

Houston Jewish History Archive at Rice University

Interviewee: Rabbi Sarah Fort

Interviewer: Dr. Joshua Furman

Date: December 1, 2020

PREFACE: Rabbi Sarah Fort is an associate rabbi at Congregation Beth Yeshurun in Houston, the largest Conservative synagogue in the United States. She grew up in Maryland and Virginia, and then studied Government and International Politics at George Mason University. She was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, part of the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, in 2017. Rabbi Fort began working at Beth Yeshurun in 2017 and was promoted from assistant rabbi to associate rabbi in 2021. She is married to Rabbi Ariel Sholklapper, who is the Director of the Jewish Mindfulness Center of Texas and the Rabbi at Congregation Beth El in Missouri City, Texas.

Rabbi Fort is currently the only female rabbi at Congregation Beth Yeshurun, and she describes the positive impact of female clergy in her interview. She also explains her own journey leading to the rabbinate, including her childhood and education. Rabbi Fort examines the impact Hurricane Harvey had on her community and how the storm and the Covid-19 crisis have both shaped her career. Finally, she describes the significance of the Covid-19 crisis for Congregation Beth Yeshurun and how she and the other clergy have adapted using Zoom, Facebook, and outdoor events to continue providing spiritual guidance to their synagogue members.

Transcript review by Sam Raphaelson, HJHA Intern

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

FURMAN: Hi, my name is Joshua Furman. I'm the curator of the Houston Jewish History Archive at Rice University. Today is December 1, 2020, and I'm here with Rabbi Sarah Fort, Assistant Rabbi, Congregation Beth Yeshurun. Rabbi Fort, how are you today?

FORT: I am good, how are you?

FURMAN: I'm doin' great. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us, and let's start just by telling us a little bit about your childhood and your family. Where'd you grow up?

FORT: I was, well, you know, not straightforward so much. I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, but we moved— in a very Jewish area, like very intensely Jewish. But we moved when I was like four to a little nothin' town in Maryland that, until recently, no one really had ever heard of and there were no Jews there, and that's really where I spent my childhood, which is a really interesting way to live.

FURMAN: What town is that?

FORT: It's Odenton.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: Yep, that's usually the response I get, people are like 'mhmm' 'cause I say, like, "Where you from?", I say "Maryland," and they, "Oh, like Bethesda or Silver Spring?", or like these very "Jewy" areas, like that is not where I am from. I'm from, like, it's kinda off of Chesapeake Bay, and it is not known for its Jewish community, 'cause there isn't really one there.

FURMAN: Save the Chesapeake.

FORT: Uh huh, I mean, I'm a fan.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: Big, big fan of the Chesapeake Bay. I have a lot of pride in, like, Maryland crab cakes and I've never had them before but I'm very proud of them for, you know, my compatriots.

FURMAN: You swear by them for those who will eat them.

FORT: I assume if you eat it they [inaudible] they're the best, that's what I've been told, so I will stand by that.

FURMAN: So then, tell us about, you know, growing up in Odenton, Maryland, in an area where there's not a lot of Jews. How did you, how did that affect your Jewish identity?

FORT: I think it made it really strong because my parents, my dad's from Chicago, my mom's from New York and they met in Israel, so you know, fairly Jewy, and then through trials and tribulations ended up in Odenton, Maryland and that's where me and my brother were raised and you have to like, you have to try really hard to have a Jewish home in the middle of nowhere when there are, where there are no Jews, you know, like that's a lot of effort, and we weren't, you know, the most observ-, we were the most observant people I knew, but like Shabbat was in our home and like *kashrut* [keeping kosher] was in our home, you know, and so like, I'm really, I was the only kid who growing up I knew who like didn't eat shellfish, who didn't eat pork, and that, you know, those kinds of things, we celebrated Hanukkah and not Christmas and, you know, Passover, not Easter and I think that just, because of all the effort my parents had to put in to raising us Jewish, you know, going to the nearest conservative shul was forty-five minutes the next county over and that's the one we went to for Hebrew school twice a week and then every single Shabbat of my life, and I think I just really, I loved being Jewish. It was such a strong part of my identity, 'cause you have to try so hard to, for us, to like feel Jewish and be Jewish and do Jewish, when there really aren't any other Jews around.

FURMAN: Yeah, yeah, that makes sense.

FORT: Then we moved to Virginia when I was like twelve, and there were a lot more Jews there, ironically.

FURMAN: Lot more Jews in Virginia.

FORT: Compared to the middle-of-nowhere Maryland, yeah.

FURMAN: Comparatively speaking, sure..

FORT: Lotta Jews in Northern Virginia.

FURMAN: Sure. And then when, when did the idea of becoming a rabbi first take root for you?

FORT: Oh man, I always, I'm such a jerk to be very honest, 'cause when, it's like the number one question people like to ask and when I was early on in rabbinical school people would ask me and I'd say, "Well, one night I was sleeping outside using a rock as a pillow and I had a dream that there was a ladder and angels are going up and down," but thing is like you say that people take it seriously, and I felt like a jerk because like I'm just kidding, I'm not, it's not true, so I stopped saying that.

FURMAN: I cribbed that story from somewhere else.

FORT: I heard it, it sounds, it should sound familiar. No, when I was really little I would, my dad, purely to needle me, he does not actually think this at all, but just to needle me, he would say, "Sarah, women can't be rabbis." And I was like, "Yeah, I can too, I can be a rabbi if I want," like and this, he doesn't believe that at all. He's like my number one fan, but he just stated it just to get that reaction. I mean, but I never actually really wanted to be a rabbi. I love being Jewish and I always felt really close with God. I've always felt close with God since I was a kid. But it didn't occur to me to be a rabbi until I was probably halfway through college, and I was really involved, our Hillel wasn't very active, I would say. We didn't have a big Jewish community, shocker, Northern Virginia, and at our, and at the school I went to, George Mason University—go Patriots.

FURMAN: Go Patriots.

FORT: Yeah, go Patri- you, yes, you would be a very pro-Patriots [inaudible], go Patriots. And I just kind of did a non-hostile takeover of the Hillel, like we're gonna have services, we're gonna have programming, we're gonna do all these things, and I just got, I just loved, you know, I had no budget, and I just, that's what I spent all my time doing, was Hillel. And I started teaching Hebrew school and I started being a youth group advisor for Kadima and, um, kind of a pre-Kadima [inaudible]. I was really seeing Jewish experiential education in action, and I just realized that, that's what I love.

FURMAN: Kadima is the, Kadima's part of the United Synagogue Youth [Organization affiliated with the Conservative Judaism movement].

FORT: Yeah, it's USY, it's like the middle school, it's like a middle school youth group for the kind of USY chain, you would be, start in Kadima and you go up. We also have like a kind of older elementary –

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: – um, pre-Kadima group just to kinda keep them in, keep them in the pipeline so eventually they go to the USY.

FURMAN: Right. Sure.

FORT: And that's what I love doing. I was like, I like curating people's Jewish journeys for them and with them. I was like, this is what I wanna do professionally, and I do not want a degree in government international politics with a minor in Islamic studies, as much as I love studying it, so I finished and I got my degree.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: And then now on to rabbinical school.

FURMAN: And so what, I always like to ask rabbis what Plan B was, so if you hadn't become a rabbi, what would you have done?

FORT: I'm so curious about what everyone else's answers are. I never had, I don't have Plan B, I never had a Plan B. Sorry if you can hear my child slamming toys over there.

FURMAN: That's okay, this is an authentic interview. It'll be a miracle –

FORT: It really is, it is.

FURMAN: – if we don't hear my child banging on the door in ten minutes, it'll be –

FORT: But I love like all your children so this is fine with me.

FURMAN: Yay! That's true, okay.

FORT: Yeah, no I, I don't have a Plan B. I remember hearing in rabbinical school once from a, it was a interfaith thing from a guy who was studying to be a priest, and he said that he'd been told this and I've kind of just held on to it ever since. He said, he'd been told if you can do anything else, if you can do anything else than this, you should do that other thing. Do that. And if this is it, like if this is what you have to do, then you gotta do it, and I think it's true. I tell

that to people who are interested in going to rabbinical school or interested in going to seminary. That's what I say, so I'm like, if you, if this is what you have to do.

FURMAN: Yeah, that's the same line I tell anyone who wants to become a[n] academic. If you can do literally anything else, right, if you're good at, if you're good at math, if you're, you know, if you, yeah, it's the same line. So what do you love most about being a rabbi, and what do you find the most challenging about your job?

FORT: Well, I kind of, I got into [inaudible] pulpit, [inaudible] being a rabbi in general, pulpit specifically because I love helping facilitating and curating people's Jewish journeys, wherever they need to go, God, Torah, Talmud, Israel, community, whatever it is that they're needing on their journey, I wanna be able to, to do that for them and with them and, I get to do that for all ages in the pulpit and, that's what I love. It's exactly what I wanted to get out of this and is what I get out of it and so that, that's a, that's a privilege. Every life cycle's a privilege, every class you get to teach, every, you know, sometimes the meetings are a little, you know, not as much fun, but even meetings can be fun 'cause I get to plan awesome programs which help facilitate people's Jewish journeys, so really it's all kinda related. That's the best part of this.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: You get to be there in people's lives at the beginning and at the end, and it's an enormous privilege to just be granted that kind of access to people's very private parts of their lives and to shepherd them through whatever stage they're goin' through, beginning, middle, end.

FURMAN: Right, all the stages.

FORT: All the stages, and we get to be there, that's amazing.

FURMAN: You know, for me, I actually considered very briefly a rabbinical career, and I, and I decided-

FORT: It's the only other thing you could do which was academic.

FURMAN: I decided that I could do something else which is why I'm here and why you're here. But I was a Jewish communal professional after college for a couple years and I loved it, I worked in Boston at a synagogue, not far from Brandeis University, and it was a great job. It was a great out-of-college job, but I think the challenge that, that any Jewish communal professional, and especially a rabbi faces, is that you're always on, right? You're always working, Shabbat you're working, holidays, you're working, and your partner is also a rabbi-

FORT: Yes, he is.

FURMAN: -so, how do you find that balance between sort of maintaining and finding space for your own sort of spirituality and your own religious needs while also serving, you know, in the role of a pulpit rabbi for a large congregation? How do you do that?

FORT: With great difficulty. It's kind of always evolving, 'cause I'm sure this is true for everyone, I don't think that we're special in this, but we're in the, you know, the new baby phase of life-he's a toddler now, but, you know, that on its own throws everything off-kilter, and then this job itself is also really interesting, so kind of constantly recalibrating and, and remembering what's important and what's missing, like have we, truly have we sat down and done a Shabbat dinner together in, how long has it been? Oh, we should probably do that, and you know, not trying to fit square pegs into round holes, like oh, like if I'm up here I'm leading *davening*, you know, we're praying. I, really do try to actually pray when I'm out there. I'd say ninety percent of the time I am actually saying those prayers for myself. And I don't know every other clergy, I don't, I can't speak for them, I can speak for me, but you know, sometimes, ten percent of the time, your brain is just somewhere else, like try to coordinate, you know, there's a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or there's a *aufruf* [Jewish ceremony where a groom and bride are called up to the Torah on the Shabbat before the wedding], or there's a [baby] naming, there's something that's going to happen, and like in my mind, whenever you're up there as clergy, and you see you kinda talked about this and touched on it, that you're, even if you really are praying, really are saying those words and you're meaning them for yourself, your brain is also doing other things, thinking like, "Oh, what does the cantor need, oh, what about the family, oh, what about like we need to end, oh, we're running over," or, which is perpetually an issue, you know, so you're just like, I'm saying the words, but also my brain is on boop, boop, boop, boop, so sometimes just I think giving yourself, to borrow from my Christian friends the grace to be like, you know what, maybe I'm not meaning all these words that I know that I'm saying, I'm meaning them, you know, in the sense of like I'm saying them in my mind on behalf of everybody, but I'm not meaning them for myself and not, 'cause, I'm tryin' to curate an experience up here of Shabbat for other people or whatever.

FURMAN: Right, right. You're sort of like the program director and the –

FORT: The emcee.

FURMAN: The emcee of it all and it's hard to balance, but you make it work. You make it work, and I'm sure it, like anything else it gets easier the more you do it, probably. So you've been the assistant rabbi at Beth Yeshurun since 2017, and Beth Yeshurun, for those of you watching this who don't know, is the largest conservative congregation in the United States, possibly in all of North America. Tell us a little bit about your community and what makes Beth Yeshurun so special?

FORT: It's, I mean, it's, it is big, like you said, it is, we have the largest Conservative shul definitely in America. I think there are, there's at least one other *shul* in Canada I know of that is I think at least the same size, I believe. But yeah, definitely in America we are the largest Conservative shul. I know I wanted a big *shul* when I was in school. I was looking for a big *shul*

to work in so I really just went straight to the top. I want the biggest. I just wanted, I wanted big, I didn't know I wanted it this big, but it worked. It's also unusual, and here is something that makes it special, in that Beth Yeshurun in some incarnation has existed for over a thou— like over a hundred years in some form or fashion it has existed for over a hundred years. That is, that's really old, you know, and in seventy-five years in this current incarnation, which is very old, like I know people my age who are, first of all, I know people in this, maybe just Houston, not just, but it's a Houston thing, that I know people who are, you know, fifth-generation American Jews, like that's not my family, that's sure as heck not my husband's family, you know, so to meet people who are five generations American, like, wow, that's crazy. And then on top of that, there are people who are fifth-generation Beth Yeshurun members, like the roots here go so deep and it's so, that is, that is a tie and a kinship to your community and to your *shul* that I've just not seen anywhere else, really, in America. It's so amazing and, and that creates a really, really special kind of community, and it is, like you said, it's very big and it kinda reminds me of, people say about L.A., you know, it's a really, really big city, so you have to find your village that you live in, and it kinda reminds me of that and that Beth Yeshurun is kinda like a big city, and you know, there are lots of villages within it, and they're all a little bit different and people find, like, their niche, they find their village within the greater Beth Yeshurun umbrella, and then as a rabbi my privilege is I get to travel to every single village, pretty cool.

FURMAN: So there's the, right, so there's the Museum Minyan [prayer quorum], lay-led group that I, that we sometimes are part of.

FORT: Mm hmm.

FURMAN: There's a chapel minyan, in the J.B. Greenfield Chapel and, sort of, other groups and, and yeah, I think it really is a diverse, you know, environment that Beth Yeshurun creates. Talk a little bit about, about your role at Beth Yeshurun, specifically as female clergy, as a role model to women and girls, at Beth Yeshurun and just in Conservative Judaism more broadly.

FORT: Well I am, yes I am the only woman rabbi there and, that's, I like it, everyone else that I've run into likes it, or they say, you know, "I wasn't sure at first, but now I, I like, I'm on board," and that actually makes me feel really good, to hear.

FURMAN: Hmm.

FORT: Knowing that the kids grow up and they see a woman, like I didn't grow up seeing women rabbis, no, and they've been ordained, women have been ordained in our movement since just before I was born, so theoretically I could have, but most women don't go into pulpit, and if they go into pulpit they don't stay in pulpit, so it's not such a common thing to see even now. Now, more than ever before. So knowing that kids grow up seeing men as rabbis and women as rabbis and it doesn't even occur to them that it would be wrong or unusual, that's really cool. And then anytime I get an email from a parent or a teacher saying, you know, "Oh, my daughter wants to wear a *kippah* [ritual head covering], where did you get yours?", and now our gift shop carries them, and I'm extremely proud about that, and like more women, more girls

are wearing, getting *tallit* [prayer shawl] when they are *bat mitzvah* and I'm like, yes, yes. Not saying don't do it if you don't wanna do it, but like, yay. I'm all for that. And seeing a woman wearing *tefillin* [phylacteries, I mean that's earth-shattering to some people.

FURMAN: Yeah, sure. Let's talk now about natural disasters.

FORT: I love natural disasters, and talking about natural disasters.

FURMAN: Yeah. We've seen our share of them, have we not?

FORT: You and I have seen our share of them from the same vantage point.

FURMAN: Yeah, quite literally actually, so you, you folks moved here in, I think what, early summer of 2017?

FORT: Yeah, I think in June, I think my contract starts in July, so June probably moved here.

FURMAN: June of 2017, right, and we were living in the same apartment building, at the time and it was just a couple months later that, in August of 2017, that Hurricane Harvey showed up, and, I'm just curious, you know, to hear your perspective as a newly-transplanted Houstonian at the time and a new clergy member, you know, thrust into just an unimaginably awful situation. What do you remember about that time, about what was happening at Beth Yeshurun, about the needs of your community and I mean, what a difficult way to kind of hit the ground running in your first job out of rabbinical school? What do you remember about Harvey?

FORT: I remember, I remember losing power and water, remember that losing water was worse, I remember that was a good lesson to learn from that. I remember thinking it was so... odd. People kept apologizing to me 'cause of, you know, what you were saying, that, "Oh and you're just starting, and this is so, I'm so sorry, you start your, your first job out of rabbinical school like this," and I'll say "Well, okay, you literally lost your house and, and both cars, so I feel like if someone gonna say sorry, it should be me to you, you know."

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: People felt bad for me and I remember thinking like, "Wow, first of all how, just how nice of a person you have to be to say I'm sorry for you, and I'm like, I'm fine," you know, and that's the kinda people who live here, it's just legitimately, genuinely nice people, just amazing. And I don't know any different. I didn't know any different. It's not like I have, you know, twenty years in the rabbinate under my belt and suddenly, oh my gosh, my life's upside down and I don't know. We hadn't really even finished unpacking so I don't know, but you had to deal with it, you had to, and from my perspective and both our perspectives, was, you know, we didn't have water and we didn't have power, but we also didn't flood, so we have to go out every day and help put the synagogue back together and help the community and our families, and that's what, other people had the same perspective, you know.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: Like, “Oh, I didn't flood so I have to go out there and I do everything I can for everyone else.” Or, “I only lost a car, I mean, oh, I lost my cars but I need, like how do I help my friends remediate their home? How do I help my neighbors,” how do I, you know, and, 'cause it was just devastating, you know, a quarter of our families flooded, a quarter of our families, that's massive.

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: It's massive, and –

FURMAN: Yeah, and the building too, I mean, Beth Yeshurun, the building flooded.

FORT: Yes, it did. We got, I mean, throughout, eight to ten inches, at least, to about four feet in Barg, 'cause it's a, instead of an incline, the theater sank.

FURMAN: The Barg Sanctuary, right.

FORT: You bet, the Barg Sanctuary, 'cause there is a, it's very large and there's an incline down, so, you know, you don't expect to be going into the office wearing your work boots and jeans and gloves, but like work gloves, but then, you know, –

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: You are, I don't know, and we, we're really in the best position to be helping, both my husband and I, 'cause you know, we didn't flood so we're like, “Well, what do we need to do,” and so it was just a massive coordinating effort for, how do we help our families, how do we help our congregants, and I didn't really know anyone at that point, I mean, I knew so few people, it was like, “Okay, how do I, how do I help these people, how do I get people what they need, how do I hook them up with other resources that can help them more than I can. How do we put this synagogue back together?” And I remember, you know, we need to get boxes 'cause you just have, thousands of *chumashim* [printed books of the Torah] out and *siddurim* [prayer books] and then they all need to be, you know, buried and it's, the carpet all has to come up and the walls all need to be punched out. You have to cut 'em out twice as high as they flood, so two foot of wall everywhere, the entire *shul* has to be cut out and then, it's just, and that's just the physical recovery, you know, the emotional, you know, mental recovery, it goes a lot, a lot longer. I think it was like a year later, I think we were back, we were back in the building, and we had religious school dismissal on a Sunday, and usually the kids sit outside and like their parents come up and they just get dismissed from there, but it was raining, so instead of dismissing from outside, we kept them in the cafeteria of the day school, where the religious school also meets, and so the kids are just kind of sitting in groups, but also kinda running amok as kids do, and it was, it started raining a lot and then it was raining like torrential,

like sideways raining. It was just, it was, like we, all the adults, I actually happened to just be there because I was doing a program and we were all just kinda looking out the windows, 'cause Reiches [Hall], the cafeteria, is really, one whole wall is just windows. You can see everything and you just, it just sideways, you know, unbelievable, and you see as soon as that big [thunder] clap, you see with some of the kids, they immediately just become agitated and someone started crying and there was this one parent who came to pick up her daughter who was talking to another little girl, and the other little girl was just in tears, like could not stop crying, and the mom was trying, she was helping, she was trying to help, she goes, "Oh, don't worry, it'll stop, the rain's gonna stop soon, don't worry, don't worry, don't worry, the rain will stop," and this little girl's just crying, saying, "It's not gonna stop, it's never gonna stop, it's never gonna stop." And that's trauma.

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: That is trauma, and how do you not have trauma from that? I have people whose kids, I have kids that had to swim out of their homes, you know, and, and so, you know, a lot of the helping that I did and the other clergy did and so many other people did, it was, is in helping people heal, you know, and people healed and are still healing, it's a process.

FURMAN: Yeah, it's a process. Yeah.

FORT: 'Cause what else can you do, like you, resilience, I don't think, is pretending like you're fine when you're not, I think it's, resilience is, you know, it's healing from the hurt that you had, so you *can* go on, and that's what I saw people here being resilient. Physically recovering and then working on, like, healing from a really big trauma.

FURMAN: Yeah, and I'm sure, you know, leaning on you and your colleagues for some pretty intense pastoral support, I'm sure, in a lotta cases. I know, you know, for me, I have a lotta awful memories of that time, but that's really, the moment that the archive was born in a sense, and I, you know, for, in terms of thinking about a silver lining, I remember sitting with you in Stein Hall.

FORT: Mm hmm.

FURMAN: You know, wet papers and photographs.

FORT: I know, that smell.

FURMAN: Everything's there, and it smelled terrible, yeah, just like your nose, –

FORT: Yeah, like gets into your nose, the smell.

FURMAN: My eyes are stinging right now even thinking about it.

FORT: Just thinking about all that mold, like mildew.

FURMAN: But the energy that you poured into the tasks of going through all of those Beth Yeshurun records and photographs, at a community that you'd only been part of, you know, for a couple of months, but you really dedicated yourself to that task and helped us and a whole big crew of community volunteers and students got that stuff organized, and we managed to rescue a lot of it, thanks in no small part to you. And it's not like you had nothing else to do, you know, those –

FORT: I like to be busy.

FURMAN: – so, so we really, really appreciate it. So –

FORT: It was [inaudible].

FURMAN: – so we survived Harvey, we survived it individually, we survived it communally, and, you know, nobody could have imagined, Purim night March 2020, what was about to happen. I think we were at Beth Yeshurun that night, I think we saw you there.

FORT: Yeah.

FURMAN: And –

FORT: That was the last kind of quasi-normal event we had.

FURMAN: That was, that was it, so tell us now about what you remember, thinking back about March. When did it start to become clear to you and the other clergy that things might not be able to carry on as usual?

FORT: We had been, there, you know, we all watched the news, and we watched the news then, and even I had been part of some conversations, I remember talking to, some of the other clergy and board, of saying like, you know, we should start talking about what happens if this all has to shut down, 'cause you know, no one, no one knew anything about what was goin' on at that point, and so we started sort of talking about it and even at Purim, you know, we didn't, nobody was really, I think, changing numbers or anything or wearing ma— like no one, wearing masks, you weren't wearing, like, that kind of mask, but, we did not let people serve themselves. We just did the big *hamantaschen/sundae* bar and it was not “serve yourself,” and we had the kitchen staff serve, which is like, 'cause you know no one knew really what to do, I mean, we weren't really being told what to do and that was really the last kind of, you, we didn't even have like a regular Shabbat after that. After that we started changing sizes of people being allowed in, you know, like how many people do we allow and, and do we restrict them based on age, we didn't know. Do we, how do we even do that, how would we ask people, well if you have a pre-existing condition, what do we know, what kinds of- like, such a lack of information at that time. But we did start talking about it pretty early on. It was a process of clergy and the board, the

executive committee, especially, they were meeting weekly, they might still be meeting weekly, actually, I don't know.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: Doctors, you know, obviously we're a synagogue, so we have no shortage of doctors. All sorts of doctors, pediatricians, infectious disease, you name it, we have it, so thank God we have access to a lot of doctors, and also, the city, Mayor Turner and Judge Hidalgo, have weekly calls in, especially in those early days was the only real source of reliable information at a governmental level that we were getting that, of like, in terms of, you know, rules for us, because we didn't know, are we not allowed to have certain numbers, how do we do this, what are the other clergy doing, so they had these meetings for Houston clergy, so we were on, it's everything, every kind of clergy you could imagine, we were all on these calls and they would have the folks from Houston Medical Center talk to us about the trends they were seeing and, you know, what kinds of rules were gonna be put in place, and restrictions that would affect us, and a decision would be made in terms of what we had to do to keep, our folks safe, and also kind of getting ideas from other people, like, "How are you doing this, what size church do you have? Oh, this is a really big one, this is a really small one," you know, things depend on how much space you have, and how much physical space you have, not just how many people you have.

FURMAN: Right, and Beth Yeshurun has a lot of both people and space –

FORT: We do have a lot of people, we do have a lot of, we have very, I mean, that [inaudible] made it easier, I would say, 'cause we have these very physically large rooms and even when you pare it down, you know, it's ten people or twenty or not any more than forty people in the room that seats six hundred. It's cavernous. We have never had anyone transmit coronavirus in *shul*.

FURMAN: Right. But I wanna kinda start with the earliest phase. So there was probably a decision, if I'm remembering right, to just close Beth Yeshurun entirely, I think, probably at some point in mid-March, no?

FORT: We, yeah, there were a few, there were a couple weeks where we, there might have been only one, there might have been maybe, you know, like two or so weeks where we didn't close, but we asked people, you know, only *b'nai mitzvah* families [families of boys or girls celebrating a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*], you know, 'cause we have *b'nai mitzvah*, we have usually at least two every week.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: And so, and these kids are studying, so what are you gonna do, tell them, like, "Oh, just pause, you can't, like, do it next week," so that's been a whole balancing act.

FURMAN: 'Cause they're not only just studying, but they're learning their particular weekly –

FORT: They're learning that *parsha* [weekly Torah portion], and so, you know, you can't just do it in a week or in a month, 'cause they, it's all the wrong stuff, so, we were restricting it, asking people like, "Oh, don't come if you, you know, think you shouldn't." [Baby cries]

FURMAN: He's setting you straight.

FORT: He was, you know, he was alive for all that, so he knows. So yeah, we, we did have, we did that for a while, and then eventually really the county/city, it was like no, we're, shut it down, so.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: And I think we actually shut down before it was imposed on us, I think, –

FURMAN: Yeah. So the first major holiday to come along after that point was Passover, so what was Passover like for you this year, both, sort of, just personally in terms of your preparations, shopping and then as a clergy member, right, I mean, does Beth Yeshurun usually host a second *seder* [communal Passover meal]?

FORT: I was supposed to do the second *seder* this year. I've never had a normal *seder* as a rabbi, normal Passover *seder*. First year was Harvey, which was kind of cool, we were in Freedman-Levit [Hall], it had no furniture in it, so that was kind of fun.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: But that was not normal, and then the year after that I had a baby like three days before Passover so that was, and then, you know, this year, so, not saying it's my fault but, it might be, just saying. And if walks like a duck and quacks like a duck –

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: So yeah, that was, we usually do a second *seder*, I was supposed to lead it, and we did Zoom seders so I had like a hundred, hundred and fifty parents and kids in my apartment. My little two-bedroom apartment for Passover.

FURMAN: You packed 'em in.

FORT: I did, and then forty-five minutes later we had young professionals.

FURMAN: Back to back?

FORT: Yeah, well, 'cause it's all on Zoom.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: So I never, you know, I wouldn't have that kind of access to people, and people would have not had that kind of access to like, me in my home, but you know, we did it on Zoom.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: Kinda cool.

FURMAN: So obviously there are drawbacks to that, I mean, you can't really gauge people's reactions, people could have, you know, their video cameras turned off, they could be looking at Facebook while you're talking or leading some of the prayers.

FORT: What?

FURMAN: Not just hypothetically speaking, but you know, what were some of the highlights of that experience for you? You sort of hinted at it a second ago about –

FORT: Positives. I mean, yeah, it is definitely challenging for sure, there are challenges. But, you know, we have, we are accessible to, we have access to people more than before. If you are physically not able to come to Beth Yeshurun, or if you don't live in Houston or, you know, you can come to all of our services and all of our programming via the Internet, and that's really cool. High Holidays. I mean, are you asking about High Holidays later, should I wait until you ask about High Holidays?

FURMAN: We can, we can jump from Passover to Rosh Hashanah, there's no law that says we can't, that I'm aware of.

FORT: I don't think so. Because it, I mean, I would say that it was a big plus for us is that we got to be accessible to more people in more ways than any other year, and it, yet, are there drawbacks? A hundred percent, a hundred percent there are drawbacks. There are also upsides, which is people, you know, I pre-recorded all of the pre-K services and the grade school services, the teen services were all pre-recorded, and you know, if you have a kid, you don't have to worry about, "Oh, we have to make it to *shul* on time and we're gonna miss it," 'cause it's only half an hour, not an issue. It's pre-recorded, you can play it whenever your kid's up from their nap and had their snack and that's, you can press pause, you know, that's really helpful.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: And –

FURMAN: I can see how, for parents, you know, that would be great. But as the rabbi, as the clergy member, though, and I'm not a rabbi obviously, but as someone who does a lot of teaching and lecturing, we feed off the reactions of the people in the room, right? You know, we make eye contact, and laughter when you tell a joke or, you know, things like that, and is that hard for you, has that been difficult, to kind of lose the face-to-face aspect of clergy work?

FORT: That's the worst part. That's, that's the worst part. There are a lot of upsides, the accessibility and the, having more people be able to access our services, etc., etc., and the worst part is you can't see, you see this much [holds hands up to face, covering mouth], but am I happy, am I unhappy, who knows?

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: It's just two eyes, kind of blankly staring back at you, and that's from like, you know, the ten or fifteen people in the room and you, it's important that we do our services, since we're still doing indoor services in Barg Sanctuary, [which] seats nine hundred when the partition is in, so the smallest you can make that space, it seats nine hundred. And it's max, you have forty people in there, and even with forty people, even with four hundred people it feels empty. But when you look out, you know, from our vantage point, I still don't think it looks different for you if you're just sitting there, if you're watching, you know, the *bimah* [altar] looks like the *bimah*, but for us to look out and see nobody, relatively speaking, nobody, you know, and the people you do see, you see half their face and not the expressive part. So it's, I mean, it's very, I think we're used to it at this point. It was more, disheartening earlier on, when it was new. I feel like, I feel bad for the *b'nai mitzvah* families, 'cause that's like their only experience of being up there is like that, and you know, at this point we're so many months into it, we're like, this is normal. For them I feel bad 'cause it's, you know, they're used to, they can't see all their friends and the families, and there's just a little eye in the sky, like I tell the kids, "Look at the eye in the sky, the camera," and like, "Go wave, that's where grandma is."

FURMAN: Yeah, she's watchin'. And is there, like, a moment or two that stands out, I mean, you've done *b'nai mitzvahs*, you've done probably funerals, you've done, I know today you said you officiated at a *bris* [circumcision], I think you were also part of a conversion class that did their immersion in Galveston in the Gulf of Mexico as opposed to a *mikvah* [Jewish ritual bath]? I'm just sort of curious, are there moments that stand out that you will remember in a year, or five years, or ten years from this time?

FORT: Well, definitely the class, we had a conversion class, and it was a fairly large class and you know, most, I, every other time, they, after they do their *beit din* [meeting with a Jewish rabbinical court to receive authorization to convert to Judaism] and their, how do you say it, rabbinic tribunal? What a term. They would then go to the *mikvah*, the community *mikvah*, which is, it's a community *mikvah*, housed at UOS [United Orthodox Synagogues of Houston] and we didn't have that option, so we took, well, we didn't take, we said "Everybody," like, well, half the class, cause it was such a big class," let's all meet, we can, half at a time, meet down, in Galveston," and they did their conversion *mikvah* in the Gulf of Mexico and that's, I got so many

calls and texts and Facebook messages from my colleagues around the country saying, “Oh my gosh, how did you do this, you know, we had people who are, need to convert, you know, people are getting married, babies are about to be born and we need to, we need to do conversions.” And so that was, I could tell that really hit people, so it didn't seem weird at the time, I don't know, 'cause everything's weird now, so few things really stand out.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: So that was really cool. That, I told you, there's give and take. That's the upside, and then you know, you do a funeral and there's ten people there, and not because there wouldn't be hundreds and all that. I've done funerals where someone said, you know, “Oh, hundreds of people would have come to my mother's funeral, you know, she was so beloved in the community, and this feels like we're robbing her of this,” and there's nothing that I can do to make *that* better.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: So that's tough. And of course, watching like, so many congregants have coronavirus, and you see [people with] coronavirus in the hospital and Facetime them. And a couple of these have died of COVID.

FURMAN: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Yeah. That's another dimension of pastoral work that, you know, I think a lot of people don't pay attention to if you're not a rabbi, right, is how you reach out to these individuals who are sick, to their loved ones and their families, so you know, doing hospital visitations over Zoom.

FORT: Oh yeah. Doing, there's something, *Vidui*, the kind of confessional, it's supposed to be the confessional prayer, the final rites, so to speak, of Jewish tradition. I've done *Vidui* before, I've done it plenty of times, and you do it at the bedside of the person who's, you know, they're at *that* stage, where they're imminently going to pass and to do that over the phone, like on speaker, it's [long pause] very disconnecting.

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: And, because you're, it's not just saying words in a book, you know, I got my little book with all my stuff in it and I'm not just saying words in a book when I'm there, when I'm being there in that moment with this person who's goin' through the life transition out, and to not be there with them, I don't know. You just kinda *hope* it does something, 'cause you can't see anyone's face, you can't hear anything, you can't –

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: Hope for the best.

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: In terms of if it resonates.

FURMAN: Yeah, but, I mean, you know, yes, you try to remind yourself that you're doing the best you can and you're helping people the only way that you know how. There's no rabbinic playbook for this, I assume. I assume like, last semester of graduate school, of rabbinical school they didn't say –

FORT: Well, it's sorta like grad school.

FURMAN: “Okay, guys, it's pandemic week. Here's what we would do.”

FORT: Right. This is what you do in a natural— oh yeah. We had one class in one, did one session of a one semester about, like, talking to the media, it was minorly helpful when you had to talk to the media.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: Somewhat helpful if they're, you're watching, sorry.

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: Yeah, it's, I mean, –

FURMAN: On a, on –

FORT: We're built for this though, like Jews, Judaism is built for *this*, this is what we are made for. We're, you know, thank God for the easier times, but we're, I think uniquely situated for times of strife and for life not looking the way you want it to and having to, you know, what better practice for having to restrict yourself and not being able to, you know, do the things that you wanna do the way you wanna do them than Judaism, which teaches you to not eat the things you want even if you really want to do them, you know, or not do things on certain days and certain times, even if you really wanna do them. Like we're good at restricting ourselves, so like, “Oh, I have to wear a mask, oh, I can't go to this place, oh, I can't eat at— okay, well, as a Jew I've been practicing for this literally my whole life.”

FURMAN: Interesting, wow. Right. That, and I think also the, you know, Judaism is very adaptable, I mean, I guess you could argue Judaism has been in survival mode for –

FORT: Yeah, this is what we're made for, we survive, this is what we do, we have literally all, why do you think we're like one of the only ones still around? Thousands of years.

FURMAN: Right.

FORT: This is what we do, we adapt.

FURMAN: Yeah, yeah. Do you think, you've done thousands of programs, lectures, you know, story time for kids...oh, there was something that you guys did for *Simchat Torah* which was really unique. Can you talk about that?

FORT: That's so funny, people are so excited about that. Yeah, we did a, I didn't come up with the term, I'm very mad I did not 'cause it's very much something I would do. We called them Haka— “HaCARfot,” the” HaCARfot,” instead of *Hakafot* [dancing with the Torah scrolls], HaCARfot.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: I did not come up with that, so mad. You know, instead of, usually *Simchat Torah's* a big thing and we have usually three different, you know, *Simchat Torah*, celebrations happening at Beth Yeshurun and this big, big one, you know, we have got, all the kids come, 'cause we do like a sweet *Hakafa* so one of the, how do you say it in English, one of the times walkin' around, there's candy and so the kids get like, huge bags, like they collect candy all, this huge walk-around they get so much candy, so much candy, they love it.

FURMAN: Yeah, Halloween has nothing, has *nothing*—

FORT: Has nothing on Simchat Torah.

FURMAN: —on Simchat Torah at Beth Yeshurun.

FORT: Nothing on Simchat Torah. It's true, it's true, and we could not do that this year, but it's Houston so the weather, you know, unless it's middle of summer is actually very nice, like even today was like pretty nice, like fifty-something, and you can do stuff outside, and so we did outdoor *Simchat Torah* with people, and they kind of had their pre-assigned, they had a parking space, and that was like their family spot and they could like bring their own food and do whatever, 'cause you're in your own spot and you're outdoors, and we had a stage set up and the cantor read Torah, and we did *hakafot* in a[n] electric golf cart. All the rabbis took a turn, so I took a turn driving around doing a *hakafah*, bringing the Torah around, and I drive, I was driving and I had, you know, the Torah next to me, and I was like holding it 'cause I was afraid one good bump would send it over, I didn't want to-

FURMAN: Yeah, you'd be a little nervous about –

FORT:- I was very nervous, like I don't wanna be the rabbi on whose watch, on whose drive, the Torah...and everyone has to pass, so I didn't want that to be me, and I made it and it was fun, it was really fun.

FURMAN: That was amazing, that's a good one. I'm curious if you think, you know, will any of the innovations that you and your colleagues have had to, made in response to COVID-19 last beyond this pandemic? I mean, it's, today is December 2020, we're hearing in the news that perhaps a vaccine could be a few months away, maybe even a few, a few weeks away. So you mentioned, you know, that one of the advantages of this, of this situation as awful as it's been, is that people from all over Houston, all over the world have been able to find, to find Beth Yeshurun. Do you think that, you know, synagogues will continue to offer programming on Zoom, will continue to, you know, broadcast funerals and Shiva *minyans* on Zoom or are we all kinda Zoomed out and that, that stuff will go away whenever this is over?

FORT: I think the answer, I can't speak for synagogues everywhere, I don't know, but I think the answer for us is obviously yes. It's both, you know, I think, first of all we were already streaming services, so for us it's not like a huge, we have to start streaming, 'cause we were already streaming, so we didn't have to worry, "Oh, we don't have any," no, we had cameras, we were already built for that, we just had to, you know, add more channels, essentially. And so we're still gonna stream our programs and we're still gonna stream our services and I think a lot of our programs, it's still gonna be streamed, ones that, you know, *can* be, you know, I think that so many people got access to Beth Yeshurun, so many more people started looking for Internet, like a virtual access to a synagogue, and found us, both, you know, people here in Houston, people all over the country, all over the world, you know, and I don't think we're gonna cut off that access, and the people here who, you know, maybe wouldn't normally come but if they can leave it up Saturday morning, have services while they're taking care of their kids and doing the morning routine, we're not gonna stop that and they're not gonna stop. I think, though, that people want and need to be around each other again. I think people are gonna, when it's safe to do so, they're gonna wanna do it and we, once it's safe to do so we will be more than happy to welcome them back, as well, and I mean, Judaism is such a communal religion, we don't, we don't practice it, you're not meant to practice Judaism solely only ever in your little, in your house, like on your little island. We're not built for this, we are a communal people and it's unnatural for us to kind of not be communally based, either with other families in other homes or at the synagogue, and so I think it's gonna be a continuation of the virtual and the innovation and also, I think they may go back to the things that we love, as well. It'll be both, it can be both.

FURMAN: Well, I for one, can't wait. That sounds, that sounds really good.

FORT: That sounds pretty exciting.

FURMAN: So we've checked "hurricane" off of our disaster bingo card and now we've checked off "pandemic." What's next?

FORT: I don't, hopefully nothing.

FURMAN: Alien invasion.

FORT: At this point, it would be not, not surprising, you're like –

FURMAN: Like, okay, why not?

FORT: Couldn't be worse, right? Oh, I mean, everytime you say that though.

FURMAN: No, don't say that. Don't say that. Well, this has been a really insightful conversation, Rabbi, thank you so much for your time and for all the work and energy that you've poured into, everything it is that you do for this, for this community, you know, during these past several months. I know that it's not easy, and you've given us-

FORT: Ariel says I'm a disaster rabbi. Not that I'm a disaster as a rabbi, but that my rabbinate has always been catastrophe. It's Harvey or it's been coronavirus, so –

FURMAN: Sure.

FORT: I don't know, I don't, I feel blessed every day I get to do my job.

FURMAN: Mm hmm.

FORT: So, whether that's Harvey or pandemic, or none of the above, hopefully none of the above more often than not.

FURMAN: Or maybe just, like, January, you know?

FORT: Yeah, just like, a regular old January.

FURMAN: Yeah.

FORT: Or one, yeah, just something pedestrian like that, something boring. That'll be weird for me, I've never really had boring before.

FURMAN: Right. No.

FORT: But, no, I love it. I love it, it's fine. It'll all— "*Gam Zeh Ya'avor.*"

FURMAN: *Gam Zeh Ya'avor*, this too will pass. Rabbi Fort, thank you so much. This has been great.

FORT: Thank you.

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