet. And so have you been noticing that people sometimes are a lot more distracted, or if they do join, are they a lot more engaged?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Oh, I say nobody joins unless they want to be engaged. But we also have an etiquette that allows people to stay keep the video off. Because and I told people just tune in, you don't have to have your video on because people are up and moving about, some people are not comfortable with their home showing them this other stuff. And or they just feel like they don't know how to use the screen, or they haven't brushed their hair, they're in their pajamas, where their kids are running in and out. So anybody who doesn't want to sit there and engage, doesn't have to. And we always for every event, we always have, I'd say you know, at least a few people who are just on, you see their names. And I always acknowledge that and say, Oh, Hi, Sarah, we see that you're there. You know. Um, so we don't have that challenge, because we're not grading anybody on attendance or participation, as much as I would like to, because that's so much fun to do, and helps draw people out. But no, nobody gets graded. I can see that that would be really demanding and demanding and a different way for students. I think in a good way, because I just, I think a lot of things wrong with our educational system. And I always drove me crazy. I taught at university for about 10 years. And my heart always broke with at the end of the semester, there would be people that I had hardly heard from, or they open their mouths in class, they just were too shy. And, and I never felt good about saying everybody must talk, I'll put you on the spot, you know, you three rows in the back. I don't remember your name because you've never spoken. It's time to speak. I especially I had a student who just aced the final, It was superb performance on the final. I was astounded. I think I'd only heard the students speak in class a few times for the whole semester. And I realize, wow, this person was taking it all in. So I think that's a good thing to get people to interact more.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

Have you heard from your congregation or any of your peers at Temple, about how they have still maintained the ritual of getting ready for services, maybe dressing up? decorating themselves their homes, and still inhabiting the sacred performance going into ritual?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Well, you know, I think if people are pretty stressed, even though we would like to thank everybody so they have more time to get this done. That I think is not the case. I see her.. Oh my nephew is bringing me coffee. Thank you dear, these are HSU students that are doing a study on how COVID is affecting the county.

Rabbi Steinberg's Nephew:

So it's Carmel with vanilla creamer.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Say hello to..

Rabbi Steinberg's Nephew:

Hello

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):
that sounds delicious, too.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:
Oh, oh, yeah, a heavy handle on the sweetener.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:
Oh, oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, so. So some people, you know that they're just barely getting there. Some people have a home practice that they will do every week. And maybe sometimes they'll go to the synagogue and some, but they'll always do it at home. Other people do not have a home practice. So they only do rituals when they are with the group. So that's still the same thing, whether we're online or in person. I think that people who always do them, it's very grounding and you can see that when they are let's say, for just simply like lighting Shabbat candles, let's light them together, you can see that some people have them, and other people don't. And this is a way in which, as a progressive congregation, no one is required to do it. So they don't have to do it. In a more strict congregation and Orthodox congregation, people are required to do it. So they do it. I was just reading an essay in this morning, something from a rabbi was writing, in 1955, you know, postwar years critiquing the American Jewish experience. And this rabbi said, that American Judaism is essentially saying what we would say it has been dumbed down. That's, we use that a lot now. But he said, we have settled for a Judaism that demands little and offers little. 1955 push for, you know, the Jewish community was in shock after the Holocaust. And so we tended to move toward bigger is better, big synagogues, lots of people just for the strength of that individual participation was lost. Of course, also faith was shattered, people were shattered. So why am I going to do these rituals for this God, who allowed 6 million people of 6 million of us to be murdered, not to mention, you know, the other 30-40 million people who perished or more, clinging to God like this now. So it's a time of great crisis. And it's interesting to read that I was three years old when the rabbi rose up. And I'm just thinking today about how that relates to what we do today. And also thinking of the appropriate way to frame that because in a progressive congregation, we don't demand anything of anybody. It's not our job to make demands. what we try to offer a great deal thinking of how we could frame this today, saying, What does being Jewish demand of you your own feeling about being Jewish, some people that means Oh, I have to do certain rituals. for other people, that means I have to have this generous and giving philanthropic tradition. For others, it means I have to study and for many, it means I have to pursue social and environmental justice. So we see that in how people prepare depends on what they feel inside, what is being Jewish demand of me. And we can't judge anybody for wherever they are, and that some people will be loyal members, but they will never let Shabbat candles at home. They're just not going to do it. And they'll just say, Oh, I just love this rabbi, it was great. But they're not gonna do it at home. That was good for high holy

days. I think we said to people, dress up, make a special, you know, for your own sake, not to please anybody else but for your own sake. And be and I'm people did people told me Oh, I like that I did dress up. I, we have a wonderful neighbor. And who's Jewish, her husband is not Jewish. But when we were when they were zooming in some of the smallest services where I could see people, I could see that her non Jewish husband had a white shirt and a tie on sitting in his living room. And I praised him I said, look at that. Tony is so respectful. He's dressed up like he said, Sure. Even though I never want to tell any guys that they should wear a tie. This is like, really, what is it? I mean, but I mean, the you know, is saying anything you do in life gonna be more respectful because you wear this thing noddod around your throat. Now just like an English aristocrat? No.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Well, I think you mentioned, I just want to clarify, is the synagogue or the temple open for independent worship? And can people go in by themselves? No?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

I think we it's there no regular hours. Our office manager works inside the building several days a week. And she has graciously said if you want to, if you're lonely for the synagogue, you want to come in and sit worship, call me and make an appointment. I don't know if anybody has taken her up on that. But it's not like you can't just show up and knock on the door and come in because we have to protect the herd

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

I do want to bring us to, you mentioned the musicality of the high holy day services and how you were able to incorporate that. And not having known your congregation prior to COVID, I would like to hear you reflect a little bit about the role music played in your worship, prior to COVID, and how you've been able to integrate that into your weekly practices.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

So the role of music is huge. The Jewish tradition has been very musical, since time immemorial. You know, King David, our great mythic leader, was renowned as a singer, the sweet singer of Israel. So, so in a traditional setting, everything is sung, the prayers are chanted, you read from the Torah that's chanted. So you see, music is a huge part, and I love music and I'm a musician and a composer, to me music is big, we have a lovely choir. And usually, we do lots and lots of music. And we really encourage participatory music with lots of our people. It's all about the song sheets. If you have good song sheets, you'll have a happy congregation. If you don't have a good song sheet, people can't be mumbling along you know. So I usually really enjoy that. So now obviously, I'm not gonna put the song sheets on the screen constantly, and then people can't see each other. So I'm just doing much simpler music that everybody knows. And as you saw, for days, we were lucky to have our soloists participate from their homes. And that just tied the

music together. And, and I was glad because people said that they loved it. I was concerned that, you know, here's a piece of music they used to hearing with a soloist or two soloists on the choir and piano or the cello, and violin and all those together, and it's really, really pretty. But people said, it's fine that it's stripped down to the bare bones of just the soloists, and there's this simple accompaniment. So it seems to be working. Yes, I found just to echo what people said, I found the use of music so effective and surprising, not not the way I had seen people try to incorporate music and even like virtual theater, doing that more simultaneously, whereas this really was the stripped down version. And it worked. What we haven't done me the we haven't done the acapella thing, where all the choir members acquired their part, they send it in, somebody mixes it, and then it's played as a pre recorded thing. I'm not really attracted to that musically. I think it's there all these charming things online all over the place. But most of those things are done by professional singers or by choirs really good voices are the things of kids voices play around the internet are lovely. But I'm not really interested in doing that. It takes a lot of time to edit all that it's not quite the same feeling as actually singing together. No, aren't together.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

I had a question regarding, we've seen a lot of religious communities kind of, well, frankly, endanger the local areas and other states and other communities because they, they still maintain, you know, in person meeting, and I just wanted to know your perspective on people who make the argument that, that it's a restriction of their their religious freedom to stop, you know, meeting in person.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

I think that is a shameful argument. I think those people should be ashamed of themselves. It's clear that we have to make sacrifices for the greater good. We're supposed to protect the vulnerable. And now we know that it's not just old people and sick people who die from COVID. You know, we're all vulnerable. So I just think it is shameful. selfish, shameful. ignorant. Really wrong.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

Has there then been consensus among your board of directors and on a greater scale your congregation to keep the doors closed and to remain virtual? Or have you had to have some debating?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

No, absolutely everybody in complete agreement. And I also want to stress that I'm really active in the humble interfaith fellowship and And there are how many different groups are represented. Maybe as many as 30 are on our mailing list, then we have perhaps a core crew of 15 leaders and the faith communities. And everybody is in agreement that everything is done online. Now, everybody is staunchly in agreement. And oh, in case I forgot to mention it, the Humboldt

interfaith fellowship awards, a peace prize every two years. And we will be awarding it to Dr. Frankovich. This year, on November 18, to really support her and to acknowledge of what she's done for peace and safety of the community. So we're very, very staunchly Do not open do not take risks. This is not an essential business to have, or having in person events, not essential by anybody's definition. Nor is campaigning, tell that to Mike Pence.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Um, I guess I don't have too many remaining questions, but I guess just how is the pandemic affected your own personal spiritual life? Do you have anything to say about that? Like, um, has it improved, like your faith in your community that you were able to come together? And that's improved your own outlook? Or?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Wow, that's a very nice question. So nice to think that I also have my own spiritual life.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Well, it's, it's certainly it's helped me see Zayne, how much my spiritual life is connected to the life of the community. Um, we did lose a member to COVID. So that was very intense. One of the elders from the nursing home where there were multiple deaths. The second person who died was a member of our congregation, absolutely sweetheart, beautiful man in his early 90s. And, and I had a very close relationship with him. So that was a real heartache. It was, it was really, it was really hard to see that happen, to lose him. So I did an online memorial for him. And then we have the benefit of meeting his relatives from outside the area. So we haven't had happy events, but we have had ongoing memorials, we did one in person funeral at the cemetery, with everybody distanced, and have had other memorials. And the memorials are, it's a wonderful new model for inclusivity. Because it's good, a good friend who passed away about six weeks ago, and people were able to participate from all over the world. You know, there's somebody who set her alarm and got up at 4am in London, to come to the memorial. And they were, it was so effective, it was so meaningful. I mean, it was really profound. And that would never have been achieved if we had done only an in person event. So this tells me that I just have to wait until the pandemic is over after we step up our online presence, so that for every important event, we also have a screen somewhere where people can be acknowledged on zoom, or whatever, or at least live streaming it out. So people can see. We've had live stream equipment for several years, but we often don't use it. There's nobody's there to run it. So this has been very important for me to see how much I feel. My own spiritual life is connected to the community, because I'm so used to serving people, I've been doing this for a quarter of a century. And that includes hugging and being hugged. And, you know, picking up babies and playing with them and acknowledging them and holding the hands of old people and just being that as people older than I am. And, you know, the togetherness, so I really, really miss that togetherness, and I missed the happy togetherness. Because as we started off, I cancelled all the good things, all the happy

things that is happy things, which leaves us with only the sad things on the calendar if I, you know, open up my zoom thing, and I see Oh, schedule meetings. Oh, this memorial for so and so this movement, build yourselves up like oh, good god, that's my life. You know, so I'm missing doing the happy things. And I realized that we have a word in our tradition simcha, S I M C H A you could write it simcha, which means joy, as, and it's specifically joy that is planned for a special event. So the event itself becomes called a simcha. Like I'm going to assume, meaning I'm going to enjoy an event, a bar mitzvah, baby naming, a wedding. And you say, Okay, this is I'm planning to be joyful, but nobody walks in the door for a wedding planning to be in a bad mood. You know, you wouldn't do that, it would be, it would be, you know, inappropriate. What kind of guests would show up and sit at the wedding, you know, being unhappy, you plan to be joyful. And we have a lot of that, in Jewish tradition, we have a lot of family based rituals and life cycle rituals. Um, you know birth, birth to Bar Mitzvah, to marriage to old age, love opportunities to honor the lifecycle process. So I am missing those I'm feeling and I'm realizing that when you know, you go to this, I'm always telling people, don't miss this simple if you're invited and you can go. Years ago, someone came to me saying, Oh, well, what should I do? My brother scheduled his wedding. And this is the weekend that I have a big exam, you know. I said, Go. Sit in your hotel room and study. Go to the ritual, spend half an hour at the party and go back to your hotel room and study. But don't miss the service. Don't miss the opportunity to participate in family joy, because surely there will be funerals. And you'll be participating with them, we saw, so do not miss it. And she went and she said it helped her life. Perfect. I did just what you said, I studied, did fine on the exam. And I was there for my brother. Great. So when you go when you have something to look forward to. And of course, I'm really deeply on them because I'm running and I'm in charge of them. I'm greeting everybody. I'm organizing them. You get so much nourishment spiritually, it is so fulfilling. It's so deeply, deeply, deeply nourishing. I don't get burnt out from those things. I may get physically tired. But they're wonderful. They're wonderful. really heartwarming events. Yeah, very nourishing. So yeah, I am missing. Oh, gosh, no happy events. No grandparents weeping. Boy. No happy little kids jumping up and down.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

I have a fanciful question for you to stay in this vein of maybe more hopeful wishes for the coming months. I'm curious if there is a tool or an application that you wish existed? That would heighten your spiritual engagement or make your job easier?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Absolutely, that would be a technology where we can hear people's voices in real time. And, and where they're also technology that lets us hear instruments in real time with good sound quality. No, like zoom is developed for the human voice. solo violin. Pretty good. Okay. But as soon as you get anything that's more complicated. It starts, the sound cuts in and out. So yeah, better sound quality, better sound quality, better sound quality. That would be it. It would it be fun if

you resume with a whole bunch of people? And you just can start to sing together? And you can hear all the voices blending on your speaker. I mean, that would be, Yep. That's what I want.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

All right. Well, like I said before, like I don't really have any more scheduled questions, but is there anything else that you just wanted to talk about or anything that you think is important for people to know? Looking into the future?

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

Well, I think it's what I think what you are doing is important because we in the US have been very lucky. Just been fortunate that we haven't had to deal with a pandemic for a long time. Got my teenage nephew, they're living with us. And he's asking questions like, will it ever be over? Will there be pandemics just every couple of years, and I can't tell him that no, there will not be pandemics every couple of years. We're paying a really high price for our mobility. And, you know, Ebola was not, didn't, you know, didn't spread, because it wasn't a smart virus. Because it just kills you so fast, that you don't have a chance to spread it. And this is a very smart little virus that is much more concerned with spreading itself around and with killing you off quickly. And the way we love to travel, the affluent people who can afford it, wow. It is a, it's really tough. So I think it's, the best thing that can come out of this is a greater sense of global connection. You know, anything good can come out of this kind of suffering, it would be that people really get it that they're citizens of a very small planet, I have to act like a citizen of the planet all the time. I remember, you know, going through airports and seeing, seeing people with with Asian features, wearing masks. I'm thinking, oh, oh, wow. I guess in their countries, they have, they wear masks when they travel. And most of the people who used to wear masks in the airport, they had Asian features, whether they were from Asian countries or not, I can't say I can't make assumptions. But I would seldom see people with European features, or people with African features wearing masks. And if you had the same experience, that was my experience. And even when I was in Berkeley in early March, right before the shutdown, walking, and we were concerned we knew the pandemic was sort of, was really on its way. I walk in the street and go by a young woman Asian features. She's wearing a mask, I remember thinking, Oh gosh, the poor people in Asia, they really they really had it hard. And then aren't we lucky to live here. And, yeah, we were lucky to live here. And we still are lucky not that our quality of life is necessarily better than that in any Asian country, I don't assume that it is not that we're any happier. But we have just got to get it that we're part of the whole world. And let's get Joe Biden elected. And let's have a national mask mandate. And then we have to be more disciplined, we have to be more connected with each other. Or disciplined. We have to see what's really important to have a sense of the public good. And I'm old enough now I was born in 1952. So I'm old enough to remember a different national ethos in which the public good was primary. It was primary. And, boy, a couple of decades of these extreme right wing moves in our country have some burden on the public good for the corporate balance sheet? Yeah, that's simple. It's greed. Greed was unleashed in America

through a series of very intentional moves on the part of the banking community and a part of the judicial process and just the common good was thrown out the window. So that 1% could accumulate all that wealth that they didn't have when I was your age, that was not the case. And it would have been considered shameful. It would have been considered shameful and unAmerican to be super rich.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Yeah, the largest thing that concerns me is this kind of culture of denial, culture of denial of science, culture of denial of reality. And, like you mentioned in Asian countries, they're a lot more, you know, urbanization and so people are a lot more closer together. And so in the last century, they've grown accustomed in their culture, to, you know, wearing masks is more important for them, because they know the reality of living close together means the spread of disease. And that actually was a major benefit to them when it came to this global pandemic is that their culture already has this idea that, you know, this is how we avoid spreading sickness. And the United States. I mean, both from virtue of our culture, and from our geography, we're spread out, and we have, you know, densely packed communities, but we also have rural locales that may not be affected. And so those rural areas kind of contribute to the narrative that it's not as bad as it is, whilst in New York in California, we have, you know, large, large case counts and also all over the country. But some of those rural areas that haven't been affected kind of feed into this narrative that it's not as bad as it really is.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

But what's happened is some of them, they're the rural areas, where is it, a meatpacking plant? Any place where people are working close together? Doesn't have to be an urban setting. But they're working close together? Yeah, it's I hope it's, I hope it's going to change our sense of how we live together. Yeah, dramatically, dramatically, and also the urban rural, connect, I mean, it's just the people are saying, oh, we're in a rural area, we don't have to worry. It's just so foolish. Because our rural areas are not independent, by any means. They're heavily dependent on goods and services coming from outside, how it's not like we're some, you know, romanticized, rural area where we make our own clothes, and we've got our own food, and we, you know, drive our own team of horses. No, it just doesn't happen. So hopefully, the sense of interconnectedness, which has been really intentionally smashed, but very, very greedy people.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

And it sounds like you are on the cutting edge of working to rebuild that, at least in Humboldt County, being a part of the interfaith network in the area. So that's a hope, to me that reads as hopeful.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

No, that's good. Goodness. Again, is what all of you do have to say, what can we learn from this? It's such a painful lesson to go through and people who care about had to die, you know, as part of this, or died prematurely. But it, but if we don't have that, what can we learn from this attitude? And all this suffering is totally for not? That's what makes me crazy about these right wing, supposedly religious people who are basically saying, we don't have to learn anything from this. There's nothing to learn here. This is a fraud. This is, you know, this, what does that say for the people who died? Now, of course, we have to learn a great deal from this. And, and do better. And we can, we can, as we know, we can do so much better that that our mortality rate is so much hotter than other nations. So this is a clear indication that we're doing something horribly wrong. It's unreal, it's just terrible. The cases are tribal, so steeply in Europe again. But they sit mortality rate is still so much lower. Yeah. And the idea that, that, well, the vulnerable people, they just can be called from the herd. Whoo, that's really creepy. That is rific. That's horrific, but it goes against some basic human nature, which is to protect the vulnerable. We didn't survive as a species. We didn't get to be the top of the heap here, you know, by being callous to one another. We got here by cooperation. We're a cooperative species. So we are, you know, are so we're hardwired for our sociobiology hardwires us, you know, you walk past the baby crying on the street, you turn around, there's a sense of, what should I do? That's innate, human nature. No one would go What's that irritating sound? It's a baby crying on the street. Yeah. Yeah. Well, what a pleasure to chat with you about this. Super fun. Super fun. I hope I didn't keep you too long.

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

No, it's fine. Yeah. Thank you for participating and Um, it was excellent, you know, talking to you, and I'm sure it'll be really useful.

Madeleine Wilson (Interviewer):

Yeah, I really appreciate you sharing your wisdom with us and with this report.

Rabbi Naomi Steinberg:

A pleasure. Just a pleasurs. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So good for you for doing it all. And I just anything else I can do to help? Let me know.

END