Molly Amster (00:00):

A lot of, whoops, did I lose you? Nope, okay. A lot of really overt racism that I had not experienced growing up. A lot of anti-Semitism that I hadn't experienced growing up. That neighborhood is basically half Orthodox Jews, half mostly not Jewish African American folks and then some white Latinx folks that are in the mix. Anyway, I'm really taking a long time to tell you my story, but I think all of those things led me to where I am. At different points in that work took a job working as the school community liaison because I naively was like, "I'm going to show everyone that the Jewish community is not all racist and self interested. And I'm going to raise money for the schools and I'm going to help make things better and I'm going to bring people together", and whatever, and very quickly realized a lot of things.

Molly Amster (01:12):

One, in some of the schools that I was working with, my presence was very unwelcome and I was met with a lot of anti-Semitism and a lot of just resistance and skepticism about my presence, which at the time as a really stupid young person was like, "But I'm so nice, why does everybody hate me?" I needed to learn about communal histories and very legitimate reasons why the black community would be concerned about a white Jewish woman being in the school and what my motives might be.

Molly Amster (01:55):

And I also learned five or ten thousand dollars wasn't going to change anything at the schools. Looking at budgets and needing to decide whether we could have an assistant principal at a K-8 school or a class of 48 kids and that's the trade off, was shocking having grown up at a school down the road, I'm at my parent's house right now, which was brand new when I went as a second grader. And similarly, seeing the condition of the buildings. And I worked on a three year campaign, the 21st Century Schools Campaign with the Baltimore Education Coaliltion. I got my organization to join that, organized parents and community members to fight for almost a billion dollars to rebuild or renovate a chunk of Baltimore City Schools, which unfortunately has not gone far enough. And that was a three year campaign, it was my first experience really doing organizing work, my first experience really doing direct lobbying. I just couldn't believe, it was so incredible to be at a rally with three thousand people that we organized to be there. And to at the end of a three year campaign win the largest public investment in Baltimore City in the schools ever.

Molly Amster (03:28):

So I knew I wanted to do more of that work, but as a white Jewish woman, trying to determine an appropriate role for myself in movement work in Baltimore was very challenging. I also started doing a bunch of anti-racism education, seeking out trainings for myself which really changed my interests and what I thought was work that I would be doing that would positively contribute. Kind of abandoning possibilities that were very rooted in white saviorism and stuff like that. I also had led a multiracial dialogue group with blacks and Jews, some black Jews, some not Jewish black folks, some Orthodox folks, some Jewish folks that are my observance level that lived in the neighborhood. So I did that for a year and really did see growth in people that I had no hope in, that there ideas were just so racist and so ignorant and just completely oblivious to other people's experience and how systems impact people differently. And I did see really significant change in people which shocked me and my colleague.

Molly Amster (05:15):

so anyway, I was really lost, I had been at [inaudible 00:05:19] for seven years, I didn't know what I wanted to do. And once a week I would half heartedly look for jobs and saw this job, which was to create the Baltimore branch of Jews United for Justice. And it felt like it was coming from heaven, honestly like this is the thing, this is the work I want to be doing. It's doing racial and economic justice work but it's organizing my community and so I can be in a leadership role and it's appropriate. My friend [inaudible 00:06:03] who runs Jewish Community Action in the Twin Cities in Minnesota, so it's a very similar organization for JUFJ, talks about our job as being one of making the Jewish community capable of helping to bring about the change that we want to see in the world. So it's not just about doing the work but it's also about educating our community and bringing them into the work to help contribute. And that, in Baltimore in particular, can be a really uphill battle sometimes.

Molly Amster (<u>06:42</u>):

The Baltimore Jewish community is just very different from the DC Jewish community that I grew up in. It's much more politically conservative, it's the largest Orthodox Jewish population per capita in the country, and that has a huge effect on the community's politics which make it much more right wing and conservative than the DC Jewish community. And I, through the work, really found my people. I worked for the Jewish community for seven years and didn't really feel like I had a Jewish community that was aligned with my values and I collected those people. And so six years later, it will be six years in a couple weeks, there's a new synagogue here that I belong to called Hinenu: The Baltimore Justice Shtiebl, Shtiebl is a Yiddish work for small synagogue. And that community is so radical, like we just adopted police in prison abolition as our issue for the year to be learning about and doing activism around. The rabbi's partner is trans and there are tons of gender queer people in the community and trans people and just people with so many different identities, I think it tends to be a much more welcoming place for Jews of color. It's incredible and it's not something that I would have thought possible six years ago.

Molly Amster (08:45):

So I think that's the Jewish piece of my work. I don't know if this was way more than you wanted and now you have questions for me.

Fatima Bamba (<u>08:55</u>):

Honestly, it's fascinating truly, an incredible story. I was wondering in that case, because Jews United for Justice seems to be extremely radical actually, and so how difficult or how easy was it to collect those people that you felt were right for this kind of work and how has the community received you all?

Molly Amster (09:30):

I think the hardest part of my job, because one of the things I didn't say is critical to our work is relationships with people who are much more directly impacted than our community tends to be, who are leading the work. And having those relationships and maintaining them really requires being aligned and so being fairly radical, although we would never publicly talk about our work that way, we talk about ourselves as a progressive organization, but the reality is that I think we talk about a lot that our job is to be translators for our community. So I say to take radical ideas, other people say to take ideas that are new or uncomfortable for people and translate them to be hearable to people. To explain them in a way that people can really hear and process and hopefully get on board with.

Molly Amster (<u>10:47</u>):

So having to walk the line of really upholding those values and being aligned with our partners on their demands while still being welcomed or at least accepted by the mainstream Jewish community, is really hard. It's a constant struggle, it requires a constant vigilance, it requires a lot of relationship building. I think it helped a lot that I worked for the associated, Hi is part of the associated system, the Jewish federation in Baltimore. I was there for seven years, I have a lot of relationships in the community and the associated is the only North American Jewish federation that's still centralized. In other places, like here in DC, each organization is autonomous and they're connected but they're not part of the same thing and Baltimore is still very centralized. So if the Baltimore Jewish Council, for example, the Baltimore Jewish Council is like the political arm of the associated, and they feel like they have to listen to that.

Molly Amster (12:29):

So sometimes we have to take the position we need to take and know that that's going to mean that there's some level of consequence. So for example, one of our first funders, who I will not name, they gave us 15 thousand dollars the first year and when I met with our [inaudible 00:12:59] there he was like, "Make sure you don't do anything controversial." Most of our funders throughout our history in Baltimore have been Jewish foundations and were taking money from their Jewish life pool, which I feel really great about because it's like taking money for the community. It's still contributing to the community, it's building Jewish community and providing Jewish experiences for people, but it also is contributing to the greater good.

Molly Amster (13:30):

Anyway, so Jewish organization, Jewish foundation, said don't do anything controversial. So I was like, "Well do you mean don't do anything countering the position of the Baltimore Jewish Council or do you mean don't do anything that's going to upset Jewish business owners?" And he said, "Well avoid both scenarios." So I was like, "Okay." And I called my boss after and I was cracking up. I was just like, "This is not possible. So I don't know, we're just going to do what we're going to do and if they don't like it then they can stop funding us", which is ultimately what happened. They were just like, "You're too progressive for us and we'll give you five thousand dollars this year and we're not funding you at all next year." And we're fine, that's okay.

Molly Amster (<u>14:27</u>):

The founding story of JFJ is actually rooted in a similar thing, where they were working with Unite here in DC to stand with workers who were being mistreated and who were having trouble negotiating with the owner, Jewish guy, of a valet parking service, which all the synagogues in DC use, because it's hard to park in DC, and Hi holidays, everybody goes to Synagogue. And the guy who owned the business was livid that JUFJ was participating. We had sent a letter to all the synagogues and said, "Don't use this company, they're in an active labor dispute." And the guy flipped out and threatened JUFJ and we had just applied for our first grant from the Jewish federation in DC where he was on the board and we did not desist from the work. Unite here held a fundraiser for JUFJ, ultimately we won the campaign, he negotiated with the workers and we did get the grant from the federation.

Molly Amster (15:50):

So that was one of the reasons that I was really excited to work for JUFJ, to know that I was working for a place that wouldn't compromise its values for the bottom line, which was not my experience

previously. So yeah, I think that has been the challenge. I think the best way I've found to get access to the synagogues and access to the associated system and recruit and build relationships in those spaces has been through education and I kind of had to push my executive director on the education piece, he was like, "Why are you spending so much time on educational programming that doesn't necessarily connect to our campaigns directly, like how to talk to family and friends about racism or screening PBS's Race: The Power of An Illusion documentary and talking about it. Or things that are ultimately connected to our work very closely but it's nice like a film screening about police reform. A

Molly Amster (17:12):

And the organization has shifted and it is now part of our strategic plan to really center that education because it's critical. It's what Karen was saying about helping the Jewish community to be capable of helping to bring about the change that we want to see in the world. And if they don't understand the issues, if they don't understand their own racism and the racism that exists in our country and the world, they can't contribute effectively. So that's been the easiest way, to say, "Let's do a program about whatever that's not necessarily connected to a campaign", and then there's a base of people in that congregation that want to learn more, that want to be more involved.

Molly Amster (18:05):

So it this point we have a synagogue social justice round table that we convene with 11 congregations, or Havurot, which are like informal prayer groups. They don't have Rabbis, they meet in people's houses, when there's not a pandemic. And they meet every other month and talk about what social justice work they're doing in their congregations, what's JUFJ doing, and finding opportunities for collaboration..

Molly Amster (18:35):

So this Sunday we're hosting a meeting with Councilman Julian Jones and Councilman Izzy Patoka in Baltimore County to talk about police reform and it's being hosted be JUFJ and Chizuk Amuno, which is the largest conservative synagogue in Baltimore. And this is not solely because of JUFJ's work, but it's certainly a part of the transformation, that synagogue signed on to a letter with four hundred other congregations, a letter about the importance of standing and consolidating with Black Lives Matter and that that's something that they're committed to and they put up a sign that says Black Lives Matter, which is really controversial in a more conservative Jewish community because there's a lot, like anti-Zionism is often equated with anti-Semitism. And so the Black Lives Matter platform, years ago, including language about Israel and about genocide and apartheid, made people berserk in the Jewish community, at least a portion of the Jewish community. And so the fact that they have taken that step to do that, it's obviously symbolic and whatever, but it's a choice that they have to really defend and are being attacked for. And again, that's never something that I would have expected six years ago.

Molly Amster (20:09):

Multiple big synagogues are doing that. Baltimore Hebrew congregation is putting up a sign, Beth Am in Reservoir Hill is putting up a sign, which is more believable six years ago. Butt yeah, so it's hard but I think relationships are the key thing. Any time things have gone wrong, it's because, I reflect and it's like this would not have been as bad if I had a relationship or it could have been avoided if I had had a better or stronger relationship.

Fatima Bamba (20:42):

So I think that's interesting because similarly there are tons of new, well maybe not new, but there are tons of religious organizations that are really springing up into the activism space, so I always wonder what that looks like as far as what kinds of frameworks and epistemologies people employ in religious spaces when talking about social justices. How is religion or faith used as the bedrock, say, of the work? And then I think my second questions, another question, a tangent, an aside, would be how has COVID changed the way things work ad operate as far as the work being done?

Molly Amster (21:40):

I think the Jewish left gets a lot of criticism from Orthodox spaces that are more right wing in particular, but even conservative spaces that are more right wing for cherry picking. And I feel like that's what everyone does, right? They're cherry picking, they're ignoring things like Welcome the Stranger for example, they can sit at a passover table and talk about the freedom story and hear Welcome the Stranger 800 times and not feel like that applies to them or where we are in this moment.

Molly Amster (22:27):

Hi, I'm doing an interview. I'm sorry.

Fatima Bamba (<u>22:37</u>): It's fine.

Molly Amster (22:39):

It's very weird to live with your parents when you're 37. It's only been a week, but anyway. Part of what I have found really valuable, being someone also who grew up Jewish but for many years after a really negative experience in Israel and feeling like I had been lied to my whole life as a teenager and then dating a woman and feeling like I don't, not that my family or the congregation that I grew up in was so anti, but just I don't know, before that I actually thought that I was going to be Orthodox. So I just was very into Judaism and then all of a sudden I was like, "Nevermind." And so coming into this job, I didn't end up working at a Jewish farm on purpose, I just knew people who said, "Oh, my friend's starting this thing, you should go work there." And I was farming and teaching environmental ed and that's what they were doing.

Molly Amster (23:51):

And similarly, I didn't intend to work for a Jewish communal development organization, but it was just where I had relationships and that's where I ended up. But starting this job, when I was starting they were talking about, "You know we do text study", and blah, blah, blah, and I was so not interested. I was like, "Ugh, who wants to do Torah study? That's terrible." But I have found a lot of meaning in revisiting texts that I really felt like did not speak to my values and seeing the ways in which it does.

Molly Amster (24:33):

For example, we've been working on renters rights for pretty much the entire time we've been in Baltimore. And this is something I really didn't know anything about before, but we participated in the study of rent court and we were there and talking to people and hearing their experiences and seeing how unfair the system was. And having that experience and then looking at texts that literally says, "Landlords are responsible for fixing broken windows and locks and for fixing the roof", like it actually says that. And says stuff about when you can and cannot evict someone, that you can't evict someone in the rainy season. I think that that would apply to COVID, I think if the Torah were being written right now, it would pretty much say, "You can't evict someone in a pandemic." So those things have been very meaningful to me personally I think similarly are very meaningful to most of the people who are engaged with JUFJ because I think it's a similar experience for them. Me and a lot of folks feel very Jewish and just don't feel like the Jewish communities they've been a part of reflect their values. And JUFJ was one of the first spaces that people had in Baltimore where there was alignment. So I think text and Jewish tradition plays in immensely, and we really try on all of our campaigns to bring in text to remind people why this is a Jewish value, what we're doing.

Molly Amster (26:18):

And in terms of COVID, honestly it hasn't changed a ton. Because we work across the state, already we're doing a lot of Zoom calls for our statewide organizing. All of meeting with our leaders were pretty much on Zoom. A couple times of year we'd have a state wide gathering on a Sunday, but our regular meetings were on Zoom, so it wasn't a huge shift for us. I think one of the things that's been really challenging is navigating our policy about whether we do in person things or not. It's only recently that we shifted to allow it, after the research came out about how the protests in the uprisings earlier this summer, and really still going on, like that has not contributed to an increase in COVID spread. After that came out, my fellow senior leadership team people were more open to encouraging our folks to go to protests. Before that it was not something that we were even telling people about, let alone participating in. And that was hard because it felt like we're a pretty privileged group of people who are staying safe at home, and the people who are really suffering who are fighting against the forces that are causing them to suffer, are on their own taking whatever health risks or whatever and we're not. And I think continues to be hard.

Molly Amster (28:10):

There's different mutual aid efforts going on, we don't do direct service work. But even door knocking to tell people about a thing, or whatever. In Howard County we've been working to end the contract with ICE that the county has to have people for ICE in their detention center. Initially we had talked about just hanging door hangers on people's doors in the neighborhood because people don't even know that this exists. But now they're talking about actually knocking on doors and trying to talk to people. And I don't feel comfortable with our folks knocking on people's doors. People could come to the door without a mask, there are risks involved in that, where hanging door hangers feels much more low risk. So that has been hard to navigate.

Molly Amster (29:15):

We did a really cool, actually you would probably really like it, last year on Tisha B'av, which is the Jewish day of mourning, it's the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, which is in the summer. And you're mourning all these catastrophes of Jewish history and we add in, "And catastrophes of modern day." And last year on Tisha B'av we had a huge rally at the detention center, it was actually the first big action related to, and to date is the biggest action that's existed on that campaign. There was somewhere between 300 and 500 people there and we had a Tisha B'av service. People read Eicha, the book of Lamentations in Hebrew and in English. There was singing, there was a civil disobedience action, blocking the prisoner entrance to the facility. And it was really sad and hard to not be able to replicate that. So instead we did three different actions highlighting three different modern day catastrophes. So one involves [inaudible 00:30:40] with a minion, so a small prayer group, a minion is at least 10, in

Orthodox tradition men, but in more egalitarian spaces, 10 people over the age of 13. And so we did three minion [inaudible 00:30:59].

Molly Amster (31:00):

One in Baltimore focused on police accountability, one mourning police violence and lost life and trauma and all this stuff, one at the Howard County Detention Center focused on family separation and ICE's cruel and inhumane treatment of people, and one which we did virtually focused on statewide the eviction crisis. Right now there's probably around 330 thousand renter households that could be evicted by the end of the year without any action. It could be like a million people and no one's doing anything. So the in person ones we limited to 15 people, so there are maybe 15 people in Baltimore and maybe a dozen at the Howard County Detention Center, so it was very different but it still felt important to have a visible action. And one of our leaders created this really beautiful video that I could share with you that highlights each of the three actions and weaves in comments from different rabbis who participated and from me and some leaders that participated. So yeah, I think those are the logistical COVID things.

Molly Amster (32:38):

It has also shifted, a bit, our focus, not entirely. We have, as I said, been working on renter's stuff for six years. We had sort of started stepping away from it because there really aren't a lot of directly impacted folks leading in the work and we wanted instead to have our efforts, we were filling a gap where there wasn't that kind of leadership and no grass roots support in renter's rates work. But we thought, I thought, and I convinced our leaders to believe as well that we should be instead putting our efforts behind campaigns being led by people who are directly impacted. Even though the renters stuff certainly impacts communities of color, there aren't those folks leading the work in any way. So instead we, last year, prioritized aligning our agenda with Up for Justice, which organizes returning citizens primarily. And we worked on juvenile interrogation bill and we worked on incarcerated voting rights and we worked on police accountability which we'd been working on already.

Molly Amster (33:59):

I'm trying to remember what the other thing was, but regardless, in the wake of the pandemic and this economic emergency we have much more significantly returned to the renters rates works because it's such a critical need right now. And, what's terrible that there's a need and also really positive in some ways, is that because it's such an acute need for people organizing groups that haven't historically worked on housing are now working on housing, and they really have a base. So Casa for example, they have 100 thousand people that they organize, and not in Baltimore but in the region. And housing was identified by their leaders, by their members, as the most important thing. So we've been working with them a lot to call for an eviction moratorium, to call for rental assistance, and several other things that would help alleviate the suffering and potentially prevent evictions for people. So that's been more of a focus. I think that that's the primary COVID related issue shift for us, I would say.

Fatima Bamba (35:24):

Just to be clear, and feel free, you don't have to answer if you don't want to, have you had any actual community members deal with effects of COVID themselves? What does it look like providing support or showing up for people who have been directly effected themselves? Or have you not had to deal with, thus far, those kinds of things at all?

Molly Amster (35:51):

There are community members that have been sick. There's at least one person who lost a close family member, but I think, I don't know if it's because people aren't talking about it or because a more white, more affluent community isn't as impacted as communities of color which is real. I think it's one of the reasons that all these anti mask white people are so out of control. They don't understand the gravity of the situation because they're not dealing with it. It's not like no white people have been impacted by COVID, the person that I mentioned who lost an uncle, he was a white guy, I have two friends who lost both of their parents to COVID, all of them were white. But in JUFJ it's not been something that has come up as a thing that people are struggling with in a real significant way.

Fatima Bamba (37:12):

Well thank you for sharing that. We promised we wouldn't go over an hour and there are ten minutes left, but we will eventually schedule a follow up meeting. And I know you said you would send over some of the things that you guys have been doing, and feel free, honestly, we'd love to take a look at it. I think for this introductory meeting, I think that will be all. Iman, am I missing anything else?

Iman AbdouKarim (<u>37:48</u>):

No, I think that covers it. I think if we have a few more minutes, something that I would love to hear a little bit about is JUFJ's relationship with the local government in Baltimore if you guys do any direct work with them. Yeah, I would love to hear a little bit more about that. I know you mentioned the social justice round table with the council members, but if there's any other way that you guys directly work with the government or if you don't, you're understanding of what the government is doing and what you are doing alongside of that.

Molly Amster (<u>38:27</u>):

Sure, so the round table I was talking about is not council members, it's synagogue members, so it's like the chairs of the different social justice committees at the synagogues. So JUFJ is a 501c3 and we also have a 501c4 which does electoral political work, it's called the JUFJ campaign fund. And so in the primary, for the first time in Baltimore City, we endorsed candidates for mayor, controller, council president, and many council seats. Over the years, we have really been working to provide spaces where constituents are directly speaking with their elected representatives. At the state level in particular, and more recently at the city level. We actually haven't done a ton of work at the city level until more recently, legislatively I should say. So at this point, a really great example from the state work but I can also share one about the city one, I was very sick and I was not able to go to Annapolis, usually I go and we have leaders coming to testify or whatever, I'm there and I support them and help them navigate, but I was really sick.

Molly Amster (40:02):

So this one leader went on her own to testify on a criminal justice bill, I can't remember which one. And I had emailed our partners to say, "I can't come, here's this person's testimony. Can you sign them up to testify and turn in their testimony?" I didn't hear back and I was kind of concerned. And after the deadline, they responded, the deadline to sign up, and everyone had forgotten. What bill was this? I can't remember. But ACLU, public defender's office, everyone had forgotten about this bill, so we were the only ones who were there. But also, this woman had traveled all this way and her testimony had not been submitted and she was not signed up to testify, but she has hosted her legislators in her home with other JUFJers, multiple times. And so she was able to go into the chair of the committee's office,

which is her delegate, and speak to his staff member who knew her. She explained what happened and he was like, "Don't worry. I'll print out your testimony and turn it in. I'll get you on the list." She was able to get someone from the public defender's office on the list so somebody else was testifying also. That would not be possible if we hadn't been working over the last five years to really develop those relationships.

Molly Amster (<u>41:38</u>):

Similarly, Eric Costello in the city, not someone we're typically aligned with politically, but he was hosted in one of our member's homes for a house meeting with other constituents to talk about our issues. And you know, he was polite and listened and whatever, but he now has developed a relationship with this woman where she can call him and ask him something and he responds. So we do have close relationships, and we endorsed all these candidates through our campaign fund. So I am often in a lot of coaliltion spaces, one of the people who really has relationships with elected officials and can reach out and help navigate. Like right now we're looking to draft two bills at the city level, one on renter's right to council, one on this water bill that we passed in November and was supposed to be implemented and the mayor's screwing us over and isn't implementing it or whatever. So it's a bill about getting the bill implemented. I'm able to just text them or whatever to try to keep it moving.

Molly Amster (43:08):

I think that also poses a challenge. It's valuable and also puts us in a somewhat inappropriate and uncomfortable position of being gatekeepers and trying to figure out always how do we provide access to our partners using these relationships to get them access. Are there people that they can't get a meeting with? Or when we have a meeting can we make sure that those people that we are working with are invited? With Casa, when the explosion happened in the Northwest, I reached out to Lydia Walther-Rodriguez who's there lead Baltimore organizer, because having worked in Northwest, I know that that neighborhood, Fallstaff, has the second fastest growing latinx population in the city, and I know that soon after I left, Casa started working there more.

Molly Amster (44:05):

So I texted Lydia, "I know that street. I know that there's a ton of latinx immigrant families that live there." And I was like, "Hey, I just heard about the explosion. Horrible, I don't know if any of your people were impacted but please let me know how I or other people can be helpful." And she said, "Thanks, I don't know yet, I'm trying to figure it out." Texted me later and was like, "I don't know", because even the people whose homes were not blown up, all the other people on that street had to be evacuated and they were being moved to different places and she didn't know where people were being moved to. And there's a language barrier for people and blah, blah, blah. So she said, "I can't get ahold of anyone. Can you connect me with someone in the council president's office?", because the mayor's office is falling apart as it's a lame duck administration and people are fleeing. So I called the chief of staff for the council president, he got back to me right away, and I just connected the two of them over text and she was able to then communicate with him directly and get the information she needed to find her people and figure out where people were going.

Molly Amster (45:22):

So it's hard. Those relationships are really valuable to the work, but I feel like obviously over time relationships are strengthened and you have more of them and whatever, but at this moment, which I would have said last year too, but at this moment those relationships are stronger than they've been in

the previous years and I'm having to confront that and figure out how to not be gate keeping in a way that disempowers the partners that we're working with and instead increases their power and increases their connections, and that's hard.

Iman AbdouKarim (<u>46:08</u>):

Great, yeah, thank you for sharing that. I think that also puts into context the different kinds of work that your organization is doing both at the government level and working with partner organizations. So thank you for that framing. And it's 2:59, it actually just turned 3:00 right now and we want to respect your time. We would love to be able to schedule a follow up meeting with you for sometime next week, and I will hopefully have en email in your inbox by Monday morning with that. Is it best for us to continue to reach out to Rhiannon for scheduling?

Molly Amster (<u>46:57</u>):

Honestly, the best thing would be, I'm just way better at texting than I am at email. My inbox is just literally overwhelming and things-