

Neil Blumofe

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SPEAKERS

Neil Blumofe, Mary Wilson

- M** Mary Wilson 00:03
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson, this is Tuesday, March 16 2021. We've been in this pandemic long enough, I really have to think about what day of the week it is, and what today is, it doesn't come off the top of my head so quickly anymore. And I need to pause as my pregnant daughter is calling right now. All right, we had to pause for just a moment, I had to take a phone call. But I want to just start off with Neil, can you just give us a little background about yourself? I know you've been written about in Austin newspapers and profiled and so on. But could you tell us a little bit about how you came to be a rabbi?
- N** Neil Blumofe 00:49
You said we'd be done before four o'clock.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:54
[laughs] Yes, so the short version?
- N** Neil Blumofe 00:59
No, thank you and Mary, I appreciate your presence and your generosity of your time.

M Mary Wilson 01:04
Thank you.

N Neil Blumofe 01:06
I've been in Austin since 1998. And I've been able to lead the community, my synagogue, congregation, Agudas Achim, A-G-U-D-A-S A-C-H-I-M in that time period. There's a lot of different ways to answer your question, but you asked me specifically becoming a rabbi. I actually came to Austin, as the cantor, as the liturgist and the musician of the congregation, and about six or seven years into my career decided to go back and become a rabbi. So I did that for a variety of reasons. The impetus that encouraged me to be the cantor had manifested and I was at a crossroads of who and what I wanted to do. So I essentially had three years of commuting while I was still working and serving this community, two years to Los Angeles one year in New York. And at the end of it came up with two rabbinic ordinations and stayed and am the senior rabbi of the congregation.

M Mary Wilson 02:14
Two ordinations, you didn't just go for one.

N Neil Blumofe 02:18
No, it was kind of the exigency of the time. So I have one from a school in Los Angeles called the Academy for Jewish Religion, in Los Angeles, California. And then I have another from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

M Mary Wilson 02:33
In New York. Yeah. Wonderful. So you've been in Austin a long time, and seen a lot of changes a lot of growth. Tell me a little bit about Agudas Achim, then during that time that you've been there, and just the nature of the congregation.

N Neil Blumofe 02:48
So when I came, we were on Bull Creek Road, which is center Austin where the Grove Project is right now. And it was really lovely. And I knew that we were going to be moving to a new space, which is the Dell Jewish Community Campus [JCC], in northwest hills. So to be part of a building project, to be part of a planning project so soon out of seminary was really exciting. And so we moved in early 2001. So we moved to a 40 acre campus

that houses a lot of the Jewish community, including the Jewish community center, and a few other synagogues and some other affiliate organizations. And it's a really lovely place where synergistic thought and conversation and sharing happen organically.

N

Neil Blumofe 03:39

And we have our own building on the campus. And we still share with our partners and also with the larger Jewish community and out into the community as well in the larger Austin community. So Agudas has continued to grow like Austin has grown. And it's been just really a pleasure and privilege to know that for all of that, which we have accomplished, I still believe even now in 2021, that our best days are ahead of us.

M

Mary Wilson 04:04

That's really awesome. I want to interject your I think I remember when you moved buildings. Didn't your congregation walk the Torah from one to the other?

M

Mary Wilson 04:16

I think I actually got to see some of that on the road from the church I attended at the time.

N

Neil Blumofe 04:16

We did.

N

Neil Blumofe 04:24

The one on Balcones.

M

Mary Wilson 04:25

Yes.

N

Neil Blumofe 04:26

Yeah, they were amazing. They all came out on Sunday, it was Sunday, March 4.

M Mary Wilson 04:31
It was Sunday morning, yeah.

N Neil Blumofe 04:33
And we marched roughly, what is it, like four miles, five miles from one space to the other. And it was great. The whole church came out and applauded and it's something - we actually we just celebrated our 20th anniversary of the move. And I asked people on our Shabbat services to give their memories and many people actually remember that, remember the church.

M Mary Wilson 04:55
Wow, I was one of the people outside watching. Yeah, our paths have crossed in many ways over the years, haven't they?

N Neil Blumofe 05:04
They have, which is betterment for me.

M Mary Wilson 05:08
Thank you. Yeah. And another way they've crossed is, we have a colleague that we both enjoy, Daryl Horton. I was able to interview him in December, for part of this project as well. And I know you all have struck up a really close friendship. And Daryl and I went to Austin Presbyterian Seminary together, and then we both graduated from Brite Divinity School this summer with our doctor of ministry degrees.

N Neil Blumofe 05:34
Congratulations.

M Mary Wilson 05:35
Yeah, yeah. Now we didn't get to celebrate or anything. We have the diploma that says so [laughs].

N Neil Blumofe 05:43

Well, you haven't celebrated yet, but you will.

M

Mary Wilson 05:45

Yes. Yes, at some point, there'll be a more public celebration.

N

Neil Blumofe 05:52

That's wonderful, I'm so glad to hear about that.

M

Mary Wilson 05:54

But no, it was great. So we have, again, another friend in common.

N

Neil Blumofe 05:58

Well I learned a lot from Reverend Horton, so I'm in good company with him.

M

Mary Wilson 06:02

Always, every time I talk to him, I learn something. So tell me how the pandemic has impacted your congregation over the past year. What are some of the things that have changed? What have you had to get creative about? And where are you now, after a year of this?

N

Neil Blumofe 06:21

So we could, again, drop the needle anywhere, we'd like. We obviously all recently commemorated our year of living in the pandemic world. And I remember because I actually had been scheduled to do a lot of traveling in January and February and March of 2020. And I remember going on the various trips that I was doing in January, and then February, officiating a wedding, in Oaxaca, in Mexico, and hearing about this pandemic, that was coming. And then I was scheduled, in fact, in March, to take a community trip to Europe. We were going to go to the Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland. It's a heritage trip.

N

Neil Blumofe 07:08

And I decided just based on what I had learned in that trip to Oaxaca, as well as consulting with some folks in our community, many of whom do work for the city and for

UT as well - Lauren Meyers is a member of my community, Dr. Meyers, and she's been cited quite a bit with some of the planning. So I asked her about it. And she said, "Well, we'll probably be in some sort of strange place till June of 2020."

M

Mary Wilson 07:34

Right, right.

N

Neil Blumofe 07:36

May or June, I'm like, okay. So I actually came back and decided and announced to my community that I was not going on that trip to Europe, to lead the community. And I got a lot of pushback on that. And, of course, some people decided to go and got trapped. So they went, some went, and then had this come back, like a day later, two days later, and some people had to sit in a different country for a couple of weeks, and quarantine or whatever. So, it turned out that it looked better, whatever.

M

Mary Wilson 08:07

Made you look very wise in your decision.

N

Neil Blumofe 08:12

See what happens when you do your homework? We're a congregation that - it's a synagogue in the Judaism traditions that sort of does the best of both worlds, it's sort of in the middle of traditional, and a little bit of progressive, it's between Orthodox and Reform, Conservative, right. So we do a traditional liturgy, and we didn't stream or we didn't broadcast at any time, we didn't use any of that on the Shabbath, on Shabbat. So, obviously, going from what we've done to zero is not tolerable, and very mindful of how synagogues or any places of worship are to be meaningful and of value to people.

N

Neil Blumofe 09:03

So we in fact, pivoted immediately to we have daily prayer services in the morning and the evening, as well. So we decided to begin to live stream those while we decided to figure out what people were doing. And on Shabbat we started doing the same thing and ultimately ended up with the platform as everybody else, with Zoom. And we ended up with Facebook, but we thought about various ways of doing things. And we've been online for a year doing pretty much everything for a year. And that kind of quick pivot is worthy of a pandemic, because that would have taken years for us to think about, should we

have done it, should we not, but I'm like, "We have no choice. The relevancy of a synagogue is at stake, and I think I want to provide for people in a way that they can pick it up."

N

Neil Blumofe 09:55

So there's a lot of different ways to study in Judaism. I don't want to bore you or the people who are listening. But there's particular principles that you can employ that are essentially what you might call "unprecedented" or "times of emergency." So we proclaimed a time of emergency, which gives me the ability to do whatever. And that was fine. And it's been amazing. It's been an amazing year.

M

Mary Wilson 10:18

Well and absolutely necessary at the time.

N

Neil Blumofe 10:22

The trouble now is, now we're beginning to think about sort of, maybe, kind of, kind of, maybe, sorta, maybe a little bit, maybe later, kind of emerging out of this, right?

M

Mary Wilson 10:33

Yeah, yeah.

N

Neil Blumofe 10:34

I did that for the transcript, by the way, I wanted people to hear that transcript.

M

Mary Wilson 10:37

Yeah, I hope they get every maybe in there [laughs].

N

Neil Blumofe 10:42

And now to have a hybrid model is very vexing. Because it's one thing to proclaim a state of emergency in unprecedented time and doing that. But it's another thing to say, "Okay, what lessons are you going to learn from the pandemic, and bring them into your congregation that allows you to be authentic to your members, and also to the tradition that you're serving? How do you do that without losing yourself and your mission in the

process?" That is a much harder conversation than deciding to stream because of a pandemic.

M

Mary Wilson 11:13

Yeah, yeah. Do you have any insight of where you think your congregation will go? And decisions.

N

Neil Blumofe 11:20

We're working on it. And yeah, the idea would be a hybrid model of some sort, what that actually will look like, is too soon to say. But we will give people the option to be part of our services in some format, whether it's live streaming, or a Zoom kind of thing, or whatever the next generation of Zoom is while we still have our sacred services on Friday and Saturday, the deep piece of discernment is to not turn our sanctuary, as it is now, into into a recording studio, which it looks like now, with the lights and the cameras and the things. We have that now, that is not aesthetically right for people who are coming to worship, let's say post-pandemic just use shorthand, because I don't know what that means. But to not have them feel that they're a studio audience for people online.

M

Mary Wilson 12:11

Right. And that's a dilemma. I think, maybe not unique for your tradition. But something that is maybe more important or more - I'm searching for the right word. And of course, I'm thinking, my tradition is in Christianity, and there are churches in Christianity, where that is very much the setup, all the time. It's not what my congregation was comfortable doing or wanted to do. But there was no conversation about whether that was what they were going to be doing. And so I think from the tradition your congregation adheres to, that's a very serious conversation about how you want to proceed with a hybrid model that really catches the best maybe of what you can do now, and extend that into the future without disrupting the tradition completely. Yeah, yeah, I can see where that's incredibly challenging right now,

N

Neil Blumofe 13:15

And our community is very diverse. We have very traditional-minded people and other people who if they never had to come back to synagogue, because they're getting it online, that's great for them. So I have to find a way that speaks to everybody. So there's a lot of having to -

- M** Mary Wilson 13:28
Well good luck with that. Diversity is wonderful. I love talking about diversity, because how much that enriches us, but it also can be challenging, because when you have, you know, 100 voices with 120 opinions, it's hard to figure out how to move ahead.
- N** Neil Blumofe 13:49
For sure, well, the saying in Judaism is that if you have two Jews, you automatically have three opinions.
- M** Mary Wilson 13:55
There you go. Okay.
- N** Neil Blumofe 13:57
120 times three I guess.
- M** Mary Wilson 13:59
There you go. Well, I wish you well in navigating that, and as a rabbi, where is your role in the conversation?
- N** Neil Blumofe 14:15
Setting the conversation. We were successful for our High Holy Days. Again, most people sort of appreciate what we do. You have CEO Christians, do you not?
- M** Mary Wilson 14:31
Tell me what that means.
- M** Mary Wilson 14:33
Christmas and Easter.
- M** Mary Wilson 14:34
Christmas and Easter, yes, we do.



Neil Blumofe 14:37

We have folks in our community who are very proud to support our community, and the High Holy Days in the fall means something to them and want that to be a thing. So I actually did quite a number of town hall meetings and focus groups and all of that, really from May through July. And we had a really lovely High Holy Days that came up because people felt connected and bought in and the same will be true, if not more so, more intensely, with whatever the new reality will be. So starting in a month or so after Passover, we're going to be really drilling down to asking and thinking about - so that my role would be somebody who sets a culture, sets a parameter of conversation, and then hopefully empowers others to honor the dissonance in the conversation that we will be having. And then magically, to put it all together to make it work.



Mary Wilson 15:31

Yes, yes. Yes. Well, I really do wish you well, I know that that is a challenge. I'm wondering if it would be good to go back a little bit and just maybe explain what the Dell Jewish Community Center is like. You mentioned you have your own facility or your own building there, but work in cooperation with others. Could you just maybe explain that for folks who may not be familiar with it that are outside of Austin.



Neil Blumofe 15:59

We're a 40 acre campus, the land was a gift of the Dell family back actually in the 90s, and we got around to developing a plan for it. And the way it currently stands now is that there's a community center, which is open to anybody in the neighborhood, Jewish or not Jewish identified. And there are three synagogues that have their own buildings on the campus. There is an Orthodox community, there's a Reform community, and there's ours, the Conservative community as well. The Reform and the Conservative communities, we are sort of owners of our land, and owners of our space, the Orthodox community, it happened by kismet that - again, we don't have to get into a wormhole, but we will - they're the oldest synagogue in Texas, where Bluebell is made. What's the name of that town?



Mary Wilson 16:54
Brenham?



Neil Blumofe 16:54

Brenham. Right. So that synagogue was falling into disuse. And they were the Jewish people fewer and fewer. Ultimately, the short story is that synagogue was moved to our campus. And so the synagogue is owned by the community. And it's used by the Orthodox community. So it's a really interesting -

M Mary Wilson 17:21
Right, they literally moved the building from Brenham to -

N Neil Blumofe 17:24
They cut it in half and moved the building.

M Mary Wilson 17:26
Yes. I don't know if I've seen it. Now, when did that move happen?

N Neil Blumofe 17:33
Seven, eight years ago, maybe?

M Mary Wilson 17:35
Seven, eight years ago? Well, then I probably haven't just didn't realize it because I have been on the campus since.

N Neil Blumofe 17:39
It's interesting because our architecture is - we speak to each other, so architecture is fairly uniform, for the most part. But that old building is from the 19th century, and it looks like an old, small Presbyterian Church.

M Mary Wilson 17:54
Right, right.

N Neil Blumofe 17:55
And it's great. But it's like the one thing on campus that's like, "What is going on here?" It's

an interesting contrast to everything else. It's actually quite beautiful. And it's really lovely to accent, all of that, which is the diversity on the campus and in Judaism, and to honor Texas as well.

M Mary Wilson 18:12

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. It's a beautiful campus. I've been there for any number of events and services.

N Neil Blumofe 18:19

There's also a day school on the campus. And again, various groups utilize the campus and we're rethinking all of the use of indoor and outdoor space like everybody else.

M Mary Wilson 18:33

Yeah. Now is the school and functioning right now and it has it been functioning?

N Neil Blumofe 18:38

It has been. They have done tremendous work. It's called the Austin Jewish Academy, and they have this really beautiful outdoor space that they've been using, they transformed, and it's been really great. So yes.

M Mary Wilson 18:51

Oh, wonderful. Wonderful. Great. So how has life at home been this past year for you?

N Neil Blumofe 18:59

It's been a lot. We have three children. I have a boy who's now a senior in high school. I have a daughter who's now a junior in college. And I have a son, who is a graduate and was living in New York and essentially moved back here just before the pandemic, not at home, but to live in Austin, for his own reasons.

M Mary Wilson 19:22

Right.

- N** Neil Blumofe 19:23
My son and my daughter, well, my daughter was home for quite a bit. Let me just say that in my house, excluding my wife and me, there were three cases of COVID in my house at once.
- M** Mary Wilson 19:37
Oh my goodness.
- N** Neil Blumofe 19:38
The past summer, my son, my daughter, and one of their friends who we just essentially said, "Just live with us because you might as well."
- M** Mary Wilson 19:46
Right.
- N** Neil Blumofe 19:47
And that's fine. My wife is a first responder she's a nurse, a hospital nurse. So she's been not on COVID Ward specifically. She works with neurology, stroke, and dementia patients in hospitals. So they've been to a degree, insulated from COVID, just based on the policies of the hospital.
- N** Neil Blumofe 20:07
Right.
- N** Neil Blumofe 20:08
But she's still going to work and putting the scrubs on and doing the thing. And I'm a hypochondriac. So it's been a -
- M** Mary Wilson 20:16
That's a lovely mix right now, then isn't it?

N

Neil Blumofe 20:20

So it's a lot. And miraculously, my wife and I did not get COVID, we tested quite a bit of time over the year. And we ultimately come to a particular rhythm. Not that the human heart and mind can get used to anything, but you can kind of get used to things. And as strange as it might have been, we've really picked up a pattern of resilience that we're very intentional about. Like many people, we had a dog. And we did get a pandemic puppy for the dog. And for us, that has sort of steered our energy. So we have two big dogs now, two Rhodesian Ridgebacks.

M

Mary Wilson 21:00

Oh, they're beautiful animals.

N

Neil Blumofe 21:02

Yeah, so steered our state of mind that way. And I've been doing a lot more reading and thinking than I normally would, because I haven't been running from one thing to the next. And it's been much more intentional. So there's actually quite a bit of pandemic life that has been surprisingly holy. I'm not saying it's good or bad, it's just been surprisingly holy.

M

Mary Wilson 21:25

Right. And I have had the opportunity to talk to several clergy leaders. And to a person it feels like, what I'm hearing is that, although this is very different, and most people have said that it is hard in its own kind of way, but there has also been gifts in it. There have been things that they want to keep as part of their either personal rhythm or in their congregations, like the live streaming and so on. It just seems to be a real consistent thing. And I don't know, maybe you can talk with me, why do you think that is? Is that something maybe about just being a faith leader that we look for that balance? I don't know, what is your thoughts from your perspective?

N

Neil Blumofe 22:18

For some for some people - again, that's a very big question, but for some people -

M

Mary Wilson 22:22

It is, yeah.

N

Neil Blumofe 22:23

The convenience, and the ability to be accessible is really important for people. And, again, pre-pandemic, like many people we were worried about - since we are in a campus, it's a blessing - but we were worried about traffic patterns. If we have an event, at five o'clock, or six o'clock, or seven o'clock, many people are not going to come because if they don't live in a proximity, they're not going to spend 45 minutes in a car. And that was impacting our religious school that met during the - and now there's aspects of it, where people just have to click on a link, and they're part of it.

N

Neil Blumofe 22:59

So there are very interesting parts of it. And I think it's not just about being a clergy person, it's about opening and modeling what it means to be connected to people. And another challenge is, at least for me, and for I'm sure many, the volume of communications has gone up, emails increased tremendously. And now I see that as things are beginning to move back, that volume, I don't think is going to decrease. And I think that that comes from people wanting to reach out and be part of it saying, "Well, I could get in a car and be part of something for a few moments, but be in the car for twice as long. I'm just going to stay on Zoom, and I want and expect that Zoom. And I expect that online presence to be presence."

N

Neil Blumofe 23:44

So you're actually opening up a sense of different modalities of congregational life and living, which necessitate not just one person doing all of it, but actually being intentional about hiring a team or getting a team of people to respond to the various ways of interacting with people on a way that is meaningful to them.

M

Mary Wilson 24:07

Yeah, when you said that emails had increased, and you didn't think that was going to change, in my mind, I'm thinking, "Oh, what every faith leader needs is more emails." But in this case, how else would you communicate? You get on the phone and text and all that but yeah, I can see why that is the case.

N

Neil Blumofe 24:34

So to have not only a tech person or presence in your holy space, but to actually have religious leaders who are - that is part of their portfolio of reaching out in a particular tech

way is the future and will be the future.

M Mary Wilson 24:50
Yeah, so a position designated for communication.

N Neil Blumofe 24:55
Well, I've already seen a position not in Austin but advertized that wants a Zoom rabbi, that's what they're calling it.

M Mary Wilson 25:02
Is that right? Wow.

N Neil Blumofe 25:04
Coming, and people who are responsible for their, what you would call, ministries in different ways. Because nobody has yet figured out the hybridization model. If I were live and talking to somebody, now you're we're here, but we're not having - so there's that's impossible at this point.

M Mary Wilson 25:20
Exactly, exactly.

N Neil Blumofe 25:22
So there's got to be a way to do it, which is what I'm thinking about. And again, if you can have, let's say, in-person services with a particular - I don't wanna get wonky - but a live stream option there. But then again, if you can have more intentional, meditative or specific other services that only meet online, that is a different portfolio.

M Mary Wilson 25:43
Right. Right. You mentioned the prayer services, and I'm really curious, especially in light of mentioning the word "meditative." How have the prayer services gone? You mentioned that you're doing twice a day, is that something you've continued to do throughout the year?

- N** Neil Blumofe 26:00
Yes, we've just this week started inching back in-person. So we've done our first in-person services, again, monitoring all of the protocols, etc. But we've kept the on-screen, the online presence as well.
- M** Mary Wilson 26:16
Right. And is the feedback you're getting that people are finding that a valuable time where they can actually meditate in the midst of a Zoom environment?
- N** Neil Blumofe 26:28
Yeah, I think so. Again, we don't bill them specifically as meditative services. They are sort of our daily services that people know what they're getting. But yeah, I think people really connect. And again, like many other congregations, we attract people who may have lived in Austin, or like what we do so very regularly, we're getting people from all over the country who join us. We have from California, from New York, from Virginia, from North Carolina, they just join us. They're just part of the thing. So I don't want to say, "Well, it's been great. Have a good year, that was really fun."
- M** Mary Wilson 27:00
Right now, we're not going to do this anymore. Right.
- N** Neil Blumofe 27:02
We've got a new way of connecting for people.
- M** Mary Wilson 27:05
Exactly. And I've heard that from everyone. So it's gotten me thinking, what is it? Literally every faith leader I've talked to has said, "And now we're getting people from places that are geographically not anywhere close to us, but people have found us." It would suggest there's a certain amount of searching and seeking going on, prior to the pandemic, even, but maybe heightened by it when physicality wasn't an option, I just wonder what your thoughts are on that.
- N** Neil Blumofe 27:38

Right, well the exploration, the online exploration has been normalized. It doesn't shine a particular light on anybody who may not be able to be in their particular space. And in fact, the other way around has been true too. I've actually heard from colleagues outside of Austin, who email me and somebody that has reached out to them, essentially saying, "Hey, meet Rabbi Blumofe in your town, he's the guy you should really talk to, because you're in his town, and you're in together, as opposed to trying to hang out with me in a community that you'll never meet."

M

Mary Wilson 28:13

Right, right.

N

Neil Blumofe 28:15

That's an important piece of the conversation, too. It's not just saying, "Oh, we've got three California people today." That's lovely and ego driven, but on one hand, I would like to make sure that we could provide for them enough that if they wanted to reach out locally, they could continue to blend what they're looking to do.

M

Mary Wilson 28:32

Right, right. Yeah, in the fall of 2019, I announced to my congregation that I felt like it was time for me to retire, and that we could work together on what that looked like. I didn't feel any urgency of time necessarily, but that it was time now after 17 to 18 years. Just felt like that call was ended, and it was time for a new voice to be there. And so we had this whole plan mapped out, right? Didn't quite as we had planned, but one of the things that I had anticipated when I stepped away from being the minister and being responsible for everything happening in our church on Sunday mornings, is that I would be able to visit my colleagues and friends in town that I really enjoy and respect but because I'm doing the same thing they're doing at the same time, I never would get to go in person. So that's never happened this entire year.

M

Mary Wilson 28:43

And I haven't felt particularly inclined to hop on to their Zoom services, because I feel like I'm entering into a space and into a community as a complete stranger and not connected in ways that - I don't know, it felt intrusive? Right? So I guess what I'm saying is I hear what you're saying about, "Okay, we've got these folks out here, but aren't they gonna want something local at some point?" Because I feel like I'm going to, and I'm interested in being in person and in a worship space in person again, and look forward to

that, where I can actually meet people instead of just see them on a screen.

N

Neil Blumofe 30:27

You're absolutely right. We had, the feeling was palpable this past couple of days, when we began our in-person, where some people hadn't even been on Zoom for a year. They're coming back into a space that they love, and you can feel that, you can feel that power. I'm not gonna say it's gonna last all the time. But at least the initial sense of the power of being back with people that they love and respect and a community they love and respect is very important.

M

Mary Wilson 30:54

Yeah, I really feel like there's a part two or three to this project of a year from now, assuming that the vaccines that are out that people are receiving allow us to do more in person things. What is it like a year from now, when people are able to gather in person, but also have a hybrid model? And then maybe even a year out from that when now the in-person is normalized again, how does the enthusiasm compare? What's the appreciation? What's the perspective? I mean, this could be a long running project, just to keep track of where people are over the next two or three, even five years, I think,

N

Neil Blumofe 31:34

Well, I think that's wise Mary, and it sounds like a really lovely retirement project, doesn't it?

M

Mary Wilson 31:39

Yeah, and what I've been doing in retirement are interviews and these kind of research projects, and I've got a grant proposal in for another type, but we'll see if that comes to fruition or not. But I find that I'm enjoying that kind of interaction and talking to other people in ways that I wouldn't have done as a pastor. Just because my time and energy was focused on something else. So it's a new opportunity, for sure. And I appreciate Religions Texas and Tiffany providing me with that option, as well. or

N

Neil Blumofe 31:46

Well that's a wonderful gift you're giving to all of us as well, to utilize your wisdom and example in engaging all of us. So it's good.

M

Mary Wilson 32:25

Yeah, it's been fun. And being in Austin, as long as I've been and in a congregation, as long as I've been, I've met a lot of people over the years and have some contacts. So it's been fun being able to talk to people about what's going on in their lives and their community. I'm paying attention to time, and we do have a good 10-15 minutes. But one of the questions I always like to ask is, in the scope of our conversation, we've hit on a lot of things from home life and living with people that had COVID to your congregation. Is there anything that we've skipped over? Or that you wanted to say, more about when we just kind of went past it, and you want to come back to it? Is there something you'd like to add that people need to know?

N

Neil Blumofe 33:13

I think, again, it's true everywhere. I think that sense of really when stripping away, the ways that we entertain ourselves, and usually I say share time, but really spend our time is the deep human capacity for wanting to be together, and the sense of loneliness that really does plague us. And I think that sense of anxiety and fear and where people - it's been so profound, to see where people go in their own understandings or where they think that COVID is going to bring them or what's going to happen to them. And and also people who follow along and want to provide for community and others, frankly, who dismiss science and guidance and don't wear masks and belittle.

N

Neil Blumofe 34:06

And again, I told you my community is diverse. But I think that what the pandemic has taught in a variety ways. There's many, many things it's taught. In the beginning of the pandemic I gave a sermon, essentially about we're all in the same storm, but we're really in different boats. And I think that that understanding helped to crystallize for me and others, sort of what we're doing here and why we're doing it. But that need to connect, and that sense that a faith community or synagogue can actually be a value add and is actually more resilient than other agencies and groups and other organizations is something that I think I double down on in terms of connecting and providing for and listening to and being present for the people in my community.

M

Mary Wilson 35:02

Yeah, I think that that's so important. And that sense of community. I was talking to someone yesterday and that word community just kept coming up over and over, and over that need to feel connected.



Neil Blumofe 35:17

It's actually quite interesting too. And again, like you, I've done a variety of things in my life. And it's interesting, if you look back in the last 12 months, what I've spent my time doing, what I've shared my time doing. And some of those things that I thought were so important to me, I barely touched.



Mary Wilson 35:33

Interesting.



Neil Blumofe 35:34

Those people are not - and I'm not present for them. But other people have sort of come about. And that's just information about what's going to happen when we are in a different pattern. And the next time. Do I resume the stuff that I've named for myself as important, or do I pay attention, actually what I've actually done this year, and the people I've actually talked to, and make that more of a priority.



Mary Wilson 36:03

That's a really, really good point. And I think, for each person that's going to play out a little bit differently. But I talked to one person who said, "You know, I used to just love going to restaurants and meeting people and getting food, having a drink. And I found during the pandemic, one, I haven't been able to do that. Two, I lost 30 pounds. And three, I don't think I want to do that, again. I'll invite people to my home to have a drink with me or to share a meal, because it's so much easier to actually hear and engage. So you know, there was just that example of a reassessment. So there's a part of what she liked that she wants to continue, but not in the same way.



Neil Blumofe 36:46

Sure, I think the same attention we give, especially in the Central Texas, on outdoor spaces and their uses, is very important. And not just in this time period. That leads into paying attention to our environment, and our climate. And what that looks like and how we can maximize our connections to each other in different ways is also I think something that has surfaced.



Mary Wilson 37:12

Yeah. And you mention climate, it's like, what is it going to take for us to really pay attention to that here, given what we experienced last month?

N

Neil Blumofe 37:22

All the things we're running to, really what are we running away from? And I think it's interesting to see, and I don't have any judgment on it. I just think that the habits that people are going to manifest, I believe it's actually going to be quite soon. I think the tipping point of people wanting to so called "normalize" is coming probably by the end of May.

M

Mary Wilson 37:42

Oh, I absolutely think so. Yes. Yeah. And I feel that within myself, and I feel like I've been, you know, on the patient, careful side of things, cautious side, but yes.

N

Neil Blumofe 37:54

Right, so are people going to peace out and just kind of do their thing? And just hop on the plane or get immersed in all the things that take them away from that kind of engagement that they might have had for the year? Or are we going to stop and apply those lessons? And I don't mean tech lessons, I mean, behavioral lessons and ethical lessons, loving lessons, and I'm not so sure.

M

Mary Wilson 38:20

I'm not either. I'm not either. I have told my congregation in the past that from time to time that I am a hopelessly hopeful person. My hopefulness is more muted these days, and with the past year, and just the politics and just everything surrounded. I hope that that continues to be part of who I am. But I do feel a little less enthusiastic about it, I guess is a way to say it. We'll see how the summer plays out and what the fall looks like.

N

Neil Blumofe 39:00

As a student of history - and you know, you've heard that term, the roaring 20s - you wonder what was that?

M

Mary Wilson 39:08

Oh, the pandemic.

N Neil Blumofe 39:10
Yes, a lot of it was the reaction to, as you said, the 1918 pandemic.

M Mary Wilson 39:16
Exactly. There is one thing I want to make sure I ask before we sign off together and I wanted to ask if your congregation has lost anyone to COVID. And then on top of that there are other losses that have happened this year, and how have you all navigated and how have you navigated those losses during this time of your life?

N Neil Blumofe 39:37
So there's been a lot of intentionality regarding end of life and funerals and services that we have. We can get into mourning practices another time, but we're very intentional about our mourning practices as well and making sure that there's a lot of space for those patterns of things. Since I guess since the summer, I've been announcing the weekly death toll in the United States on our Saturdays, which is staggering still.

N Neil Blumofe 39:37
Yeah, we have. We've lost people, people have lost their family members, whether associated with us or out of town. I think it really hit home with people - one of our more active members who died in his late 60s, who in a "normal" - whatever that means - time, several hundred people would have been at his funeral, and essentially, it was in one of the worst - and it was just me. And people watching it with the people, the connection they had to this man really bringing it home that it was like, "Oh gosh, look what we've lost."

M Mary Wilson 40:45
Staggering.

N Neil Blumofe 40:46
Last week, it was small, but it was still 10,000 people. And it's been as high as 23,000.

M

Mary Wilson 40:53

Right. And we lost 100,000 people in a month after the beginning of the year. So I mean, it's just mind boggling, the numbers, really.

N

Neil Blumofe 41:03

Right. I don't like being Debbie Downer on a Saturday morning, but people are like, "Oh, oh," but they still hear it. And we've upped our poetry game, we've done a lot of poetry surrounding not only the pandemic, but also issues of race and reconciliation in the United States, because obviously, that is a very big part of this year as well. And it's something certainly devoted some time to anyway, but it's been something that we've really brought to bear in our community, of really devoting one night a week after our prayer services to having a study project of a particular poem every week that people bring. On Saturday mornings, I do particular poetry that maybe in a normal time, I would be criticized for doing because they're so-called "political," but I think it's important to hear various voices and to lift up people that people may have not yet heard of, and including me, it's been a great project for me to learn a lot of so.

M

Mary Wilson 42:03

Yeah, I've read some things this past year, I probably just wouldn't have thought about grabbing them. Well, we are coming up to the end of our time. So let me go ahead and close this off.

N

Neil Blumofe 42:15

Just one more thing I just want to say it, which is great: So in our years, we have a cycle of seven, which is a year of rest, it's called shmita year. And that actually, believe it or not, is what the fall is coming up. So gives me a lot of more opportunity to be more intentional about pandemic plus one and kind of seeing what we're going to be doing.

M

Mary Wilson 42:38

Yeah, I definitely need to talk to you in a year to see how that played out after this. Definitely.

N

Neil Blumofe 42:46

So, thank you for your time. I appreciate it.



Mary Wilson 42:48

Thank you very much, and I hope you have a really good evening and blessings to you and your family.



Neil Blumofe 42:54

Thank you and to you, and G-d willing, you have good news, as we say in Hebrew, b'sha'ah tovah, may the time be propitious and good and blessed for all and for your daughter specifically.



Mary Wilson 43:04

Thank you, I appreciate that. Bye-bye.