

Rabbi Charles Sherman

Served for nearly 40 years at Temple Israel as well as numerous other ministry roles in the community.

Chapter 01 Introduction

Announcer: Rabbi Charles P. Sherman retired in 2013 after serving Temple Israel for nearly 40 years. Temple Israel is Tulsa's only Reform Jewish congregation. Reform Judaism is the nation's largest branch of Judaism, with about 1.5 million members in some 900-plus congregations in North America.

A native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Rabbi Sherman was educated at the University of Pittsburgh and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he was ordained in 1969.

Rabbi Sherman has been an Adjunct Instructor at the Phillips Theological Seminary and has taught in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Tulsa.

Rabbi Sherman has served as President of the Southwest Association of Reform Rabbis, the Tulsa Ministerial Alliance and the Tulsa Police and Fire Chaplaincy Corps. He is the only person to serve as president of both the National Conference for Community and Justice, Tulsa Region and the Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry.

Since his retirement Rabbi Sherman became a Cruise Rabbi and a mediator in our court system.

This interview was conducted before a live audience at Temple Israel June 10th, 2013, and a follow-up interview was recorded February 19th, 2020, dealing with his years following retirement from Temple Israel.

You can listen to Rabbi Sherman's oral history on our Podcast or our website VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 10:40**Good Jewish Education**

John Erling: Before we continue on, I'd like to acknowledge Mel Myers, who is our engineer for the evening. But he's also our editor, so in case, Rabbi Sherman, you get carried away or something, he's able to edit it out.

Rabbi Charles Sherman: That's why I said hello to Mel.

JE: [laughs] Yeah, right, and, you know, if you flop, he's able to make you look really good too, so, but he's the base of all of this and I appreciate very much his work.

I think everybody knows pretty now then about VoicesofOklahoma.com. It has become a research tool for students, for teachers, educators, OU history professor uses it in his curriculum, and there's another curriculum out of Dallas, Texas, that reaches out to us and used it. So it's becoming part of the fabric of our community and beyond. So without any further ado we'll move on and I'm going to say for the sake of our audience, let us know you're here, maybe you'll clap, cheer, yell, scream, or whatever you want to do.

So good evening and welcome to VoicesofOklahoma.com. We're live from Temple Israel in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This is our third live performance in 2011. We interviewed David Bernstein. Last year our live interview was with Maxine Zarrow. And this evening we will be visiting with Rabbi Charles Sherman, who is retiring here after thirty-seven years at Temple Israel. I should also say the rabbi also joined us two years ago when we interviewed, and, actually, he had an idea for this, while we had an idea for doing it, and the two ideas came together at the same time. Let's get underway.

My name is John Erling and today's date is June 10, 2013. Charles, if you'll state your full name, please, your date of birth, and your present age.

RCS: I'm Charles Philip Sherman, born December 14, 1943. I'm sixty-nine years old.

JE: Were you named after someone in your family?

RCS: Yes. In Jewish tradition, among Ashkenazi Jews, John, it's a very strong custom, not a law, but a custom and sometimes customs are stronger than laws, to name after a deceased relative to perpetuate the memory of someone dear to the family. I carry on the names of both of my grandfathers who were not living when I was born.

My mother's father's name was Charles. My father's father's name was Philip.

JE: Were there any other rabbis in the family going back to grandfather, at the time?

RCS: Not that any admit to. [both laughing]

JE: Joining us here on stage is Paula Milsten. And, Paula, you and your husband, Malcolm, you've been longtime members here at Temple Israel. How many years?

Paula Milsten: Well, Malcolm's been a member at Temple Israel his entire life. And I have been a member here since 1959 or '60.

RCS: And Malcolm and Paula currently serve as the highest position that we honor any lay leaders with as our co-honorary presidents. And the first time a couple have been given that honor as well.

JE: Very good. And we can say that you were, Paula, on the selection committee when you selected Rabbi Sherman, and that's been thirty-seven years ago. And—

PM: That is correct.

JE: . . . we'll get into some of that a little later on here.

Rabbi, let's talk about your mother, where she was born, where she grew up, and kind of describe her personality for us.

RCS: My mother's name was Ruth. Kovacs was her maiden name, K-o-v-a-c-s. My mother was born in the small town outside of Pittsburgh, Duquesne, Pennsylvania. The family ran a drug manufacturing business in Duquesne, probably the largest business in Duquesne, from what I can understand. My mother was the oldest of three children. Her father, Charles, died at the age of forty-two, leaving her mother a widow with three young children.

Her brother had just become a bar mitzvah and her younger sister was five years younger.

So my grandmother, a rather remarkable person, Gisela Kovacs, decided that this was not where she wanted to rear three children, in a small town, very small Jewish population, and she moved into Squirrel Hill, the Jewish section of Pittsburgh then and still now. It's one of those rare Jewish communities that has maintained itself all of these years.

My grandmother bought a home. Her mother lived with them, so there were three generations in a Hungarian-speaking home. My great grandmother really never learned English very well. Hungarian was definitely the language of the home.

My mother was a wonderful lady, gentle, and, unfortunately, died at the age of fifty-four, exactly after four weeks after holding our oldest son, Aaron, at his brit milah ceremony. She seemed to be very healthy and returned to Pittsburgh and became ill for three days and died.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). How old were you at the time?

RCS: Twenty-six.

JE: What a shock, huh?

RCS: Yes.

JE: Her personality?

RCS: My mother was a sweet, gentle, soft-spoken human being who was a great neighbor. We live in a short street, thirty houses. My mother knew the name of everybody on the street; knew the birthdays of the children on the street; always had a card for them. This kind of person, she loved people.

JE: Did you draw from her because of that, you believe?

RCS: I hope so.

JE: Yeah. Your father's name and where he was born and where he—

RCS: Samuel Lewis Sherman, born in Pittsburgh, and was ten and a half years older than my mother; and, therefore, her sudden death upset his whole game plan. He always thought, with good reason, he would predecease her and now she was gone and his whole plan of life was upset. My dad was a pharmacist. My father grew up in a Yiddish speaking home, kosher home, and received no formal religious education. His father, I don't think, had much use for religion. He was a tailor, master tailor, and, from most reports, was not a great guy.

Five children, my father the middle child, went to work very, very young. In those days, you could become a pharmacist in two years. And at nineteen, my dad had his license. He was proud of the fact that he had that license for sixty years. Loved pharmacy. Let it in the '50s, I guess, or '60s and went into real estate, commercial real estate after residential real estate. Then made the mistake of going back into pharmacy, bought a Rexall store in downtown Pittsburgh and took it into bankruptcy.

JE: How old was he when he passed away?

RCS: My dad was seventy-eight, almost seventy-nine.

JE: Brothers and sisters?

RCS: My brother says he's an only child. [both laughing] I had a brother who is four and a half years younger than I, just the two of us.

JE: Religious upbringing, was it important in the family at all? Did you sense that?

RCS: Yeah, that's a very interesting question. When my grandmother moved from Duquesne into Pittsburgh she immediately joined the large Reform congregation and belonged to Rodef Shalom Congregation for over fifty years.

My mother and father were married in that congregation. I would say religion was always important to my mother.

Again, my father had this strange background of no formal religious education but a kosher Yiddish speaking home. He never had a bar mitzvah and, therefore, now blessed with two sons, it was very important to my father that his sons have what he didn't have. And so I grew up in a classical Reform congregation, which in those days, did not permit bar mitzvah, it didn't exist at Rodef Shalom Congregation in 1956.

So my father looked around and found what he felt was the best Jewish educational place. It happened to be Orthodox. Didn't make any difference to my dad. So my brother and I were enrolled there. I went to cheder several days a week and to the Reform Temple on the weekend. I got a better Jewish education than most of my peers, and certainly more of a Jewish education than I wanted at that particular time.

JE: [laughing]

RCS: So I'll tell you an interesting story. About age twelve, rebelling against this burdensome schedule of going after public school to cheder, the Hebrew school, and then on the weekend to the Reform Temple, I thought I would catch up my dad and say, "You know, you've got us going to this Orthodox school and we go on the weekend to this Reform Temple, which are we?" Figuring one or the other I was going to get out of.

That didn't work. I'll never forget my father's answer. He said, "You know, son, I don't really care. My responsibility as your father is to see that you have a good Jewish education. What you do with that education when you are an adult will be your decision. But I intend fulfilling my responsibility." That was the last time we discussed the schedule of classes. I understood the point. And he was right, of course.

JE: As you were growing up, were you a child that had to be disciplined a lot? Or did you conform to everything your parents proclaimed?

RCS: Um, I was a goody-goody, John. You don't want to be immodest on the air here anyway. I was one of those model students.

JE: Okay, all right. All right, we'll take your word for that.

Chapter 03 - 4:42

Chose to Be Rabbi

John Erling: Your education in elementary and junior high school was all public education.

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Right.

JE: And then on into high school, what was the name of your high school?

RCS: Taylor Allderdice High School, it's probably the best high school in Pittsburgh, probably still is. It was 80 percent Jewish. My elementary public school was 90 percent Jewish. Again, these were the best schools in town. I accelerated, skipped a grade in elementary school, did high school in three years, and college in two and two-thirds years. Not because of any special ability but because I was impatient with the educational system and was in a hurry. I knew I was going to go to graduate school, depending on which graduate school, so might as well get on with it.

JE: Right. Were you active in activities in high school?

RCS: In high school I debated and did that in college as well. I've been a sports fan all my life, mainly as a spectator. I played softball, played baseball in the summers. So I was not the bookworm.

JE: You graduated from high school in what year?

RCS: Nineteen sixty.

JE: Then on to college, which was?

RCS: University of Pittsburgh.

JE: There—

RCS: Because I was young, my parents really didn't want me to go away. You know, I was sixteen and a half when I began college; I lived at home and commuted to the University of Pittsburgh. Pitt was experimenting at that time with the trimester plan. So I went to school eleven months a year, three trimesters, that's why I finished in two and two-thirds years. I went straight through.

JE: So you really enjoyed education, right?

RCS: I did, I did.

JE: Then it was time for you to choose your graduate school. Somewhere along the line in here you were deciding to become a rabbi. When did that begin to impress itself on your mind?

RCS: Probably during high school. I was very, very active in our temple youth group. I was president of the temple youth group. I was an officer in the region, and I was sent to a national leadership camp in Zionsville, Indiana. Met young dynamic rabbis, who I thought were doing exciting and important work with young people and that that's something that I might like to do.

At the same time, I was very much interested in law. My dad's younger brother, Harry, a prominent attorney in Pittsburgh, and, frankly, I thought I was going to go to law school and join my uncle in practice. My uncle thought so too.

So I went to Pitt as a political science major with the idea of going to law school. During the course of my second year at Pitt, I took a philosophy course and I found myself fascinated by the study of philosophy and took another and another. And I still enjoyed political science, so that became my minor. And I majored in philosophy. And I found myself writing more and more about religious topics when I had an opportunity to do a term paper or research paper.

Finally, I had to say to myself, you know, *Am I kidding myself about law school? Is that the number one? Or am I serious about the rabbinate?* Even into my senior year, I was having this internal debate. And finally decided that I was going to go to seminary.

JE: Any special moment? Something happen that you said, "No, I've made my decision"?

RCS: I can't recall anything like that. I recall that conversation with my father one night late and telling him that I had made up my mind. And my dad, again, was a businessman, and he said, "Well, let's talk about this." He said, "So how long does it take to be a lawyer?"

"Three years law school."

"What could he anticipate in terms of earnings?" We talked about that. He said, "Now how long does it take to become a rabbi?"

“It’s five years, Dad, at least, of graduate school.”

“And what do you think a Rabbi earns?” and so forth. It just didn’t make sense from a business point of view and he simply wanted me to acknowledge that, make sure that I had considered that, and I had.

But I told him, “That wasn’t exactly the way I was looking at it.”

He understood, he was supportive. He just wanted to know, as with many things, I think my father encouraged independent thinking on the part of his sons but wanted to be sure that we were looking at it as clearly as possible.

Chapter 04 - 8:12

On Strike

John Erling: What year did you graduate from the University of Pittsburgh?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: ‘Sixty-three.

JE: And in that period, on the national scene, we have President John Kennedy assassinated November 22nd of ’63, 12:30 p.m. in Dallas. What are your recollections of that day?

RCS: I was already at the Hebrew Union College. I had begun in June of ’63, and I had a very good friend from Pittsburgh who was at the University of Cincinnati on a special program. It was, if I remember this right, it was a Friday afternoon.

JE: Friday afternoon.

RCS: So my friend, Jay, came over from UC to the Hebrew Union College chapel, knowing we had our Sabbath eve services. And we were certainly going to come together as a community that Sabbath eve to deal with this national tragedy.

And then he and I had dinner together. And I remember we went downtown and how quickly people do things. Shillito was the large department store and the window was draped in black with just an American flag. The two of us, who had been friends for a long time, talked about, what does this mean in terms of our country? We couldn’t imagine a larger tragedy. So I do remember that night very well.

We had a memorial service at the Hebrew Union College the same day the national memorial service was going on. Dr. Glick, who was the president of our seminary and who had been the one who gave the benediction at President Kennedy’s inauguration spoke and recollected his meetings with Kennedy and so forth. It was a very moving time.

JE: Yeah. Hebrew Union College, where is that located?

RCS: Cincinnati, Ohio, is what we call the mother school, founded in 1875. Then there is a school of the college in New York. They merged. It was begun as an Independent Reform seminary; they merged in 1950, that's why you have this long name. Hebrew Union College, that was the Cincinnati mother school. Jewish Institute of Religion, the New York school, and you put a hyphen in between and you have a merger.

We founded a west coast school while I was at HUC, in the early '60s. Then we opened a school of biblical research and biblical studies and archeology, I think it's called, in Jerusalem. It is now, as well, a full seminary. So one school, four campuses. I, of course, going to the mother school. You got the idea.

JE: Right.

RCS: It's a five-year minimum program.

JE: Did you skip grades there too?

RCS: No, I made up for some of the ones I skipped then. Hebrew and I were not a good match and I took six years to get through seminary as I battled the Hebrew language.

JE: You then graduated in what year?

RCS: I was ordained forty-four years ago last Friday, on June 7, 1969.

JE: Also we had, while you were in school in '68, Martin Luther King assassinated April 4th, we have June 5th, '68, Bobby Kennedy assassinated shortly after midnight during his campaign for president. Recollections of that, you would have been in school and how that was handled?

RCS: Yeah, also if you remember, this was Vietnam era.

JE: Right.

RCS: And free speech movement in California, so you could begin your studies in the Los Angeles school but it wasn't the full seminary in those days. And then for your third year, you had to transfer to Cincinnati. So we had these free speech Berkeley types all of a sudden coming in, and Cincinnati's a rather conservative community, putting it mildly. Nice city, very nice city, but very conservative. And all of a sudden, these Californians came in the largest number ever into my class. It was mainly the Vietnam era that shaped many of the things, for reasons that maybe they understood. The student body elected me as president.

We had a dormitory, and in the basement there was a large meeting room. We went through all the channels to reserve the room on a Sunday night for an anti-Vietnam speaker. Got the dean's permission, etc. It made the papers that So-and-so, I don't remember the name of the speaker now, was scheduled to speak at the Hebrew Union College. And the number of the conservative Cincinnati trustees called the president, "What in the world is going on? Why is this person?" And they wanted to cancel the talk, which was sponsored by the student body.

We refused to cancel. So, as I remember, the college simply closed the doors and didn't permit it.

Well, that provoked the first strike, I think, in the student body of the Hebrew Union College's history, with Charles Sherman being the president of the student body, wondering what the consequences in terms of my rabbinic career never happening might be. It was an interesting time.

We called a strike, we called all of our professors and said, "We're not going to be there tomorrow morning and you might not want to be there as well because we're not going to be there."

And the president drew his line in the sand, had the dean call the faculty and tell them they'd better be there in class.

And I'm in this basement room at 8:30 in the morning, wondering if I'm the only one on strike. And slowly, the student body, until it was quite clear that there were not students in class.

I have a very close friend, who before coming to seminary, was a labor lawyer, a Yale Law School graduate labor lawyer, and he says to me, "All right, you know the next step."

Like, you know, I know nothing about this. All I know is we played by all the rules and the college chose to break the rules, and that's not fair. And that we have to protest. He can't do that.

We were all twenty-one-year-old and above adults. So my friend, the labor lawyer, says, "Send somebody over to the classroom building and make a list of all the scabs." [laughing] New world for me. So we discharged somebody to see and there were not many students in class. Those students were not spoken to for a long time who were there.

So the president calls this convocation in the chapel. I get to respond to the president of the seminary. Fortunately, he liked me. His only son's name was Charles; he always remembered my name.

When he got done, I had to say, "You know, Dr. Glick, here's the way we see it. We did everything according to the rules and you pulled the rug out from under us. You force us to live in the dorm if we're going to take scholarship subsidies, and then you deny our free speech. That's intolerable and we're not going to do that anymore."

Wild applause from the student body and from many of the professors. Dr. Glick stood up and said, "I understand." And he had already come into a formula to appoint a faculty-student committee to go over the rules of rental of the facilities. He knew that he couldn't continue business this way. I think it was those conservative Cincinnati trustees who had forced the president into a position he really understood was untenable.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RCS: So there was some exciting times in seminary.

Chapter 05 - 6:16**Nancy**

John Erling: You were cast in a leadership role, as you were the rest of your life, did you enjoy yourself in leadership at that point? Was that interesting and fun for you?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: That day was not fun. [both laugh] You understand, it's a student body of leaders. So to be selected, to be the leader of the leaders was very, very flattering. Also I'll give myself credit for knowing how to utilize the talents and skills of my fellow students. And that made it fun because we were doing some exciting things. And I had wonderful people to work with and to learn from.

JE: There are different types of rabbis, rabbis can come out of being Congregational, rabbis, maybe rabbis who would work for nonprofit foundations or teaching rabbis. You chose to be a Congregational rabbi. Why did you choose that?

RCS: Yeah, and that's not what I thought I was going to do at first. Again, I thought I wanted to work with youth. We have a National Federation of Temple Youth, NFTY. Frankly, I thought that's what I was going to do. And what I discovered is that I could do a lot of youth work in the congregation and do other things that I also enjoyed. So the Congregational rabbinic was a clear choice. The question for me was whether upon ordination to go to a small congregation somewhere of up to 125 families, which we were eligible for as a new ordinee, or taking assistantship in a large congregation and work with the senior rabbi.

I struggled with that decision. Fortunately, the summer before my senior year, the dean called me in and said, "I want you to do something, Charles." I was supposed to go to some other congregation. He said, "There's a congregation in Bluefield, West Virginia, that has always had a resident rabbi. The resident rabbi just left and they've come to the College Institute for a student rabbi. We think that you're the person who ought to go to this place."

I jumped at the chance because this gave me an opportunity to serve part-time a small congregation and see what that would be like. And it was a very good experience. But I discovered that I could do in three days out of every fourteen just about everything that they needed done. And I said, *What am I going to do with the other eleven days?* And I decided to become an assistant.

They asked me to stay in Bluefield; it was very nice of them, they were nice people. I think I had eighty-five congregants. I went to a fourteen-hundred-family congregation in West Hartford, Connecticut, as the number two rabbi.

JE: Somewhere in here you met a young lady by the name of Nancy. Is that part of this period of time?

RCS: No, it's much earlier. Much earlier.

JE: Okay.

RCS: I took Nancy to her senior high school prom.

JE: Okay.

RCS: Nancy and I have known each other forever. She told the story on *Sisterhood Shabbat*. So I'm sorry, friends, to repeat this but I'm telling it for John and Theo, okay." Nancy was vice president of her temple youth group in the South Hills section of Pittsburgh. I was president, as I said, of the Rodef Shalom youth group. We were part of a region called MAFTY, the Middle Atlantic Federation of Temple Youth, in those days. The whole region met once a year, either in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Washington. We were on a bus from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia, so all of the four temple youth groups from the greater Pittsburgh area were on the bus.

I was involved in a sermon competition, representing my youth group, and I think Pittsburgh. I was practicing and this young lady from the South Hills comes along and asks me what I'm doing and whether she could help me. And she's been helping me ever since.

JE: Children from your marriage?

RCS: We have three that I'm aware of. Um, Aaron was born in 1970, in West Hartford. Daniel in 1972, in West Hartford. And Ruth is our Okie, born here in apropos of what we talked about at the very beginning. Ruth perpetuates my mother's name.

JE: The two boys are rabbis?

RCS: They are.

JE: Was that direction from you or could they make that of their own free will?

RCS: Oh, absolutely, it was their choice. I'm delighted that that's what they wanted to do. But I think they saw a father who thoroughly enjoyed what he was doing. They got a wonderful Jewish education here in Tulsa and decided that this is what they wanted to do.

Incidentally, I don't want to pass over Nancy's participation in my life and career. Nancy and I dated all during our college years. She went to Ohio University. When we think of OU, it's Ohio University. Nancy finished in three and a half years so we could get married. And we did in February of 1965, one week after she graduated. She taught school and supported me through seminary. What we called a "brunette scholarship" in those days.

JE: [laughing]

RCS: And for a good part of my seminary education, Nancy was with me, was part of that, knew what I was studying. And I think that made all the difference in the world. She understood from the beginning what a rabbi does. And is my greatest asset, there's no question about that. Has been throughout my life. Did I say that right? Oh, good.

Now I think that people who marry after they've trained for their career and so forth, spouse doesn't have that advantage, which my wife has.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Two rabbi sons, have they ever called as a rabbi for advice in their congregation?

RCS: Oh, sure, sure.

JE: And say, “Hey, I’ve got this going on in my congregation”?

RCS: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, we do that regularly. I love it. Yeah.

Chapter 06 - 9:20

Sherman’s Invited to Tulsa

John Erling: Paula, you were on the search committee—

Paula Miltson: That’s correct.

JE: . . . and decided to select this fine young man. He was thirty-two years old. Was that a very young age for someone coming into this size temple?

PM: It didn’t seem so to us at the time. He had had, at that point when we interviewed him, six and a half maybe, at that point, years as an assistant in a very strong congregation. So besides his other personal attributes we knew that his rabbinic background was just exactly what you want somebody to have coming into your congregations and substance.

JE: That’s what led you to select him?

PM: Oh, I think that was only one of the things. I was very, I think I was very young when that search committee took place. I was certainly one of the junior members of the committee. It was very capably led by Dr. Manny Lubin.

During the interviews I remember a certain few segments of some of the conversations, thinking back those many years. We were interviewing somebody that was, as you have seen already tonight, direct, articulate, sincere, caring, and then he had this Congregational background that was very good. So it just seemed like a comfortable match. And really, when you’re searching for a rabbi in a Congregation is I have learned—or any circumstance—it’s almost the intangibles as well as the tangible things. But when it feels right, it is right.

JE: Yeah. Rabbi, why did you decide to come to Tulsa?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: I spent three years, ’69 to ’72, as the young, green assistant in West Hartford. I should add that—I’m going to come back to Nancy—I actually married her for her rabbi. Meaning that, again, Nancy grew up in a South Hills suburb. I taught their confirmation class while I was still at Pitt, and had gotten to know her rabbi, who confirmed Nancy. And he married us, along with Dr. Freehof, my rabbi from Rodef Shalom. And he had then left the South Hills of Pittsburgh, eight months before I was

ordained, and succeeded a man who retired after forty-three years as the rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in West Hartford.

I was hoping against hope that he would be looking for his first assistant and would want me, because that was the person I wanted to work with. And it worked out that way, thank God.

So, for Nancy, you know, this long relationship with Rabbi Silver, for me shorter but a very positive relationship and so I went there. After three years, Congregation invited me to stay on for years four and five, become associate rabbi. And after those two years, I was given the responsibility of directing the educational program. We had 850 students in the school.

I said, "Well, I don't want to give up the associate rabbi responsibilities so let's see how we can work this out. If I can hire an administrator for the school that I'll supervise and be involved in curriculum and so forth, we could do it, I think."

They said, "Anyway you want to do it." They were very nice. So that was year six and seven.

We were actually talking about, in a number of Protestant denominations there are staff clergy. So you have a senior, then you have associates who may be forty or fifty years of age. It's not a phenomenon common to Judaism. My senior and I were talking about making this a permanent relationship.

So they invited me to stay on for years eight and nine in November, and said, "Give us an answer by February or March." So this was the time if I was going to test the waters and look around that I could do that.

I decided, "All right, let's test the waters." A congregation that looked attractive in Tulsa, Oklahoma, came on and I didn't know where Oklahoma was. I honestly did not. I have this one younger brother, as we've talked about, who's been since 1970, in Phoenix, Arizona. I'd been at West Hartford, we'd been a country apart. I thought, *A move to Tulsa will be next door.* You know? My idea of geography.

At any rate, there's 1100 miles, for those of you who don't know, between here and Phoenix, most of which is barren desert, as far as I'm concerned. At any rate, looked into the congregation, healthy congregation, good senior retiring after twenty-five years here. Congregation getting younger as he was getting older. I thought potential, at least find out more about it.

So did my due diligence. Committee did their due diligence. Invited Nancy and me, which is very unusual, for a first interview. Usually it would just be the rabbi. I think they were getting tired, frankly, of this search and said, "You know, let's see if we can't bring them both in at the same time."

PM: We hadn't done that much searching before that, Charles.

RCS: Really?

PM: Yeah, I don't remember, maybe one other person, maybe two.

RCS: Really?

PM: Not any more than that.

RCS: So Nancy Sherman and I get on a plane in Hartford, Connecticut. It's two degrees below zero. We are dressed appropriately: gloves, scarf, heaviest coat. We fly to Tulsa, Oklahoma. It's the last weekend in January of 1976. We get off the plane, it is seventy degrees in Tulsa. Unseasonably warm. You know, you feel stupid dressed the way we were.

Jan Jankowski is the president of the temple. He picks us up at the airport, he puts us in the backseat. We're trying to do the unlayering look, and he says, nonchalantly, "Would you like me to turn on the air-conditioning?" [both laughing] It's a great line.

I'll tell you one other incident, which sticks in my mind. Jan is determined that the Shermans not think of Tulsa as an overgrown cowboy town. So we drive by the just-finished Performing Arts Center, and he's giving this spiel. Chamber of Commerce could have done no better. "You know, we have a resident philharmonic orchestra. We have a resident ballet company. We have a resident opera company. We are an eastern-looking city with very rich culture." He is laying it on very, very thick.

So we have reservations at the Camelot Hotel. As we drive up to the Camelot there seemed to be a lot of horse trailers in the parking lot. Jan is beginning to get worried. Turns out, in those days, as you'll remember, Tulsa hosted the National Rodeo Finals. That was this week and Camelot Hotel was headquarters' hotel. We walk in, he's been giving us all this eastern-looking thing and the lobby is filled with ten-gallon hats—I'd seen ten-gallons—spurs I had not seen that close up ever before.

And Jan aged ten years right on the spot. He wanted to change the rese—we thought this was great, never been that close to cowboys. The whole weekend he was making up for this error. God only knows I hope it was not you who made the reservations at the Camelot. [both laughing]

It was an interesting experience. Nancy and I in two and a half days really fell in love with the congregation. And it was very unusual; after the committee did its formal interview on Sunday afternoon—you'll appreciate this, those of you who remember our building superintendent, Walter Glore, since none of the committee members wanted to leave because they were going to do a discussion and a vote, Walter was assigned to take me back to the Camelot.

I have a feeling, those of you who know, that was the real interview. The drive back to the Camelot with Walter Galore. Then he called in his vote, I think.

At any rate, they decided, and this just doesn't happen, to invite me to become the next rabbi of Temple Israel. Would we stay over and negotiate a contract?

When I called to try and change our flight, it turns out Chicago was socked in, we weren't going out that night anyway. So it seemed like the stars were lining up in a certain configuration.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 07 - 6:00

Two Tulsa Synagogues

John Erling: Before we move on we have two synagogues in our town: Temple Israel and Congregation B'nai Emunah. Can you tell us the difference between the two congregations?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Good guys and bad guys. [everyone laughing] Now wait, I didn't identify which was which. [laughs] It's an interesting question that is a different answer today than when I came, a very different answer. Congregation B'nai Emunah was founded as an Orthodox congregation. When I came here, Rabbi Arthur Con Oliva Shalom was the rabbi. Rabbi Con trained as an Orthodox rabbi, graduate of the seminary of Yeshiva University.

The congregation, during his long tenure, had voted to join the conservative movement, but nothing changed in terms of liturgical practices from the way the Orthodox rabbi wanted them to be. So in terms of worship patterns, the congregation 1.2 miles from here was a place that any Orthodox Jew could be very comfortable. And Temple was founded in 1914 as a Reform or liberal or progressive congregation. So there was really a significant difference in terms of worship patterns between the two congregations.

Since that time, when Rabbi Con retired, they elected a conservative rabbi, Rabbi Mark Fitzerman, and the congregation has really, not only come into the conservative movement, but has become, I would say, and I think my friend Mark Fitzerman would agree, a liberal conservative congregation.

So today, in looking at the two congregations, it's not quite as clear what the differences are. We belong to a movement, and Paula and Malcolm have given years of dedicated service to leadership of this movement, which stands for adapting our tradition to modernity. We have been on the cutting edge of almost all of the social issues, meaningful empowerment of women. The ordaining of women rabbis, women cantors. Of outreach to mixed marriage and so forth.

The conservative movement, I'm trying to be fair here, is a lag-time of about a dozen years. Then the conservative movement catches up with what we pioneered, got criticized for, and so forth, and we move on to the next issue.

JE: [laughs] I understand you're a great lover of music and that you have this beautiful, wonderful singing voice. [everyone laughing]

Paula Milsten: We're going to let him answer that.

JE: But music was very important to you in the services, and why? Talk about music in your life.

RCS: Sunday, a week ago, at our cantors in the round culmination of Nancy's and my retirement weekend, I commented the fact that I grew up in a congregation that did not have a cantor. Served my first seven years in a congregation that did not have a cantor. And I don't sing anywhere near on key. I do love music.

I didn't say this the other night: Our family summered at Chautauqua every summer. My parents, from the youngest age, exposed me to classical beautiful music at the Chautauqua Assembly Grounds. My parents were seasoned symphony ticketholders in Pittsburgh and would take me occasionally. I was exposed to good music. But I can't sing.

JE: I was told that many times before we got here.

RCS: Yeah, I'm sure. But working with Cantor Harry Sebran of Blessed Memory was a revelation because here's a man who knew every kind of music and loved every kind of music. It is he who instilled in me an appreciation and love for Jewish music.

JE: So on staff here you have an ordained cantor who is Kari Siegel Eglash. For those listening who don't understand the synagogue, tell us what a cantor does.

RCS: Interestingly, this is one of the very first Reform congregations in the entire southwest to have a full-time cantor. And as I understand the story, Cantor Hal Orbach, who was the first cantor, was doing a Gilbert and Sullivan routine, right?

PM: Tour.

RCS: Tour.

PM: Toured through Tulsa. The company performed on our stage here. This is just shortly before I came to Tulsa. Evidently, somebody found out that he was an ordained cantor. He had a magnificent tenor voice, wonderful. And, literally, they snatched him out of the company and asked him to be cantor at Temple Israel.

RCS: One of the reasons the congregation felt it needed a cantor was to train bar and bat mitzvah students and teach Hebrew. Not a lot of native Tulsans who are that knowledgeable Hebraicly plus able to teach. So to be able to chant the ritual rubrics of our service, lead the congregation in worship, is one of the jobs of the cantor.

In Temple Israel, teaching is a very important part of the cantor's load. Teaches the oldest students in our Hebrew school. Trains each bar and bat mitzvah student individually. Is my clergy colleague. Co-officiates at life cycle events and so forth.

So the cantor here is a full clergy partner with the rabbi.

Chapter 08 - 7:00
1984 Temple Flood

John Erling: In 1984, the congregation faced a huge challenge, and that was a Memorial Day weekend, when the temple was flooded. Maybe you can briefly sum up what happened there and how the community came out to support. And I think it's a reflection on the congregation and on the community at large. Tell us what happened.

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Well, first of all, we refer to this as the Malcolm Milsten Memorial Day Flood. Malcolm was three weeks into his presidency and we had this terrible flood. We had just built a Hebrew Learning Center in the basement. Two rooms equipped so that between Kansas City and Dallas this was the finest Reform Conservative Orthodox Hebrew Learning Laboratory that existed. It was a state of the art facility.

We got too much water. There's a fence along the border between our next-door neighbor's Cascia Hall and the temple. The water came down Yorktown, maybe there were those who speculated because it used to be a lot more green that could absorb the water, now there was concrete. Water had no place to go. Along the fence were shrubs, bushes, it made a dam. Until it could no longer hold, then the fence burst and all of that water poured onto the temple grounds and into the basement of the temple.

In here in the sanctuary, there was water that was approximately six inches up on all of the wooden pews. The Hebrew Learning Center was destroyed. I never had witnessed such destruction as when I walked down the steps as far as I could get into the basement. I didn't realize water could do that kind of damage. All of the pews, as they dried, these beautiful wooden pews, cracked, all of them. So the question was whether we had to replace all of this or not?

The community response, people who lived in the neighborhood, descended upon the temple. Some of them with mops and buckets and brooms. "What can we do to help?" These were not Jewish people, these were our neighbors.

When the word got out that the temple had been injured this way, neighboring churches offered us their facilities. Very, very generously, "What do you need?"

The picture that sticks in my mind, our prayer books had become soaked with water. And two different things happened. Women from the neighborhood and from the congregation, brought, what do you call it?

Paula Milsten: Hair dryers.

RCS: Hair dryers, thank you, to dry out the prayer books. And then there was a theory that if you had an ironing board, you could iron, page by page, I mean, we're talking about 350-, 400-page prayer books, if you can imagine. People willing to put in that time to see if we can't save prayer books.

PM: I think that Malcolm would recollect that that morning this was this enormous rainfall after a week of rain, springtime weather in Oklahoma being what it is. Our phone rang at about seven o'clock in the morning. Maybe it was earlier, on Sunday. Those of you who know Rabbi Sherman well know that that's not a general time for him to be making phone calls. So when it was Rabbi Sherman on the phone and Malcolm picked up the phone and said, "What?" Charles just said, "Come to the temple, I need you here now."

So Malcolm came and I came and it truly was a devastating thing. I mean, we all see on television now all kinds of devastation, but I think when it's your own personal situation and when you see something you've never seen before in your house of worship, it was truly something that touched our hearts.

But the people came from nowhere, I mean, by noon that day we had people here with generators and buckets and mops and brooms. And, of course, it's muddy water, it's not just pure water. And starting to fix things up.

Then several days along the way, this woman appeared out of nowhere to Malcolm and said, "I understand that you had prayer books that had been damaged, and I can fix them."

He said, "Well, I can't give you all of our prayer books. What are you suggesting?"

She said, "If you will get me ten women with ironing boards and irons and come here to the congregation I will teach them how to restore these books."

These were books, as I understand, Charles, that were stored at that time but books that we still use to this day.

RCS: They were the Holy Day books.

PM: Right, they were the High Holy Day Prayer Books. Every year on the High Holy Days you can open a book and know that it was one of those because the pages are still a little wrinkled.

JE: We're sitting in the sanctuary that was flooded. You were without power for a week, six months for rebuild, I understand. And you were offered other sanctuaries but you chose to continue meeting in this sanctuary without power or, and definitely, without air-conditioning. Why did you make that decision?

RCS: I really didn't. That's a very interesting incident. Confirmation, which occurs here at the end of tenth grade, a true coming of age ceremony, was scheduled for three weeks or something after the flood. Imagine this room with no carpeting, that had all been pulled out, it was ruined. As you say, limited power and no air-conditioning, certainly. And pews that were being taken out two rows at a time to be restored. We were offered, and I want to say, Congregation B'nai Emunah, our sister congregation, most generously said, "Please, use our sanctuary."

I actually put it to the students, said, “Look, we have rehearsed in here. You know what it’s like in here, it’s not going to be better Confirmation. So you want to be confirmed here, we can go B’nai Emunah, they’ve generously offered.”

And the kids, the tenth graders, said, “We want to be confirmed in our temple.” And that’s what we did. And it was their decision.

To continue holding services here was our lay leadership’s decision that we would make the best but this is home.

Chapter 09 - 4:55

The Rabbi’s Mentors

John Erling: Let’s get to know the rabbi on a personal level of some sort. Paula, maybe some personal traits of the rabbi that you have observed.

Paula Milsten: Well, I think that everybody in the congregation would share their knowledge of most of these traits. Rabbi Sherman has a wonderful sense of humor. That’s evident often. He’s orderly, he’s organized. As I’ve remarked, on his service a week ago Friday, he is always on time, you can set your clock. There must be an internal one of those things from England that sets the World Clocks in Rabbi Sherman because he’s always on time.

I think that as a rabbi it’s important that we all recognize that he respects people’s confidence. This is not a rabbi that gossips or trades secrets. If you tell your rabbi something it’s not going to go anywhere else. And I think you always know where he stands. That’s a wonderful trait with a rabbi.

As I said, he’s clear, he’s articulate, lots of other traits. We all know he can’t sing. [she and JE laugh] We forgive him for that.

JE: That’s very complimentary, Rabbi, how does that make you feel?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Well, Paula’s biased, you know, because Paula and Malcolm have been my Nancy’s and my dearest friends since we came here. Paula is responsible for finding us the home that we’ve been living in for now thirty-seven years happily. She steered us that way. I still remember the advice: Stretch if you have to for a year or two, it’ll get easier as you go along. It was good advice. I didn’t know we were going to have a third child and needed that extra room. She may have talked to Nancy, I don’t know, but at any rate, we’ve been very happy in our home.

So how does it make me feel? Coming from Paula who has been a coworker for all of these years, it feels very good, and I thank you.

JE: Those traits, they come from a mentor or several mentors?

RCS: Oh, sure, yeah, you mentioned in your early questioning, there's not a week goes by that I don't do something because I think that that's what my mother wanted me to do. Or not doing something because that's what my father would not want. So I had strong parental models.

I grew up with one of the giants of the American rabbinic, as the rabbi of my home congregation. Dr. Solomon B. Freehof was one of the great teachers of the twentieth century Judaism. And I cut my teeth for seven years with a wonderful congregational rabbi, who when we sent him an invitation to our retirement weekend, Nancy was home, he called and said, "What do you mean Charles is old enough to retire?"

So I've had a lot of good mentors. I said to the congregation, "I watched a senior rabbi and a rabbi emeritus for seven years, close up. Came here, I had the benefit of Rabbi Norbert Rosenthal's twenty-five years of experience here and forty-some years in the rabbinic. He was a blessing to me for almost fourteen years as my emeritus here.

"Cantor Sebran was truly not only a colleague but a dear friend, and a source of wonderful knowledge of the congregation."

I've also had—I've thought about this question—one of my mentors is Reverend Clarence Kanipa. Reverend Kanipa is a Missouri Synod Lutheran minister. We became friends in my earliest years here and I kind of followed Clarence in some of the things that he'd do. He served as chair of Planned Parenthood's Religious Committee, and when he finished he recommended that I become chair. We were involved in creating the Tulsa Police and Fire Chaplaincy Corps. He became its first executive eye of the first president.

Clarence is one of the fairest, wisest, maturist clergy people I've ever met. And I could go on. There were Christian clergy who became my colleagues and friends. Warren Holtgren of First Baptist Church, and you know these names. Bill Wiseman of First Presbyterian. These were people I learned from and could also lean on when I had a challenge. I was never too proud to be able to say, "Guys, what would you do?"

Chapter 10 - 7:50

Interfaith Work

John Erling: That's your interfaith work. Your interest in interfaith work in a community, wasn't that implanted in you before you even came to Tulsa?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Yes.

JE: That that was one of those things that you wanted to pursue.

RCS: Yeah, the Reform Congregation have been involved in interfaith relations throughout the twentieth century. It always was the Reform Temple that was representing the Jewish community. So in West Hartford, our emeritus was *the* Jewish figure in the community for a half century. My senior colleague carried on that tradition and expected his assistant and his associate also to be involved. So, yes, I came here with some of that background.

JE: These are things that you didn't have to get involved with because it's an extra workload: The Oklahoma Center for Community and Justice, formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews; there's downtown clergy monthly luncheons; monthly Jewish Christian dialogue sessions, board meetings, and all that. They're added onto your load, so it does make for a long day at times.

RCS: I knew that the long days were part of what I was choosing to devote my life to. I don't think that the ministry is a forty-hour week for any minister, priest, rabbi, imam. This is what one decides one wants to do with one's life and that's where a supportive spouse partner who understands that becomes all important. I have been so blessed with having that kind of partner.

This is not said to either complain or brag—before I had open-heart surgery I was working eighty hours a week. After having quintuple bypass surgery the cardiologist did manage to convince me that that might not be the way I wanted to continue doing things. So I did make some adjustments. Some adjustments means a fifty-five- to sixty-hour week. All right? But I love what I do so that's not really a problem.

Those associations that you just mentioned were also all very stimulating. I was with lay people and clergy, who are some of the shakers and movers of greater Tulsa. There's a certain stimulation of being part of those kinds of decision-making meetings and so forth. I didn't see it as a burden.

JE: Well, interfaith work promotes respect between religions and so forth. Where do you see the interfaith continuing in the future?

RCS: As you know, I've spoken and written about my concerns of late. We are in danger in our country, I think, of everybody looking out for themselves. Meaning that for the past fifteen, twenty years there's been a church growth movement. So each congregation, because we have an increasing number of independents who are not even part of a denomination or a movement, they are interested in growing their own facility, numbers, and so forth. And what's beyond the walls of our institution is of tertiary importance, at best. Okay?

If it will help us, if it will read down to our congregation's glory, reputation will be involved. No sense that I can see of calling of what used to be termed mission, a

weakening of those elements. That's for me, very sad. We have clergy and I include rabbis in that, who are, again, are not that interested in what their neighbors are doing. They're interested only in their own flock. There's articles written in terms of Judaism inreach or outreach with many making the case we have to be involved with our own. Because our people need all of our energies.

Well, I think that's shortsighted. Unless we see ourselves as the old cliché of all in the same boat, we're going to drown.

JE: Okay, so what if the interfaith effort goes away, what harm can come from that?

RCS: Oh, it will result in a weakening of the sense of community, which I believe would be very, very unfortunate. At a time when we are a more diverse society than ever before, if we don't teach and exemplify respect for the other, respect for the differences, then we are going to find ourselves very much out of step with the demographic facts of life.

JE: The demographics have changed in our town since you first came. Today, we have the Islamic community, the Eastern religions, and the faiths weren't even there. So it's probably even more important today than it ever was.

RCS: When I came, we talked with some Broken Arrow Jewish parents. When I went to talk along with the CRC community relations committee director with the folks in Broken Arrow the assumption was in the early '80s, that most every child in a Broken Arrow classroom was a white Christian.

We can smile with that today because we know how it has changed. But that wasn't far from the truth. So, yes, we've changed.

We did a session a number of years ago in Sand Springs that a really, very super sensitive superintendent of schools brought in a Muslim, a Christian, and this Jew to do a panel for his superintendent's staff, which included principals and vice principals. He knew the changes were coming and he wanted to prepare his staff for those changes.

I remember doing this in Jenks. At that time, the Islamic community was very small and young in this work. I'm talking about the fact that, you know, if you only order pepperoni pizza for lunch on Friday in the high school cafeteria, there are a number of people who can't eat that pizza. Talking about things, High Holy Days, you can expect Jewish students are not going to be present. And we expect our holidays to be respected. All right?

And the Muslim lady, I still remember, says, "You ain't seen nothing yet. When our boys reach middle school age, boys, not females, the uniform that you're expecting them to wear in gym is unacceptable to us religiously."

And I saw the coaches kind of going, [gasp]. So we are a much more richly diverse community today. Thank God, for the most part, those in positions of leadership, academic leadership particularly, have been sensitive and willing. I'm also thankful that

I had congregants who are willing to say, “If we have to file suit for our children’s rights, which we know we’ll win, it’ll create a lot of animosity in the process but we’ll do it.”

They sat in my office and said, “Rabbi, we three are willing to file the suits. So go and make your presentations knowing that we’re going to be there for you.”

I’m very, very grateful to those families.

Chapter 11 - 7:30

Tulsa Jewish Population

John Erling: I understand you’ve really embraced the world of technology with your [audience laughing] iPhones and your iPads and a Mac and why did you embrace it so wholeheartedly?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Semmel must have done the research [laughing]. I am not mechanically inclined, John. As all who know me know, the computer frankly frightens me. I hate to confess that but part of this is definitely a deficiency on Charles Sherman’s part, okay?

JE: [laughing]

RCS: No question about that. But I have concerns about the use of technology. I’ll be blunt even though one of my teammates is here. The fact that people aren’t reading newspapers and, in fact, the local newspaper, is a matter of great concern for me. If we’re getting our news from the *Daily Show* or from blogs and Facebook, we’re not getting the news. The constant texting and people with their head in a phone instead of with their eyes on the blessings of this world, that’s of concern to me.

JE: Is it true you don’t have a cell phone?

RCS: It is true.

JE: And—

RCS: I have absolutely no need to be in constant touch. I respond to emergencies, and, you know, in the ministry people have emergencies. I’m responsive without a cell phone. I have no desire to be in that kind of touch with the world.

JE: As you reflect on your past thirty-seven years, you think about the Jewish community, its population dwindling, maybe you can comment on that. I think there are about two thousand Jews living in Tulsa. And when you think about the main foundations we have they’re attached often to Jewish names and to Jewish individuals. I’m sure more people would think, *Well, certainly there must be a bigger population here.*

And then I want you to also talk about one of my joys of doing this is that I get to know people more than I ever did when I was on the radio. So I’ve interviewed a number

of Jewish people and I hear “to repair the world.” Comment on, if you can, all of what I just talked about there, this dwindling population, and then to repair the world.

RCS: The dwindling numbers are of grave concern and I don’t think that anybody has the answer. Our hope is that with greater diversification in employment opportunities here in Tulsa, Jews can be attracted to move here for employment opportunities. I think we have to do a much better job of retaining the Jews that are here. I proposed two weeks ago, and I’ll say it now to a much larger group, that we look into providing scholarships for students, out high school seniors to be able to attend colleges and universities, which have a critical mass of Jews who will come back and work summers here. We will make every opportunity to find employment and they will have a, for the sake of discussion, five-year commitment to return to Tulsa in order to have forgiveness of those loans.

I think we have to do something that ambitious in order to bring children back. I’ll tell you the figures that we’re working with. When Jennifer Larch, our director of youth and education, put together for our *midrash* graduation, all of the graduates, and this is a self-selective group of some of the most committed young people who have continued beyond bar and bat mitzvah through confirmation to high school graduation from our Jewish high school, which is an afterschool program.

I don’t think I know every Jewish person in town but I know a lot. I went through the list, 18 percent. We can’t survive 18 percent of our students not coming home, we can’t survive as a Jewish community. That’s the wakeup call, friends, we’ve got to do something about it.

We’ve been at this grow Jewish Tulsa for six years and I don’t think we’ve made much headway at all. So we’re going to have to do—I’ll use the word “ambitious,” much more ambitious things. I am concerned.

You take Oklahoma, there’s no longer a Jewish congregation in Okmulgee, in Bartlesville, in Ardmore, or in Muskogee. There are only Jewish congregations, virtually, in Tulsa and in Oklahoma City. Yes, small congregation in Ponca City, small congregation in Seminole brings in somebody for the High Holy Days, but virtually it’s the two big cities—Tulsa and Oklahoma City and that’s it.

So this business of numbers is important. There has to be a critical mass. In terms of *Tikkun olam*, to repair the world, we Jews believe that we are partners with God. We are God’s arms, legs, hands, back, in order to do the work of repairing this world. Your question is a very insightful one because they’re tied together. If there are not enough arms, legs, backs, heads, and so forth, you know, you can’t do the work. And that’s definitely a challenge for us in the twenty-first century.

JE: You talk much about your work and long hours, you have never taken a sabbatical. Many times rabbis, ministers, and all will take a month, two months, to recharge and I suppose you could have done the same thing here. Why did you never take a sabbatical?

- RCS:** Just stupid, yeah. Yeah, I wish I knew the answer. My wife wishes I knew the answer. Um, there always seemed to be things that got in the way, I mean, yes, you're quite right. Rabbinic guidelines call for every seven years there to be a sabbatical of three to six months, akin to the academic world. When you have young children, you can't take them out of school that long and so forth. And I guess, there's a deep-rooted fear, don't listen to this, Paula, yet they'd figure out they can get along without me, you see, you know. So I guess, I was just having too much fun.
- JE:** And that must be the reason you've stayed her a long time. I mean, you could have moved on. I'm sure you could have moved on to bigger callings, bigger cities, bigger congregations, and you chose to stay. Why?
- RCS:** I have been privileged to work with some of the finest people that anyone could know. Supportive and generous, sensitive, appreciative, I can't imagine a better group of people to work with. And that includes, incidentally, my friends in the general community as well.
- JE:** Rabbis, have they come out of this congregation?
- RCS:** Yes. In coaching, there's a Coaching Tree. I'm proud of the fact that Rabbi Sandra Katz, Rabbi Aaron Sherman, Rabbi Daniel Sherman, Rabbi Adam Miller, and soon to be Rabbi Andrew Terkel are products of this congregation. Cantor Deborah Avery is a product of this congregation. Yeah, it's a source of great pride.
- JE:** Yeah.

Chapter 12 - 4:50

Rabbi Emeritus

John Erling: There might be those who will listen, this is an educational tool, or young people considering this ministry, what would be your advice to them?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: I'm one of those who believes very much in calling of serving people. To be able to study and to serve a wide variety of people, building on your own strength. So I love teaching. Therefore, have tried to take advantage of every opportunity to teach. I love preaching, and so, I preach regularly. This is the kind of calling in which someone else loves pastoral work can really emphasize that part of the calling.

For me, a healthy congregation makes it possible to do more than any one, two, three individuals can do. So I've put a great deal of my energy into the organization of this congregation because I thought we could do more, you'll use your word, in an orderly, well-organized, well-financed congregation, than if this was a hit or miss operation.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RCS: So I've been able to play to my strengths, develop what I love doing. I don't know that every occupation provides that kind of flexibility.

JE: And now you hand off the leadership role to two rabbis, Rabbi Karen Citrin, and Rabbi Micah Citrin to serve this congregation. Did they ask or did you give them advice of any sort?

RCS: You know, in our polity, the idea is that the incumbent rabbi stays out of the placement process. I'm going to pat myself on the back, I think I did a darn good job of that. Uh, so, when the committee that Paula served on, again, said, "This time do it right, Paula," uh, they brought candidates here. They went through all of their screening, reading of resumes, Skype interviews, and so forth, decided who to invite here. I had an opportunity to spend an hour with the candidates. I said to each, "I'm not an interviewer here, please understand that. I'm here to tell you anything I can as candidly as I can about our community and our congregation, so ask away." That was my input, whatever they wanted to know.

JE: Now you move into the role of rabbi emeritus. What are your plans in that role?

RCS: I'm going to let it evolve, John. Congregation generously has provided me with an office down the hall and Nancy and I are committed to writing a history of the congregation as it prepares for its Centennial in December of 2014. Dr. George McCutchen of Zion Baptist Church has celebrated his sixtieth anniversary with the church and his advice to his congregants I'm going to borrow. He said, "My door is always open for fresh air, not for complaints."

I think that is good advice. I have been part of some people's lives for almost four decades and they a part of Nancy's and mine. And I hope to remain a part of their lives and help the Citrins in any way they would like to be helped.

JE: I think you've done this before, but could part of your future plans be a rabbi on a cruise ship?

RCS: Yes, again, that's a wonderful idea, John. Yes.

JE: You've done that before, haven't you?

RCS: We did.

JE: Yeah.

RCS: A year and a half ago to Australia and New Zealand, it was great fun.

JE: So as you say goodbye in your role of rabbi here at Temple Israel, what will you miss the most?

RCS: I will probably miss preaching regularly the most.

JE: You enjoyed building sermons, writing them?

RCS: Yes. And delivering them.

JE: And delivering them, of course.

RCS: Yes, it's a great challenge to preach and I have to figure out how to channel those creative juices in a different way.

JE: Well, I want to thank you for the evening and our audience here, I'm sure, feels the same way. [applause] And for your community service. And I'm sure that if you're called on in interfaith work you'll continue that as well in your role as emeritus. So thank you for this evening, we've enjoyed it very much.

RCS: Thanks for the project, I mean that, John. I think that the Voices of Oklahoma is a great idea and you are such a skilled interviewer that it's been fun.

JE: Thank you, thank you, Rabbi. Appreciate it. [applause]

RCS: Thank you, Paula.

Chapter 13 - 12:20

Cruise Rabbi

John Erling: Charles, when last we talked, it was before that audience at Temple Israel. It was June 10, 2013. Today's date is February 19, 2020. Seven years ago, can you believe that?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Hard to believe.

JE: It's scary, isn't it?

RCS: Yes.

JE: How fast it goes. And now our visitors can listen on our website and also on podcast. I had never heard of podcast seven years ago so we want to welcome our podcast listeners as well. As we listen back to your story, you were about to retire. So I wanted to follow up with you to see what you've been doing. Get some of the thoughts about what's going on in this world.

I asked you what you would miss the most, and you said preaching. And you said you wanted to channel those creative juices into something. You talked about writing a book about the history of Temple Israel. So did it turn out to be that preaching was one of the things you missed?

RCS: Yes. No question about it, John. I enjoyed the whole creative process involved in selecting topics, studying to prepare a message, and then to deliver the message. What has given me an opportunity to continue preaching on a much, much more limited schedule is that I have had the very, very good fortune of becoming a cruise rabbi. And for the past, almost seven years of retirement, Nancy and I have done three cruises each year: High Holy Days, Hanukkah, and Passover. As cruise lines employ rabbis and

cantors at a deeply discounted cruise rates, it still costs a lot of money because we have to pay the transportation to get to the embarkation point and so forth. And we pay for our excursions onboard, but it's still a deep discount. We couldn't afford to do this if it were not this opportunity.

Nancy and I have been now to all seven continents. We have seen things that we never imagined ourselves seeing. Nancy, you may remember, taught for some twenty-five years at Tulsa Community College. And she taught, among other things, cultural geography.

JE: Oh.

RCS: So now she's had a chance to see the places with her own eyes that she had taught about over and over again. It's been a treat for us. We have been now on eight different cruise lines and fourteen different ships.

JE: Do they seek you out knowing that this is what you do, all these different cruise lines?

RCS: Well, my dear friends, Rabbi and Mrs. David Packman of Oklahoma City, David died last week and just last Friday we were in Oklahoma City for the final farewell. David and Nina Packman retired years before I did and they had become cruisers. And we learned from them. And so there's an agent who handles a variety of ships, it's his job to secure clergy, not just Jewish clergy, but Protestant and Catholic clergy as well, to staff the cruise ships. Unfortunately, cruise ships over this last decade have been cutting back on these opportunities so I don't know how long this is going to last.

JE: Hmm, why would they be cutting back?

RCS: I think expenses.

JE: Yeah.

RCS: As cruising has become increasingly competitive and I guess the profit margin goes down, so they're not looking to give away cabins.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). What do you do on the cruise? Is that where the preaching comes in?

RCS: Yes. During the High Holy Days, and my hope is always to have a cruise long enough that it encompasses both Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. I do all of the Jewish services, and it's surprising how many people will say, "Oh, Rabbi, when we booked this cruise we had forgotten that the Holy Days were going to be during this period of time."

So we're glad to have an opportunity, even if briefly interrupting our cruising to worship. So I have services on Sabbath Eve and on all of the Holy Days. Yes, I preach as part of each of those services. Sometimes they're golden oldies, but even those golden oldies need to be revised, revamped for a different time. And that's a nice challenge.

We have met people from throughout the world. Give you a recent example: We picked up a cruise ship in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and we went for Hanukkah to Argentina, Uruguay, and five ports in Brazil. Nancy and I had never been to Brazil before. And you never know how many people on the ship are Jewish, or how many of those

Jews are going to attend services. So I prepare but I'm not sure what the congregation is going to look like. It's always announced in the daily program of the ship, first night—Hanukkah candle lighting with Rabbi Sherman at such-and-such time and place. It was the drawing room of the ship.

I get there early, of course, and there's one or two people. Slowly the room continues to fill. There were over forty people. I always begin by asking, "Folks, let's take a few minutes, introduce yourself, and tell us where you're from." It's nice that you try and build a spirit of a congregation, what we call a *Kehillah*, and listen to people introduce themselves from ten different nations of the world. But all over the globe. There were people from South Africa, from Israel, from Turkey, from the UK, the USA and Canada, and then from South American countries, from Chile, Argentina, Brazil. So you have forty-plus people from literally around the globe.

We begin with the traditional blessings of the Hanukkah candles. And I had passed around a sheet with the words and with some songs and people began chanting the blessings with me. And I bring a tape recording. One of the problems is that ships today don't have CD players. I have good CDs with a variety of music so it's a challenge. At any rate, the blessings I had were with a youth choir because there were no youth on this cruise ship among my congregants and it was nice to hear the voices of young people. And people joined in.

Then I went to want we call the Hanukkah anthem, "*Maoz Tzur*," "Rock of Ages." And again, I have no idea, and the people from these ten spots on the globe all joined in in the Hebrew and filled the room. Tears came to my eyes, it was just beautiful. They didn't all know the English translation but they knew "*Maoz Tzur*," and the traditional melodies.

So it's a fascinating experience. We meet very interesting people. And you learn from these experiences, learn from talking with a variety of people that are interesting folks. Many of them have traveled the world repeatedly. I'm always surprised there's a certain class of people who spend a good part of every year traveling and enriching their lives, undoubtedly.

I'll give you another experience. Four years ago, we were on a Holland America ship for Passover. I had met two days in advance with the culinary director and he gave me his card. And I still remember, I said, "Your name is Kovacs," K-o-v-a-c-s.

He said, "That's the correct pronunciation, how did you know that, Rabbi?"

I said, "Because that's my mother of Blessed Memories' maiden name."

He said, "No kidding?"

And she was born here. Her mother was from Hungary and my mother spoke fluent Hungarian. So we hit it off and planned the Seder, the traditional Passover meal and it was lovely. The ships go out of their way to make this experience very, very nice. All the traditional foods and whatever I need in order to conduct the Seder, which takes two

and a half hours. All they ask is that people make a reservation. There's no additional charge but they need to know for food preparation how many people will be coming. It went beautifully.

And then Passover is either seven or eight days long, depending upon whether you're a traditional Jew or a liberal Jew. So the idea was that for the next seven or eight days, people when they went up to the lido deck to get their breakfast, let's say, would ask for Matzo, they didn't want to put the Matzo out.

So when Nancy and I got there for breakfast, I asked for Matzo. The fellow said, "Of course," and he went and disappeared. Came back, it took him a good five minutes, and said, "There is no more Matzo."

Now we're at the first day of the Passover festival. I said, "Are you sure?"

He said, "Yes, I'm sure."

I went to find Kovacs. I said, "We have a problem." Turns out his staff unknowingly put all the Matzo out for the Seder the night before. And once out it couldn't be used again, so now the ship had no Matzo.

He said, "Don't worry, Rabbi, I have on my staff a man who used to be a baker in an Israeli bakery. We will begin baking Matzo."

I said, "Fine." And by the end of the day, there were Matzo.

Now it was an interesting creation. It looked like a Pop Tart, no Matzo I had ever seen before, only Pop Tarts have a delicious filling, this dough did not. It was edible if you put enough butter or peanut butter or cream cheese, jelly on it, otherwise, it left a lot to be desired.

My people came to me during the course of the next two days. "Is this really kosher for Passover?"

I said, "I declare, yes, it's kosher for Passover and we can eat it."

Every day Kovacs and crew made fresh Matzo. We got through the holiday.

Chapter 14 - 4:20

Anne Frank

John Erling: Do any Protestants or Catholics come into your services?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Yeah, that's an interesting question. We have had non-Jewish people attend services of all kinds. They had a second-day Rosh Hashanah service last year and there were a very few people. And one gentleman introduced himself, a retired Lutheran pastor from Germany. He had studied Passover, he knew all about the holiday, but he had never experienced Passover. And, "Would I be allowed to come?"

I said, "We'd be delighted to have you." We've had all kinds of people join us.

I remember on one cruise a man came over and said, "You know, I'm a funeral director and we've had a lot of Jewish funerals but I've never been to a Passover Seder. Could I come to the Seder?"

I said, "Well, absolutely, we would love to have you."

We had a Jewish Lord and Lady from the British Empire. They came to Seder and for the second-night Seder they invited the other Lord and Lady who were not Jewish, to be their guests at Seder. So I've had royalty at a Seder.

You know, people reach a certain status in life, and you're well aware of this, they don't have to be pretentious, there are no airs, they're simply good people.

Nancy sat beside the Lady and they have a fascinating conversation about world geography, in fact.

So, yes, when there's another clergy person aboard the same cruise, I make it a point to get us together for lunch. And I've met some very, very fine colleagues, both Catholic priests and a variety of Protestant ministers. Many of whom have cruised much more frequently than I. And we would swap cruise stories.

If I may, I'll tell you one more story. Three years ago, we were on a ship for Passover. Nancy starts out by saying to people she meets in the elevator or in the food line, "Where are you from?" That's the ice breaker and they're off and going. She met a lady who said she was from Amsterdam, actually, right outside of Amsterdam. And Nancy said, "Well, we've been to Amsterdam, beautiful city," and so forth, "and we particularly enjoyed the Anne Frank House."

The lady said, "I was one of those hidden children, the same as Anne Frank." She and Nancy continued to talk. An eighty-year-old lady, Ynette was her name. A lovely lady.

So knowing this, the *Haggadah* that we use, the ritual book for telling the story of Passover at the Seder, has a beautiful quotation from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. And I try to recruit twelve, thirteen, fourteen volunteers to help me with the reading of the *Haggadah* at the Seder. And I said to this lovely lady, "There's a quotation from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. It would be very meaningful to us if you would read that, if you would be comfortable."

She said, "I will try."

Well, we came to that point in the ritual meal and I informed our guests that this lady, now eighty years of age, was a hidden child who understood very well the story of Anne Frank and she will read this part. You could of heard a pin drop as she read with such feeling these words of hope that Anne Frank wrote in the middle of this nightmare she and her family were living. It was one of the most meaningful Seder moments of my life.

JE: Hmm, I bet. Wow, things you didn't know were going to happen to you as we visited you in 2013.

Chapter 15 - 7:07**Mediation**

Rabbi Charles Sherman: The other thing, John, is that I may have begun thinking about, a friend of mine in the congregation had been sharing mediation stories with me at our collation after services often. Obviously he was enjoying this volunteer activity and he said, “You know, I think it might be something you would enjoy.”

So I looked into it and decided that it was something that I would enjoy. When I began college, a long, long time ago, I was prelaw. I thought I was going to become a lawyer and my uncle was a prominent lawyer in Pittsburgh and he had a place for me reserved in his firm. But over the course of my years as an undergraduate I changed my mind and decided to go to seminary instead of law school.

But the law has always fascinated me. So I did the training, forty hours of training required, I think in October of 2013. Now I thought that with all of the years that I had put in in premarital and marital counseling that marriage and divorce was right up my alley and that I would have a lot to bring to that.

Well, you can’t start there, no matter how many years of experience. You have to start with small claims court and civil law. So I did that for a year and a lady who had been going to Sapulpa, Oklahoma, for small claims court on Wednesday mornings, she retired. And I was asked if I would do this.

And so every Wednesday morning now for the last five-plus years I drive to Sapulpa and I do the small claims docket. Now this is the middle, as you well know, of Creek County, and I think that a high percentage of the people I meet and deal with are Native Americans, at least some percentage. I believe that Judge Woolery, who I think is an outstanding jurist, knows half the people in front of him in the courtroom. And he decides which cases are to go to mediation. He sends me the ones he doesn’t like, having to do with the families, which are often difficult. And all I know is the names on the dockets. So there’s some paperwork that has to be done in the mediation setting.

So I kind of curiously said to this older woman, “I notice that you have the same name as the party over here. Are you related?”

She looked at me and said words I’ll never forget, “He used to be my son.”

John Erling: Hmm.

RCS: Well, that was not a warm welcome—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RCS: . . . to the mediation table but we managed to work through it. The judge also doesn’t like animal cases and I think I have had every kind of animal case over the course of these five and a half years that one can imagine, including a young man driving a high-

speed sports car at three a.m. in the pitch dark, coming around the corner on this country road, running into a cow and doing thousands of dollars of damage to his sports car. And him wanting compensation. The cow didn't belong in the middle of the road. So there have been all kinds of cases.

JE: Okay, so how did that get resolved?

RCS: The cow didn't belong in the middle of the road, and the owner had some responsibility for the fact that his fence was broken and that the cow got out. He finally realized that he had some responsibility and we worked out, hopefully, a fair settlement.

JE: When you mediate, do you go from one room to another? Do you get both parties at the same table?

RCS: That's something we learned early on, there's a procedure known as caucusing where you meet with one party and then meet with the other party, separately. I prefer always to begin together and see where, as we create an agenda, what are the items that we're going to be deciding. And then, if necessary, if I feel that we'd do better to speak to one side at a time, then we caucus. I find that that is a useful tool, but only used occasionally.

This morning I was in Sapulpa and Judge sent the case, an eviction case. I do a lot of evictions. This was a case where the owners of the house were the Creek Nation itself. The judge smiled at me when I brought in the settlement, he said, "Well, have you ever dealt with the Sovereign Nation before in mediation?"

I said, "No, it's really my first such case."

But if I may, I'll tell you one of most interesting cases. In Sapulpa, it so happens. I also mediate in Tulsa. And we began last July an eviction court. We have an inordinate number of eviction cases in Oklahoma. So the court began and eviction court just for landlords and tenants. The reason I was interested in doing this is, as I've learned, if we can prevent an eviction going on a renter's record, it makes it much easier for them to rent in the future. Landlords are not looking to people who have been evicted. So if we can work it out with the landlord so that the house, mobile home, apartment, reverts to the landlord in a timely manner, without an eviction on somebody's record, that's highly desirable.

And we now, I'm happy to say, have public defenders and a nonprofit group representing the renters. Because it's an imbalance. There's often an attorney on retainer for the landlord who comes in with a whole stack of manila folders of cases. And for many of the renters, they are not familiar with the system, they don't have representation. So mediation can be very helpful here for both sides. I enjoy doing that.

Chapter 16 – 8:10**Marriage and Divorce**

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Incidentally, after a year of doing civil mediation, I returned to my director and said, “I still want to do marriage and divorce.” And I did forty hours of training at the OU Law School to do marriage and divorce. I’ve been doing that now for the last four years. It is my favorite, even though it can be emotionally very trying, especially when we’re dealing with children and parents disagreeing over basic things in their children’s lives. But to try and work that out.

Mediation provides an opportunity for both sides to be heard, to get a lot of things off their chest, which they would never have the opportunity to do in a court. It also lightens the overburdened court system. And so people often get a chance to resolve their differences much sooner than waiting for a court date. And to be heard.

So we’re, all of us, volunteers. And these mediators come from all walks of life. It’s interesting and this is my way of giving back a little bit to a community that has been wonderful to me.

John Erling: Have you ever had cases where when both sides put it all out on the table, and maybe they had never been to counseling before, that, well, maybe they say, “Oh, I get it, I understand your side”? Have you ever had a healing as a maybe not get a divorce?

RCS: No. But there have been times when I listened to two people and I wonder why in the world are they getting a divorce? It sounds like they’re in agreement on many things but I have asked the question that you’re posing, you know, “Are you sure you want to do this? Because this is a good time to back out or put it on hold, maybe, would be a better way.”

For example, to pursue what you’re saying, “Go get counseling,” if they haven’t done that. I have to be careful because, you know, as a clergy person counseling and trying to preserve relationships was a high priority. That’s not my role here as a mediator, but I am who I am.

So, yes, that has been the put out but I haven’t had any takers yet, John. They have continued. But I don’t know what happens because in marriage and divorce you write a memorandum of understanding, which each side must then take to their counsel, who will put it in the final form for the court. So whether that happens or how quickly that happens, I have no idea. Once we’re done I know nothing about what happens with a case.

JE: But you do get a sense of accomplishment, maybe, that while you didn’t bring the couples together maybe they came together for a better settlement for the children. And you walk away from that saying, “I feel good about that.”

RCS: Absolutely, and that's exactly what you do feel better about. In fact, what I have found over these years is that lack of communication or bad communication is the source of 85, 90 percent of the problems. You know, people who stop talking to each other, stop even sharing emails and so forth. So there's a wall now. And there are things that have to be resolved. Simply stonewalling will not solve the issue, or move the relationship forward, or take care of the needs of children, minor children.

I've had cases, as all of us who do mediation, where you have two parties. And each party has an attorney. I worried when I began, you know, an attorney knows the law far better than I with my minimal training and so forth. And that I still remember the trainers. Attorneys can be your best friends. Do not be afraid of the attorney. I have found that to be absolutely true. But then two attorneys and then a third representing the minor child, so it can get very complicated.

Everybody has their needs and is entitled, each person, each party is entitled to be represented, if they want.

JE: Some probably at the end of it all have said, "Wow, we came together and it's a good thing," and both sides may have thanked you.

RCS: And shaken hands with each other. That's perhaps the most fulfilling. People who were not necessarily communicating when they sat down in the room.

I'll give you a good example. [laughs] I had two gentlemen several years ago, I would say fiftyish. The one man had been doing business with the other for years and sending other people. The one gentleman had a fancy expensive truck and he had a rattle in the motor and he brought it in.

The other gentleman had a very good muffler shop. So he bought a new muffler, etc., etc., and some other part and he drove away.

Well, the rattle was still there days later. So he brought it back and, again, the muffler shop owner had his crew work on it. This happened three times with no satisfaction. And finally, they had it tested with a sophisticated piece of equipment at a dealership and so on.

And the muffler shop owner was saying, "It's not the muffler that's causing it."

He said, "Yes it is the muffler." So he finally, the truck owner got it fixed. And now he wanted his money back because he had spent a lot of money and I think it was over a thousand dollars.

So we worked it down and we got it to \$250. Now, I must say as a mediator, if I got it that close, if I can't bring this to a peaceful conclusion, I'm at fault.

Finally, the one man says, "Look, you can afford \$250, I can afford \$250. Let's flip for it."

I looked, and I said, "Are you serious?"

He said, "Yes."

So three men, the two of them and I, reach in our pockets and we do not have a coin among us. I said, "I'll be back." I go into the court quietly, court was going on. "Do you have a penny? Do you have a penny?" I cannot find a coin. I go outside the courtroom and a lady said, "They're going to flip for it, aren't they?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Here's a penny and I don't need it back."

I go back inside the mediation room and we go over the ground rules, you know, who wins with head, who wins with tails, that this is for \$250. If the one wins, he gets a check; if otherwise, no check. And the case is done. Get it all squared away, flip the coin, and one person obviously wins.

And the other says, "Two out of three?" [both laughing]

"No." The man sits down, he writes a check for \$250, gives it to him, and the two of them walk out smiling.

JE: That's great.

RCS: It was wonderful.

JE: That's great, yeah.

RCS: And I kept the penny, and I take it with me on Wednesday mornings to Sapulpa just in case I need it again.

JE: That is great. Well, this is wonderful the things you've done since you retire. I don't like the word retire, so in essence, you haven't retired.

Chapter 17 - 15:28

Anti-Semitism

John Erling: I noticed when listening to our original interview that I didn't ask you about anti-Semitic attacks in the world. But I must say, those attacks perhaps have taken more headlines over the last seven years. For future visitors to our website, we want to capture this moment in time for them. Some of them will be listening twenty years, thirty years from now, and they can compare the different times.

I have a study here, Tel Aviv University's Cantors Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry. I'm going to, obviously, get your thoughts. They talk about being more attacks, a lot of evidence of anti-Semitism going through the mainstream, not just far right and far left activists. They've catalogued 387 anti-Semitic attacks worldwide and cited among the causing growing fears in Europe and elsewhere

linked to mass immigration, economic hardship, opposition to Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. And physical attacks, with or without weapons, arson, vandalism, and direct threats against Jews, synagogues, and other Jewish institutions. I'll stop here in a minute, but they cite: The deadliest attack ever on Jews on US soil in which a gunman stormed the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, yelling, "All Jews must die," killed eleven Jewish worshipers. And then the nineteen-year-old gunman opened fire on Sabbath worshipers in a Southern California synagogue, killing one woman and wounding three other people.

Let me just get you started in the conversation and I can add more from this report. What is going on? Why is this happening with increased activity?

Rabbi Charles Sherman: Well, I want you to know that, um, I grew up five blocks from the Tree of Life Synagogue. So that incident was especially painful. My cousin was the immediate past president of the Reconstructionist congregation that meets at the Tree of Life. He was in the synagogue on Friday evening, but not, thank God, on Saturday morning. Knew all eleven people that were murdered that morning, particularly close to several of them.

The other side of that, and then I'll try my best to answer your question, is the rather incredible response of the people of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. People of all faiths and of no faith wanted to do whatever they could to help. And to say that this is not the community that we want Pittsburgh to be. So from the non-Jewish mayor to the imam, people simply rose up to say, "This can't happen in our midst." And as painful as this tragedy was, we also have to look at, I think, how the community chose to respond.

I just was with my cousin and they now, a year later, are still trying to figure out its challenging situation. Do we repair the Tree of Life Synagogue, which has still the bullet holes and so forth? There are some people who say, "I'll never step foot in that space again, too many memories." Or do we tear it down and start all over again, and so forth? These things have not yet been resolved, and it's a full year later.

The larger issue, obviously, where you cite global statistics, of course, the question has to do with Jews, but also with instances of Islam-phobia, of anti-Muslim hate crimes. We still have racial crimes that are hate crimes. And I suspect that there's an increase in the last several years in each of these categories. And what happens in Europe, of course, is in some ways even more politically involved. As people are concerned with change, there are people who find that their world is not the way it was, and they're unhappy with the changes. They're not sure of their employment. Are they going to be replaced by someone younger and more capable of using modern technology? Or even replaced by a machine? Their pensions are not secure any longer. Longtime loyalty to a company, which will take care of its own, those things aren't there.

The increasing cost of higher education with people coming out of school with hundreds of thousands, not just thousands of dollars, hundreds of thousands of dollars

and not convinced, as I think our generation was, that we're going to have a better life than our parents and grandparents.

So there's a great deal of uneasiness about and that makes it easier for those who are peddling hate, who are looking for a scapegoat, to find the one who is different. And Jews have been, throughout our history, different. That they're the cause of the problem. That's, I think, what is going on today.

The other side is, I think I am an eternal optimist, so in the midst of these statistics about the growth of anti-Semitism, the last pew study showed Jews were the most respected religious group in America. Fascinating.

And today, as we speak in February of 2020, two of the candidates for the presidency of the United States of America are Jews. So we've got a mixed bag here today, that Jews are able to enter any school, graduate, go on into any profession today. When I was a child that wasn't true. There were quotas still in colleges, in graduate schools, and certainly their professional life.

Let me be real blunt. When Nancy and Charles Sherman and children moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1976, there was not a Jewish member of the Southern Hills Country Club, nor a black member. And that's no longer true on either score. Changes have taken place, are taking place. Progress is being made. Are we there yet, of a colorblind or totally color-appreciative society? No. But my early years of the rabbinic here, the police were raiding gay nightclubs and beating up the peaceful patrons. That doesn't happen today. We have an equality center that is the envy of the country.

So, one act of hate, be it against Jews or Muslims or blacks or gays, is one too many. But let us not either ignore or discount the progress that is being made.

JE: The report says, to bring you back to the negative side, "In the United States," the study noted, "among other factors, far right groups and increasing hostility on campuses toward Jewish students who support Israel is feeling anti-Semitism there." On campuses. And this kind of plays into what you said earlier, "While far right supporters often see Jews as a cosmopolitan foreign agent threatening national identity, far left groups sometimes blame Jews for economic uncertainties and tensions caused by globalization."

I think you kind of talked about that.

RCS: Right. What's going on in campuses is particularly troublesome. It's hard sometimes to draw the fine line between anti-Israel sentiment, because as you quoted, the challenge of Israel and the Palestinians, just a tremendous challenge, and not one easily solved. And so there have been those who mobilize against any Jewish speaker or pro-Israel speaker on campus. And it's made sometimes freedom of speech a difficulty on campus.

And there are those boycotting products made in Israel and so forth. And they have found on campus, students who are trying to understand what's going on in a different part of the world often have been led to believe that one side has all of the

evil and the other side all of the good. And that's unfortunate, especially in institutions of higher education where we hope young people are learning to see grace and nuances and so forth.

JE: Yeah. To show you how top of mind this is, this is from the *New York Times*, Monday of this week, February 17. Headline: Anxious times for visible Jews as communities clash. The article just opens up a rabbinical student was walking down a quiet street in Brooklyn last winter, chatting on the phone with his father, when three men jumped him from behind. They punched his head, knocking him to the ground, before fleeing down the block.

Then they cite other happenings as well. And one of the rabbis said, "We thought the things that happened in Europe would never happen in the United States, and definitely not in New York City. But unfortunately, we were in dreamland."

So this is a very current story, happens there. We don't have that visibility as much here in Tulsa, but it is of concern, of course, there. And increasing in the United States, maybe, from ten years ago?

RCS: Well, I don't know. I suspect yes, but also, and this is your area of expertise, we now have instantaneous news from every corner. So we know a lot more about such incidents than we did even a decade ago. That kind of incident is frightening and it is deeply disturbing. And what causes an innocent person wearing a skull cap or some other distinctive Jewish garb to be the object of such an attack? I don't know. I mean, here in Oklahoma, we're talking, John, as you well know, about encouraging people to be able to carry guns more openly, more easily. And yet, it's innocent people who are most shot by those guns.

So we have some rhetoric going on in this country, there's no question about that. Those who look at our president as being partially responsible for increasing tensions, I think that one can make that case. Certainly, President Trump hasn't been a unifier. If white nationalists, if hate groups feel that it's safer, more acceptable to spew their venom today because of the President, then he has to take responsibility for that. But I don't think that that's the only reason, at all, that we have such haters.

I, again, think we have people who are unbalanced, and we have to do a much better job in terms of identifying Sooner people with severe emotional problems. And we have to do a much better job of making sure they can't purchase guns. But we also have to get people to the point where they feel in their own life that they are secure. They don't need anybody to hate, they don't need a scapegoat because they're comfortable within their own skins, within their own homes, within their own communities.

So there's no easy solution to hatred, whether it's hatred of Jews or hatred of anybody else. I hope that we will increasingly focus on the causes of people being anxious and insecure and try and meet their needs.

JE: And we can leave the topic on a real positive side, and this is kind of like a time capsule for those who listen. The Tulsa community and environs has tremendous respect for the Jewish community and their foundations and what they do. About two thousand Jews living in Tulsa?

RCS: Right.

JE: And those foundations who are making a difference to repair the world is held in high respect by the rest of the community. So it's nice to be able to say that and represent that to the future generations.

RCS: I agree. And I appreciate you saying that. Tulsa, you know, would be a different place without the involvement of some of these families, who, again, see their role partly exactly what you said, the concept of *Tikkun olam*, of repairing the world, a basic tenet of Judaism and partly is a way of giving back to a community that has been very good to us. When we're grateful, we try and help make other people as safe and secure as we are.

JE: Well, thank you for doing this follow-up interview. I enjoyed it, I know our visitors will enjoy hearing you.

RCS: Thank you, John, for making it possible.

JE: Yeah, we'll do another five years and see what happens.

RCS: I'm willing if you are.

JE: All right. And so shall I say, as I used to say on the radio when I concluded my program, "Shalom for now," I used to say.

RCS: You did. Thank you, Shalom.

JE: Shalom.

Chapter 18 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on VoicesofOklahoma.com.