

Mara Nathan

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SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Mara Nathan

- M** Mary Wilson 00:02
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson, and this is Thursday, March 25 2021. I have found that after the first of the year, I pause a lot trying to figure out what day it is, I think a year of pandemic time has altered my ability to keep track of things. But I'm here talking to Rabbi Nathan and I'm gonna let Rabbi Nathan introduce herself and her congregation, and then we'll go from there. So rabbi, please.
- M** Mara Nathan 00:29
I'm Mara Nathan, I'm the senior Rabbi at Temple Beth out here in San Antonio, but I'm in my house. You can see my dog has been attacking some cardboard because he is a puppy. Working partly in the synagogue and partly at home, in this transitory moment of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:50
So tell me a little bit about your congregation. We were talking some before I hit record, but if you would share some of that with everybody else now.
- M** Mara Nathan 00:59
Sure, so Temple Beth-El is the oldest Jewish congregation in the city of San Antonio,

though the Conservative and Orthodox synagogues were founded in short order afterwards, but we're soon to celebrate our 150th anniversary, I think it's in about three years. So the synagogue's been around for almost 150 years, and we're about 1,000 families, just shy of 1,000 families. At the moment we're the sole Reform movement congregation in the city, and Reform Judaism is the more progressive wing of the Jewish religion. But there's also an Orthodox and a Conservative synagogue as well as Chabab, which is a kind of Orthodox Judaism, more of a Hasidic sect, and a few other little groups as well. But we are historically the oldest and also the largest community in the city of San Antonio.



Mary Wilson 01:24

And as we were talking before we started the official interview, you're located in the downtown area, which lends itself to some unique interactions, say, compared to maybe north in the suburbs, and so forth.



Mara Nathan 02:21

We're on the edge of downtown, my guess is in the 1920s, when they built this facility, this was not downtown. This was heading out of downtown. Our official address is Belknap, but we're really off of San Pedro. We're right by the San Antonio College. So we're less than ten minutes from the business center of downtown San Antonio, and in the Monte Vista neighborhood, which is a really beautiful neighborhood, but also adjacent to some pretty economically challenged parts of the city as well. It is a unique opportunity, both to be closer to downtown, and but also to be more physically present and aware of the social inequalities that we have in our city, like we have in pretty much every city. We're involved with a lot of interfaith work to deal with that and address that as well.



Mary Wilson 03:21

Great. I suspect that there are many folks in the state of Texas that would be surprised that there's a synagogue that's 150 years old in San Antonio. Can you give us a little history about how it came to be there and who started it and any background in that?



Mara Nathan 03:42

I can, I'll pull up some research for you. But sure, San Antonio back in the 1800s was certainly not a huge city, but it was sort of a trade route where people came. Jewish people in the United States certainly came through Ellis Island as most people think about, but many people who are from Texas would know that there also was - Galveston was a

big port, and there was a project I guess later called the Galveston Project. A Jewish business person, Jacob Schiff, felt like they would move some of the Jewish immigrants to come down south instead. So a significant Jewish community, not as many as came through Ellis Island, but a significant group of folks came into the United States during that wave of immigration in the late 1800s, mid 1800s-late 1800s, through Galveston harbor. For those who know their Texas history, Galveston used to supersede Houston as the major ports. That just right shifted with hurricanes and whatever. That's not my history expertise.

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Mara Nathan 05:09

My husband's family came through Galveston and his parents actually still live in Galveston. Some folks made their way out, so Jews have been in Texas for - there are the bold folks who came in the 1600s and 1700s and whatnot, but a lot of Eastern European immigrants showed up in Texas around that time. In 1874, the congregation was founded by forty-four different families. Initially, the congregation had a small building right near Travis Park. After a few years, I guess about twenty-five years, they tore that building down and built a new one in the same site in 1903. Then, in 1927, moved north and built the building, which is now on the corner of Belknap and Ashby right near San Pedro.

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Mara Nathan 06:05

So people were all sorts of all sorts of folks there. We have members of the congregation that are sixth generation, whose ancestors were here, and they were saddle makers and ranchers and other kinds of business people and they owned clothing stores or grain stores, or like many Jews, they started off as peddlers. Then as they got more successful, maybe they built a brick and mortar, or they sent relatives off to further outposts than San Antonio. When we look at the history of San Antonio, there certainly are Jewish folks that have been involved in everything from bringing the Spurs to San Antonio to building the the North Star Mall, involved with the highways. The Jewish community has, when they arrived here, really called it home and put down roots.

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Mara Nathan 07:03

And like I said, in short order, there was also a Conservative synagogue, an Orthodox synagogue. Just like in the Christian faith, there are lots of different denominations. Right, so different groups came from different traditions. Historically, Jewish people who came from Germany and more central Europe tended to be Reform Jews. Those who came from Eastern European background, at least initially, tended to be more traditional, which when it comes to the States, that's Orthodox. Conservative is kind of in the middle, the

folks who wanted to have less religious restrictions, but still kind of felt compelled to that. So they were Conservative and - it's a whole it's a whole class. I could teach a whole class on it.

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Mara Nathan 07:53

There's a lot of social involvement, but the Jewish community, it was downtown, and then lots of folks, I'd say in San Antonio, who grew up here, who might be in their nineties now, or even late eighties, if you ask them where they went to high school, they all went to Jefferson High School. "Did your mother go to Jefferson High School?" "Of course she did." So they all lived in a certain area here, and then they all kind of migrated to Castle Hills. And then there have always been folks who have lived in Alamo Heights and Terrell Hills. Now it's really diffuse. There still are those pockets around the city. But you know, San Antonio is a really large, sprawling city, and people come from forty-five minutes, an hour away to be at the synagogue.

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Mary Wilson 08:46

Well, thank you for that background. So we're a year into the pandemic. How has your congregation navigated the pandemic? What's worked? What hasn't? What's been surprising?

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Mara Nathan 09:05

We pivoted pretty quickly. On one hand, everything shut down, but on the other hand, we were crazed trying to figure out how to move our entire operation online. Some of which initially succeeded right off the bat, some of which faltered. But then we got our wings, we figured out what we were doing. I'd say initially, we were just really wanting to create as much content as we could, because we knew people were locked down. We were doing daily programming, every day at four o'clock you could get on Facebook Live with someone from the Temple. I took out my guitar, I was singing like, "It's a campfire," or someone would do a cooking demonstration, or someone would read children's books. There was two staff that did movie critiques, just so people had a place to go that was familiar and they could see us and that sort of thing. I think once everyone figured out what they were doing that dissipated.

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Mary Wilson 10:11

I do love the range of that though, from cooking lessons to reading children's books, movie reviews. That's great.

M

Mara Nathan 10:19

It was less faith-based and more like, "What do you got? What are your skills? What can you do from your house?" That kind of thing. Right away, we were somewhat familiar with Zoom that we used, or certainly I'd used in different contexts. So we put our services up on Zoom pretty quickly, all of us were leading services from our homes. Over the year, we got real good at it, and we push it to our live stream, and we push it to Facebook Live. We've added all sorts of digital content to that as well. Our adult education continues, and our religious school continues.

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Mara Nathan 11:03

We did all of our High Holy Days, as did the Christian community do Easter, right, but we did our entire High Holidays. That we actually did in the sanctuary, but we had to hire a production crew to help us do it online. And we created a lot of pre-recorded content as well, because usually those holidays involve a lot of members of the congregation and helping to lead worship. So we spent a tremendous amount of time not only preparing for the holidays, which we always do, but I'd say probably three or four times more time than usual, re-scoping out the entire thing, and then reaching out to people, helping them make recordings, integrating those recordings into the service. We've done that with other things throughout the year, with our confirmation service or b'nai mitzvah or other kinds of things.

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Mara Nathan 11:57

But to me, I think the most heartening part of all of it is that really there weren't complaints. People understood that and continue to understand how hard we are trying to be present for them and to create community. And the feedback has really been very uplifting. We don't always get it right. But people's goodwill has been bountiful. Also for those who are able financially to support the community and continue to do that, people have been generous. So you hear stories around the country of lots of people kind of taking a year off from membership or budgets being in a really bad place. And of course, we were quite concerned as everyone else was too, but we just feel blessed. Nothing ever happens by accident. It feels like the culture that we've created and built at the synagogue is one of more flexibility than we had recognized, which is amazing, and a lot of grace, so we've been really lucky.

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Mary Wilson 13:00

I had the chance to read a couple of the High Holy Day sermons, and a couple things

stood out to me. One of them is you said, "Jews know how to do exile." And I was wondering, that was back in the fall, how has that carried out through the months that have followed?

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Mara Nathan 13:20

I think for some people, it's been great. They like the live stream, they like doing things from the privacy of their home. For some people who have trouble driving or live further away and don't like to drive at night, or those kinds of things, it's been a bonus for them. As we start to talk about coming back to be in person, which will be in the next week or two on limited basis, we know we have to keep things hybrid and still allow people - also, even for some people who are fully vaccinated, they're just traumatized and don't feel comfortable being in public spaces with folks. So we'll keep doing that. But people are tired, and we're tired. It's nice to be with you on Zoom, but by the end of the day, I've spent six or seven hours on Zoom. I don't want to get on for anything else in the evening. It's not enticing.

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Mara Nathan 14:17

So I think the exile, we grow weary, we grow weary of the exile. But then there's also in addition to that ability to be at Temple wherever you are, we've also engaged teachers from around the country and even around the world. We're engaged with folks in Israel who have been able to teach us and engage with us. That flexibility I think we'll keep and enjoy. And there'll be moments where we'll use the technology we have at the synagogue to do hybrid again. So maybe we'll have a scholar come in from Israel, and they can Zoom in and we've got the screen. And if you want to be in person with others, you can be in person with others, or if you want to watch it on Zoom too, then you can do that as well. I think we're already starting to think about that piece.

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Mara Nathan 15:05

But it'll be interesting to see when we reopen for the community. By the time anyone sees this, it will have already happened. The first week in April is our plan unless the numbers go awry, and it'll be transitioning in, but it'll be interesting to see how many people do show up. As much as people have said, "Oh, we miss it. We want to be there." We've all been doing this for a year, we're all in a routine now. We might not like the routine, but we're in this routine. It's gonna take some thought to shift out of the routine and get back to the old routine or a new version of whatever routine it's going to be.



Mary Wilson 15:45

Yeah, you've hit on something that I think a lot of people might be overlooking, is that we're about to have another transition. And although we have some idea of what that might look like, transitions are never exactly what we expect.



Mara Nathan 16:03

And they're messy. They're always messy.



Mary Wilson 16:04

Yes. They're always messy. Yes, thank you. They are always messy. There are always things that happen that we don't anticipate. Yeah, so I wish you well in making this next transition. I was gonna ask, do you think having people vaccinated is - is that part of what is allowing you to open or reach that decision?



Mara Nathan 16:28

We have a - as I'm sure lots of other people do, too - we have a COVID taskforce that's been meeting. Initially, we were meeting every week, then we were every other week, and then when nothing's changing, we don't need to meet, that's not a good plan, right? But two of the people on our committee are infectious disease experts, one's been working with the county and the city, the other's been working with the state. Very fortunate to have those resources, and we'll just follow their lead. When they say, "don't," we don't, and they say, "it's time," we say, "okay." They know from a clinical perspective, not just like, "Oh, we're sick of this, let's get back to normal." They're just like, "No, it makes sense." We really are gonna encourage only those who have been fully vaccinated to come, at least initially, but people will make the choice. Everyone's gonna still need to be masked and all of those things, but people will need to make the choices that are right for them. I'm not vaccinated yet. I have one more shot to go. But my other two clergy members are fully vaccinated. I think by the time we're in full swing, we will all be fully vaccinated. Part of the thing was not just to keep our congregants safe, but to keep the staff and clergy safe.



Mary Wilson 17:39

Absolutely. Because early on, there were plenty of stories of clergy who would get exposed and unfortunately die as a result of it. And I have talked to clergy who said, "Yeah, we're not opening because I've tried to explain, I need to be safe as the clergy person." I do think that that's one thing that often, again, gets overlooked, maybe in media or even among

politicians, and so on. We're all sick of this. All of us. Our political affiliation, religious or whatever our affiliation is doesn't change it. We're all sick of it, and just trying to navigate our way through. I got my second shot earlier this week, so yay.

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Mara Nathan 18:23

Good. You're almost there. A week and a half.

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Mary Wilson 18:27

It's a liberating feeling. I mean, I'm thinking, "Oh, I can get a massage again because my therapist has hers." And "Oh, my friends over here have had theirs, we can have dinner together." And then all of a sudden, that feels very surprising that, "Wait, we can do this again?" And you know, that's probably one of the differences I see right now, in folks I'm interviewing in March versus folks I interviewed, say, back in October. In October there was no light at the end of the tunnel. It was just hard. Right now, what I'm seeing is, "Okay, we think we can do X, Y, or Z, we think this part is safe. And we have this and we -" There's an anticipation that somehow our new normal is going to arrive. Okay, I want folks to get to know you a little bit, and I was wondering if you could tell us how you became a rabbi, and a little bit of your life story and background.

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Mara Nathan 19:37

Sure. I grew up in New York on Long Island, which for those who are not familiar, is a suburb of New York City. Not in New York City, but nearby. Very involved in my Reform congregation with my family. New York City was definitely a part of our lives and we enjoyed being there. I am third generation American, so my great grandparents came to the United States at the turn of the century. All my grandparents were born in the United States, as were my parents, obviously, but that's not necessarily - I think for a lot of folks in Texas, a lot of times their families have been here longer than that. But certainly where I grew up, lots of people's grandparents were the ones who came to the United States. So the fact that my great grandparents, they were the pre-World War Two group. They didn't leave Eastern Europe fleeing from the Nazis or that, they came earlier because they were ready for a change.

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Mara Nathan 20:43

So I grew up in New York, involved in synagogue, Jewish summer camp, a pretty typical engaged Jewish kid in the Reform movement. When I was in college - I went to Northwestern University in Evanston, a suburb of Chicago. I had a friend, actually a

sorority sister, who applied to rabbinical school. It wasn't something I had ever really considered before. This is like the early 1990s, and there were women who were rabbis. But there weren't a tremendous amount of women who are rabbis yet. So there weren't a lot of role models out there, or ones that I had met. When I thought about, "What are you envisioning yourself to be?" I guess I wasn't that much of a trailblazer, because I wasn't like, "Oh, I will be this, I don't care if there are no women." I love being Jewish, but it didn't really even come into my mind.

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Mara Nathan 21:49

But this friend of mine, who is also a rabbi now, she applied to rabbinical school and it just got me thinking, "Oh, I had never really considered that. But here's this person who I look up to, who's like a year or two ahead of me in school, who's doing this," So that really set me on a path. I lived in Israel for the year after I graduated from college. I guess to, number one, bolster my Hebrew because Hebrew proficiency is an important part about being a Jewish teacher and professional. Then also jokingly, to make sure that I wanted to be doing Jewish things all the time, twenty-four hours a day.

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Mara Nathan 22:33

So it worked out, I came home about a year later and worked in the Jewish community as a youth group advisor and a religious school teacher and service leader, things like that. And while I did that, I applied to rabbinical school at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, which is the Reform movement seminary. Once I was accepted, I went back to Israel, because everyone spends their first year of rabbinical school, at least in the Reform movement, living in Jerusalem. That helps you with your Hebrew as well and also really inculcates a love of Israel if you haven't spent significant time there before that. So that's the short story.

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Mara Nathan 23:21

My kids are seventeen, almost fourteen, and eleven. They're like, "I'll never be a rabbi, no way." And then my daughter just said yesterday, I think she's like, "Well, mom didn't think she wanted to be a rabbi when she was our age." I was not the child who knew their whole life this is what they wanted to do. But when I considered it, it's a really unique profession, as I think a lot of clergy professions are where you get to do a lot of things that you like and call them work. Now, there's a lot of hard parts to the clergy life as well. But music is very important to me. I've always had a theatrical flair. I like to be up in front of people, which not everybody does. I really do love to teach history, as a history major, history is a passion of mine, and I love to teach history, Jewish history, of course, now. Social justice

was important to me. Working with kids and teens was important to me.

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Mara Nathan 24:25

So I have a varied array of interests. And I thought, "Oh, well, actually, I could really do all of those things as a rabbi." And the truth is, I do get to do all those things as a rabbi and probably wouldn't be able to be involved in music as much if I had become a lawyer or a business person. I thought maybe I'd be a history professor one time. I didn't get my PhD, but I can still teach adults complicated material and enjoy that. Those were the things I think that initially drew me to it. And now I think the community building part and the pastoral care and the social justice work really are the meat of what the daily life of a rabbi is all about. It's been really fulfilling and challenging. Sometimes overwhelming, often quite exciting. It's been good. I've almost been a rabbi for twenty-one years. For the record, I'm forty-nine years old. So now it's been a while.

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Mary Wilson 25:44

That's great. I mean, I love that story. The story of when I was a teenager, it never occurred to me. But what crossed my mind as you were talking about your friend who applied is the idea that representation matters. You saw a woman who wanted to be a rabbi, and all of a sudden, that was a viable option. I had people who came to my services, and I was for some of the first female they'd ever heard preach. And in the tradition I grew up in it wasn't really an option. But there were other paths, and it was an incredibly rewarding career. Because you do get to do all this - I get to hold all the babies. And I happen to be one of those crazy people that like teenagers.

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Mara Nathan 26:37

Oh, I love teenagers.

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Mary Wilson 26:38

Yeah, I love doing camps and spending that one-on-one time with them and getting to know them in ways that you can't do once once a week or whatever might be your worship times. So it's a way you get to do all sorts of things. It's a crazy profession in many ways, but it's a really rewarding one.

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Mara Nathan 27:01

Absolutely. Yeah, I agree with that.

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Mary Wilson 27:04

Yeah. So tell me about what life has been like a little bit at home if you will, during the pandemic as you've tried to care for the world and social justice issues and then you've got this family around you.

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Mara Nathan 27:23

As with all of us, there's been great parts of it and awful parts of it. I feel very fortunate, we don't have a huge house, but everyone has their own bedroom, so everyone has a place - I mean, my husband and I share a bedroom - but each child has their place that they can go. This last spring and the beginning of the summer I think was much more challenging than the school year has been so far. My husband works full time for a summer camp and when they canceled camp and the kids knew that they were not going to get to go away, that was really devastating for them and also for me. I was like, "Go away." They love to be at camp, it's just the place where they love to be themselves and be with those friends, and I felt the same way when I was a kid so I certainly empathize. Doing school online in their bedrooms all day and trying to figure out the setup for work at home. Alamo Heights district and all the districts have really been different, but our kids have basically been in school in person since like a month after school started.

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Mary Wilson 28:36

Oh really?

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Mara Nathan 28:37

Yeah, so they've had their moments where they've been exposed or they had a cold and while we were waiting for their test results. "You got a cough? You're going to go get a COVID test." In the past, "You've got a cold, take some Tylenol, go to school." So they've all had times when they've been home but mostly they've been at school and that's been really great for them and for us. The synagogue has basically been - everyone's allowed to work from home, different people come in and out as they want. We are building and we rent space to a charter school, a Great Hearts school, so they're there as well. So they're in person and I think they've got a hybrid model too.

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Mary Wilson 29:26

I know San Antonio has about a dozen school districts. It's the most mind boggling thing I've seen. I don't know of any other city that is set up like that. But your kids are in Alamo

Heights district. So is everyone back at school or do they have -

M Mara Nathan 29:46
They have options. There are options.

M Mary Wilson 29:47
They have options. Okay.

M Mara Nathan 29:50
Initially it was like - especially for the younger kids - it was pick. I think it really is still like pick, you can't go back and forth. They have designated teachers for the kids who are staying home. That's become more fluid there. And certainly in the high school where my older two kids are, you can just go back and forth, basically as you want. It's definitely complicated. The teachers have just been unbelievably amazing, their flexibility and their creativity. I'm sure they're just as exhausted, if not more, than I am at the end of every day, but we've been really lucky. You hear, not just here, but across the country, I guess really across the world, kids who just couldn't bring themselves to be online, they just didn't hand in any of their work. And even when my kids were all virtual, all online, they were really good about getting on doing their work, doing their thing. They've suffered, but they've weathered the storm pretty well.

M Mary Wilson 30:59
I have some grandsons, elementary, they're very young, that have been in school in person for a while, but it's because my daughter is assistant principal in the Austin school district. There have been times where she has had to be in the building and it's like, "Well, okay, then where are her kids going to go?" Not all of their friends are back in person. So it's been a mix, some are and some are not.

M Mara Nathan 31:31
That's been a challenge, too. There are days, for sure, where it's really, really hard. Then there are days where working from home is great. Like you said, it's March and I was in the office all day yesterday. But in terms of the transition conversation, the expectations from your children are also like, "Well, you're always home, you're always available. Can you do this, this or this?" And it's like, "No." My son has a track meet today, and they are leaving early because it's both a varsity and junior varsity track meet and, "Could one of you

come pick me up and get me lunch and then get me back to school for the bus?" And we're like, "No. No we can't." My husband's like, "I've got meetings," and I've got meetings like, "Sorry man, our lives don't revolve around you from 8 am 'til 3 pm. No, sorry. If you're sick, fine. But no." So whatever. I gave him some money, and he's like, "Yes, I can walk to the bagel store." He'll survive.



Mary Wilson 32:44

I remember those kind of conversations, non-COVID time.



Mara Nathan 32:49

I know. For sure. Just because I'm home doesn't mean that I'm not working. For them, there's still that like, "You're home, you must be available." And I'm like, "No, I mean, someone's got to pay the mortgage on this house. If I don't work, we don't live here."



Mary Wilson 33:14

I think that that is going to be something that, as we were talking about earlier, the transition, the messy parts of it. How families have this expectation or experience now have been around each other a lot. And from what I hear, mostly, that seems to be a good thing. And I'm certainly clear that some situations it's not. But how will that transition happen? Where, "Wait a minute, I miss you now," or, "No, I'm actually not available at this particular moment." And I think that could be one of those messy places.



Mara Nathan 33:51

And I've joked with my kids, because we're all a little dry witted. I guess we were talking about camp or something, and I was like, "No, I would like you to go away. I would like to miss you." I'd like to have that feeling, that sensation once again of, "Oh, I can't wait to see my children again," as opposed to like, "Please get out of my face. I've just spent the last four solid days with you." Going away just to go away is not that exciting, where it used to be good. Now, it's like, "Unless you got something fun to show me, I'd rather stay home and be on the Xbox with my friends." Which I get because it's not like, "Oh, I never get to see you mom and dad, cause you're always working. It'll be so great to have a long weekend when we're all just together." We've had a year plus of that where we're all together all the time.

M

Mara Nathan 34:42

My heart goes out to families with really little kids. I can't even imagine. My kids have been challenged socially, and it's been really hard for them because they miss their friends, but they're also very independent human beings. They can be in their rooms, or I can be like, "It's 10:30, I'm going to bed," on the weekends. "Do what you want. I don't need to put you to bed." But when your kids are little there's just no - and if you can't have a babysitter at home, when do you get to have your date night and leave your kids for three hours and get a little reset, right? Or when will it be comfortable to leave them with grandma and grandpa and go away for a weekend or just stay home and let them be with the grandparents?

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Mary Wilson 35:29

Right and date nights, I mean, where do you go? Do you want to go to a restaurant? And if you do, then what does that mean?

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Mara Nathan 35:39

For sure. And certainly I would imagine, for Austin too - I don't think I've really been in Austin this year - not living in a cold climate has been a real benefit. We've eaten outdoors. We haven't really been in restaurants in a year, but we have eaten outdoors at restaurants and have felt comfortable doing that, which is at least a little bit of an escape. And if a place doesn't have that, then we're not going there.

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Mary Wilson 36:12

Right. Yeah, we ordered out the takeout and that sort of thing. And I haven't yet gone and sat to eat in a restaurant. My spouse has had some health issues where I haven't wanted to take that chance. But with the vaccine, I anticipate being able to do that and feel confident that we'll be okay.

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Mara Nathan 36:38

Now you have to decide where you're gonna have your first meal.

M

Mary Wilson 36:41

Yeah, haven't decided that yet. But we are going to go to California because we have a new grandson that was born last week.

M Mara Nathan 36:49
That's excellent. Congratulations,

M Mary Wilson 36:51
Driving out. Driving as opposed to flying but still making more conservative choices, even in doing that. It makes for a long drive. San Francisco is a long ways from here, but there's a grandson there to be seen.

M Mara Nathan 37:12
You'll get there. There's some good books on tape.

M Mary Wilson 37:16
There you go. There you go.

M Mara Nathan 37:19
Audible.com.

M Mary Wilson 37:20
Yeah, actually, we have an account. So it'll work. I want to ask something that I've asked everybody that I've interviewed. We've talked a little bit about your life and your life story and background, about the congregation and the pandemic. Is there anything that we haven't covered, something that you think would be good to share that I haven't quite asked the right question or we went past it and you want to come back to it? Something that people should know.

M Mara Nathan 37:47
I think the thing that has really impressed me, not just for the synagogue but the Jewish community here in San Antonio, is the resiliency and that people have really worked hard to take care of each other. Whether it's putting funds together and making sure people had the resources that they needed financial or otherwise. It's definitely been a time where people's - in some ways some people's worst selves have shown through - but for the most part, I've really seen the best of people and that's been really inspiring. I have heard a lot of really ugly stories out there in clergy worlds, not just the Jewish community,

but clergy worlds of people feeling taken advantage of and not appreciated and put in risky situations. The different synagogues have made different decisions here in San Antonio as well. We've definitely been the most conservative. We're the most progressive and liberal in the world, but we have been the most conservative, I would say with a small "c."

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Mary Wilson 38:53

I think that's true in the Christian world as well, the more progressive have been the more conservative about the virus.

M

Mara Nathan 39:03

Yeah. I think for the most part people have really either appreciated it or at least tolerated it and understood where we were coming from. As we are really at this point where we do see the light at the end of the tunnel and it does feel like in the next few months, things are going to revert to some new hybrid probably, but closer to normal than we've had in a long time. I feel weary of the exile, but I don't feel beaten down professionally and personally, I actually feel really loved and appreciated and cherished for what we've accomplished, and I don't take that for granted. I really do feel like we are super lucky to be in this consortium of leaders and that it's just a great community.

M

Mary Wilson 40:02

That is a great distinction I think, it's one thing of being weary and another thing of feeling beaten down. And those are two very different things. You're weary and you've got people around you that are supportive, you can pick each other up. Beaten down, that's harder to do.

M

Mara Nathan 40:17

And I've seen it. I don't know if this is wholly true, but I work for a 1,000 family congregation with resources, and we have a variety of staff, and especially early on, I was rotating people off worship. I'd be like, "Everyone needs a little break. There's no reason for all three of us to be on the screen if there's nothing special other than the sabbath going on." The colleagues who are solo clergy, who don't really have even other staff in their office to help them, everything's on them. We spent all this money to hire a production team to run our tech, there are people who all they had was this. That's it, they had no money. So very, very lucky that that was our situation. But a colleague said, "Well, just because their stress is acute doesn't mean that your stress isn't acute. It's just your

issues are different, you have different kinds of expectations you have to fulfill." But grateful to be in a place with resources and a desire to protect the people.

M

Mary Wilson 41:32

I mentioned earlier that I had an opportunity to read a couple of your sermons, and there was a quote by Rabbi Larry Hoffman that you used that I thought was just really wonderful. I wonder if you might speak to how that also has played out. The quote you use was, "Faith has very little to do with belief. Rather, faith is a perspective on our future." Where does faith play a role in the future we're about to enter at this point? Because it was a different scenario.

M

Mara Nathan 42:04

Sure. He's wonderful. He's wonderful, and if you look in the footnotes, there's a link, I think, to the entire program. And both of the people who presented were excellent in that program.

M

Mary Wilson 42:19

Yeah, I know who Diana Butler Bass is.

M

Mara Nathan 42:21

Yeah, they were both really, really thoughtful. I think faith is like love. It's a decision. It's easy to get caught up in the big stuff. But the long haul is not - it's easy to be disillusioned. You don't have things to hold on to and decide, "I'm going to be committed to that congregation, to that faith, to that person, to that community." Then anytime something goes awry, you just give up and walk away. Right? And we all see that in our communities, people who bounce from church to church to church or synagogue to synagogue, who get annoyed or disappointed about something you said or did, or didn't like some program, and they're like, "Well, I'm out of here." And you're like, "Are you in a family? Do people not disappoint you and let you down? You gotta be in it for the long haul."

M

Mara Nathan 43:12

And then we have folks who say, "Well, that rabbi, she's way too liberal for us. But she's always been there for us when our family needed her. Okay, her sermons, we know she's gonna be a little too left for us. But she came to visit my brother at the hospital, and she took great care of us when my husband died." That goes a really long way. So I do think

it's about a decision to be in it for the long haul. When I teach worship and faith to kids, I use the metaphor of exercise all the time. I'm a CrossFitter. I love to do CrossFit. But even before I did CrossFit, I used this analogy. If you only do it occasionally, it's painful and awkward. But if you do it all the time, it not only feels good, and you know what you're doing, but you crave it. It's part of how you add meaning to your life.



Mary Wilson 44:08

That's a great way to say it. The last thing I wanted to just comment on is I thought you had a really great point. In the very same sermon, you said that if COVID had never happened, our world would still need healing. Boy, is that the truth.



Mara Nathan 44:26

It's been more exasperated. And maybe because we're all home, we're just paying more attention. It's not as easy to just get too busy with your own stuff. Well, I hope so, because there's a lot to do.



Mary Wilson 44:40

Well, thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today.



Mara Nathan 44:44

Great to meet you Mary, and to talk with you.



Mary Wilson 44:47

Hopefully sometime in the near future if I'm in San Antonio, I can actually come see you face-to-face.



Mara Nathan 44:52

That'd be great. We'll be there soon.



Mary Wilson 44:56

That would be lovely. Again, thank you so very much. I appreciate your thoughtfulness and your time both, and blessings to you and your congregation.



Mara Nathan 45:05

Thank you, Mary. Have a safe trip to California. Enjoy that grandkid.



Mary Wilson 45:09

Thank you so much. I appreciate it.



Mara Nathan 45:10

So exciting. Have a great afternoon.



Mary Wilson 45:13

All right, take care. Bye bye.