

INTRODUCTION TO TAPED INTERVIEWS WITH RABBI RICHARD ROSENTHAL

During both interviews, I met with Rabbi Richard Rosenthal in his study at Temple Beth El. Both times we met on a February afternoon, misty and gray as February days in Tacoma tend to be. For those intimidated by books and the clutter of a scholar, rabbi's study would not be a comfortable place. But for me, extremely at ease both with books and clutter, it was a cozy environment with an ambiance of timeless wisdom and tradition. Besides, I had been in this study many times over the years, plaguing Rabbi with questions and questions to the questions. So these interviews were a deja vu experience, only this time I had a tape recorder.

Physically, Rabbi Rosenthal is in his early sixties, with a full beard, salt and pepper hair, and twinkling blue eyes behind strong prescription glasses. If he had white hair and was a little plumper, Rabbi would resemble a Jewish Santa Claus. His intelligence, humor, and basic goodness are apparent at once.

Several times during each session the interviews were interrupted by Rabbi's "business as usual." Once a man came to Temple needing \$125 to take a bus to California. Rabbi made a phone call and arranged for the funds and the transportation. Whether the man in need was Jewish or not, I don't know. What I do know is that it made no difference.

Another time our interview ended when Rabbi's next appointment arrived. This time the visitors were an almost-thirteen-year-old girl with her mother, who were conferring with Rabbi about the girl's impending Bat Mitzvah. I could feel the girl's

fear, excitement, and anticipation. It is no small thing to address the congregation, in Hebrew yet, for a person of any age. I could not help wondering how many Bat and Bar Mitzvahs, how many weddings, how many naming ceremonies for babies, how many funerals Richard Rosenthal has presided over in the past 36 years as Tacoma's only rabbi. His tenure has been the longest of any rabbi yet in the one hundred years of organized Judaism in Tacoma. Here is a man who seems equally comfortable with God and with humanity.

NARDAH LEAH FOX
TLSUS 437

**TRANSCRIPT OF TAPED INTERVIEW WITH RABBI RICHARD
ROSENTHAL OF TEMPLE BETH EL, TACOMA, WASHINGTON.
FEBRUARY 17, 1992**

Nardah Fox: *My name is Nardah Leah Fox, and the subject of my interview is Rabbi Richard Rosenthal of Temple Beth El, Tacoma. We're going to be talking about some subjects relating to the local Jewish community. Rabbi, when and how did the Jewish community begin [in Tacoma]?*

Rabbi Rosenthal: The organized community began with the incorporation of Temple Beth Israel in 1892, but obviously there was some Jewish life in Tacoma before that, but we don't know very much about it. There were Jewish people in Tacoma around the time of the Civil War. A man named Isaac Pincus lived in Steilacoom then...

NE: *So there have been Jewish people in this area about as long as there have been people...*

RR: Sure, but there weren't very many until the 1890s when there were enough to incorporate and very quickly build a synagogue.

"When" and "how" are all the same ... there were new people here and that's how they did it ... they just got together. Whatever the critical mass was, I don't know, but I would guess that there were twenty or thirty families. There weren't that many people in Tacoma [in 1892]. Go through the Tacoma City Directory and find who some of them were ... look at the businesses that were downtown at that time. Many of the [Jewish] people had businesses

in downtown Tacoma. Everything was much more concentrated [geographically] ... after the railroad came here, after the state became the state ... anyway, those people formed a congregation.

NE: *Where was Temple Beth Israel located?*

RR: They built a building shortly after that [founding the congregation] at North 9th or 10th and I Streets. It's now an empty lot right up from the County-City Building, not too far from where the Armory is on Yakima [Street].

NE: *It was a good, central location in those days, close to downtown Tacoma.*

RR: Right ... probably what today is Hilltop was the residential neighborhood of Tacoma. I'm not quite sure of the configuration of Tacoma [in 1892], but actually it wasn't too long after that that people moved at least as far as Proctor Street, and into the North End. Parts of the North End were developed by a guy named Mason, I think ... but [one person] did not develop all of it. The development was pretty patchy. People developed Pt. Defiance pretty early along the way, and there were streetcar lines, so it was all kind of tied together. And the [Asarco] smelter must go back [to that time] ... Ruston, in some form, must have started about then, but I wouldn't want to give you [specific] dates, since I'm really not sure about them.

NE: *Were the first [Jewish] people primarily business people?*

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BB: I would think so. I think what brought people out here was opportunity, and the only opportunities that people could think of was to go into some kind of business. There are a number of people that I remember hearing about, who I don't know of directly, who came here and opened stores, small stores, because they didn't have much capital. There was a man here that I met years ago--he died about twenty years ago--who came here a little bit after [1892]. He came, as did some of the other people to this area, on his way to the Klondike ... the Klondike Gold Rush. And as he looked around Tacoma he decided that he could make more money supplying people who were going to the Klondike, rather than going to the Klondike himself.

NE: *I understand that there was a depression in the 1890s.*

BB: Right. That's what caused the discontinuity. That's why we don't know [very much about the individuals who made up the first Jewish families--many of them moved away]. Also, according to Murray Morgan, when Tacoma acted against the Chinese population and forced all of the Chinese people out of the port area where they were living, that had such a negative effect on the reputation of Tacoma, that [it] was the decisive event that sent Seattle on its course and Tacoma on a secondary course. Before that, it was up for grabs to see which one would be the bigger city.

NE: *Do you think that the expulsion of the Chinese ... had some bearing on whether the Jewish people came here to settle too? That perhaps Tacoma had the reputation of being a bigoted city?*

BB: No, I don't think so. [The expulsion of the Chinese] had a negative effect that kept everybody out to some extent ... how much, I just don't know. The feeling against the Chinese was pretty universal, unfortunately, in Seattle and Tacoma. [However] in Tacoma they did something, while in Seattle they just talked and probably yelled a lot, so they had some restraints. In Tacoma, the restraints broke down. In Tacoma, Jews included, probably thought the Chinese should get out of here, because they were taking people's jobs away. That's a part of the racism of that period, and I imagine it was pretty universal among white people.

NE: *Were there any documented cases or incidents that you know of where the Jewish people encountered anti-semitism in this area?*

BB: No, I don't think so. There's no story that anyone remembers [that has been passed down].

NE: *Getting back to Temple Beth Israel, exactly one hundred years ago, was that congregation Orthodox or Reform?*

BB: It was Reform [Judaism]. That's because the 1890s was fairly late; the Reform movement was very strong in America at that point. [Also,] most of the people who came to the Northwest weren't immigrants; they were people who had been Americanized somewhere else. They came from, I would guess, San Francisco...

...In the 1890s the railroad didn't come to Tacoma yet, so people usually came to Tacoma from Portland or San Francisco or Vancouver BC. When they wanted some Jewish connections in those early days ... the metropolis of the west coast was San Francisco.

Later on, when the railroads were finished, it all changed. People travelled [to and from] Milwaukee, Chicago, and the East Coast. Some immigrant people came here later on, too. When Eastern European immigrants came, then they wanted something other than Reform Judaism. By the 1890s, certainly by the turn of the century, there was an Orthodox minyan that met in the back of someone's store, but they didn't organize an Orthodox congregation until 1912.

NE: *What was the name of the Orthodox Synagogue?*

BB: It was called Talmud Torah. They bought an old church somewhere on Tacoma Avenue and made it into a synagogue.

NE: *Would you say that the Orthodox population was always smaller than the Reform population?*

BB: Probably. But you know, you're talking about a few families; you're not talking about a lot of people. When the depression occurred in the 1890s the population went down and remained down until 1917 when Camp Lewis was built...[With] a new influx of military, it created a lot of opportunities for people to come to Tacoma, so you had a whole bunch of people who came here then. But I don't know what the [exact] figures are. If we tripled the [Jewish] population, it still wouldn't be a very large number of people, but it brought in a greater variety of people. The Orthodox congregation was always somewhat smaller than the Reform congregation, however.

NE: *How long did the Talmud Torah [congregation] last?*

BB: In 1960 Talmud Torah and Temple Beth Israel merged. Talmud Torah became a Conservative congregation in 1936, I think, and changed its name to Temple Sinai, and in 1960 those congregations, Sinai and Beth Israel, became Temple Beth El.

NE: *Was the [merging of the congregations] because of the numerical strength of combining the two?*

BB: When they merged, there was about 150 families total, and it had been impractical up to then [to maintain two congregations] but up till then the difference [between Conservative and Reform theology] was too large to bridge. [In 1960] they were able to negotiate coming together and to have a large enough congregation to make it viable ... There were rabbis all during that period [since 1892] but never any one rabbi over a long period of time. But in 1940 or '41, the Reform Temple hired a full time rabbi; he left to go to the chaplaincy in World War II, and came back, and from that time on the Reform Temple always had a full time rabbi. The Orthodox rabbis in Tacoma kept changing; they didn't have enough funds to maintain a full time rabbi ... they paid very low salaries. So rabbis came here for a year or two and left ... I know of five or six rabbis who passed through Tacoma in the [nineteen] forties and fifties. When [the Orthodox congregation] became Conservative, they tried to hire a full time rabbi, but nobody stayed here very long. [In 1960] they took and combined the resources of both congregations ... that led to the [construction] of this building [Temple Beth El]. The congregations sold the previous two buildings [Temples Sinai and Beth Israel, and combined the funds toward Beth El.] ... In 1915 or

1916 the Reform Temple sold its building and met in a hall for a while, looking ahead [to planning a new synagogue] ... but didn't build a new building until 1920, on the corner of North 14th and J Streets.

NE: *And that building--does it still exist?*

BB: That building is still there. It has had a steeple added to it; it's a church now. You can see it if you want to. Meanwhile, the Orthodox congregation bought a lot at 4th and I [Streets] by Wright's Park. They built the bottom part of it in the early [nineteen] twenties; they built the building in two stages, finishing it in 1929, which was not a great time--and both of these buildings were sold when we moved to this building [Temple Beth El]. The one that was sold to the Apostolic faith is still a church; the other was sold to the blood bank next to [Tacoma General] hospital and it's now a parking lot. It faces Wright's Park.

NE: *Do you see this as a liberation of the Jews of Tacoma--from a small Orthodox congregation to Conservative [in 1937] to merging with a Reform [congregation in 1960]?*

BB: It was part of the same tendencies as American Jews as a whole, except that Tacoma was never large enough consistently to maintain an Orthodox population, certainly not in the post-World War II period. Originally, Tacoma had some resources; in the early years there was always somebody who was a *shohut* [Kosher slaughterer and butcher] of animals, but it all disappeared. Orthodox people tend to move to communities where they can find an Orthodox life, so they can practice among people like themselves, and also at the

same time find an education for their kids that they think is necessary. Even Seattle in those years had a hard time attracting large numbers of Orthodox people ... Even today, maintaining [enough people to allow] owners of Kosher butcher shops to make a decent living ... a Kosher butcher shop in Tacoma couldn't make a living at all. So, if an Orthodox family ... after the highways [between Seattle and Tacoma] were built ... people could work in Tacoma ... Orthodox people who might work in Tacoma could still live in Seattle. There wasn't any reason for Orthodox people to come to Tacoma--it wasn't attractive to live in Tacoma. There's a basic formula you could use: the smaller the town, the smaller the percentage of Orthodox people. [Inversely,] the larger the town, the larger percentage of people in the Orthodox community. Now that Seattle is a good sized city ... the Orthodox community is pretty strong. But even thirty years ago, when the congregations merged here, the Orthodox community was much smaller and not quite as strong [in Seattle].

The important thing is, remember the numbers I gave you--in 1960, maybe 150 families got together in the combined congregations. That was considerably less than I imagine a thousand individuals out of a population in Pierce County of several hundred thousand people--that's about 0.5% of the [total] population. That's a really small group. There are twice that number of Jewish families now in Pierce County, but even that's not very much. But at least it's a little bit more.

NE: *Is [the Jewish population in Pierce County] up to one percent now?*

BB: No, because the county's grown a lot [too]. In towns like Tacoma that are dominated by larger cities, the [Jewish] population will always be drawn off [to the larger city].

****END OF INTERVIEW NUMBER ONE****

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW NUMBER TWO WITH RABBI
RICHARD ROSENTHAL OF TEMPLE BETH EL, TACOMA,
WASHINGTON.
FEBRUARY 24, 1992

NE: *Could we talk a little bit about the families that have come here, the Russian families? Could you tell me a little about them...?*

RR: Maybe you should interview them; ... it would be hearsay--my impression may or may not be true. They are all different [individual] people with [individual stories]. Some had hard lives ... of course, some harder than others. The Soviet Union as a whole kept changing all the time. So ... whenever it's been since they've been coming ... the last ten years or so [each has their own story]. The easiest thing would be to take one or two of the families, if you're really interested, and see what they're like--what they would say about their lives.

NE: *Do you think they would be willing [to be interviewed]?*

RR: [You would] have to ask them.... [Most people] enjoy talking about themselves and their experience[s] and [today] there isn't too great of a danger involved anymore. ...Their lives were hard and difficult, and each one has a story that belongs to their family, and I wouldn't know how to generalize their experience[s].

NE: *Right now, I'd like to deviate a little from the [list of] questions and ask you a little bit about yourself, about your life. You've been in Tacoma now since 1956 as Rabbi, which is the longest term rabbi that Tacoma has had in the last 100 years of organized Judaism. Anything you'd like to say about where you were*

born, where you went to school, how you came here and what you did when you got here?

BB: I was born in Germany and came to America in 1939 and ended up with my family in Louisiana, where I went to grade school and high school. I graduated from college, and after college I went to the ... Reform Seminary in Cincinnati. I graduated from there in 1954, and that was the tail end of the Korean War, so we all had to go into chaplaincy because they were short of chaplains. I spent two years as an army chaplain ... in Missouri, and I was discharged in June 1956. So, looking for a pulpit, I interviewed for a number of different pulpits. My wife and I both liked Tacoma, and Tacoma offered us a position, so we came here in 1956. The way life worked out, we just stayed. Sometimes you stay, sometimes you leave--things happened over those years ... that kept us involved. In 1960, the merger--and then the process to build [Temple Beth El] the present building ... took a number of years. We were engaged in that...and by then the kids were growing up and we just decided consciously that we wouldn't make them break their ties to move [somewhere else]. At some point, I guess it must have been in the late sixties or early seventies, we decided that we would stay in Tacoma rather than to seek to go someplace else.

And, the thing about it is, the way America changed in the sixties and seventies and eighties, especially [in] the Northwest, we didn't have to leave Tacoma because Tacoma became a different place anyway from the way it used to be. Back in 1956 Tacoma was a distinct type of city. It had a downtown, and about 50% of the members of the Temple [Beth Israel], in those days, had stores

downtown. [You could] basically walk down Broadway and up Pacific and meet an awful lot of Jewish people. Now you could shoot a cannonball down either one and not hit anybody. There was no Jewish community in retail businesses anymore; they still owned some, but [the Jewish community was involved in] a much broader range of occupations. Probably a goodly number of Jewish families in Tacoma in 1956 [were composed of] people who had grown up in the Northwest ... and now, the majority of people in our congregation grew up someplace other than the Northwest.

In the sixties, there was urban renewal ... and downtown was emptying out anyway. The minute I-5 {freeway} was built ... then the Tacoma Mall and Southcenter, it basically was a death knell for downtown Tacoma. In those days you had Rhodes, and the Bon Marche, and then the Sears Roebuck store ... all closed, and there weren't any department stores left downtown anymore. ...What that means [--the loss of a downtown district to the malls--] there's no identifiable center. I mean, ... you can walk out of the Tacoma Mall, into the SeaTac Mall, walk out of the SeaTac Mall and go into Southcenter and go up to Northgate and you don't know where the heck you are. You might as well be in California or suburban Chicago, and there's no local character to any of it. When there were stores in downtown Tacoma,... there was a unique feel to it--it was Tacoma. Tacoma [today] is just a bunch of people who live along I-5. That place where you guys are, in Fife, and beyond there ... people are moving [out of the city]. Forty years ago, with the exception of a few families who lived in Lakewood, most of the Jews in Tacoma lived in the North End ... and probably somewhere, one side or the

other, of Proctor Street. And that's not true at all [today]. Most of the Jewish kids at one time all went to Stadium High School ... and Wilson [High School], but that's not true anymore. It's now a much more diverse population....

As far as the Jewish community is concerned, the number of Jewish people [in Tacoma] has kept on increasing, not in any large number, but a steady increase over the years, and I assume will continue to [grow].

****END OF INTERVIEW NUMBER TWO****