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**Eric:** Hi, I'm Eric!

**Salima:** And I'm Salima! Welcome to another episode of The Shared Mic

**Eric:** Today, we're really happy to have Abe and Trent. Abe is the Manager of Public Affairs for the Alberta division of B'nai B'rith Canada. And Trent is an active volunteer in the Muslim community and serves on the City's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee.

**Salima:** Abe and Trent will be talking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their communities.

**Abe:** Okay, so age before beauty...so away you go Trent!

**Trent:** One thing I wanted to talk about right off the hop was you were mentioning how difficult 2020 has been because your children are kind of quarantining you and your wife. I, I don't have that experience, not being in that vulnerable age group where my family is forcing me in or having any preexisting conditions. So what has been experiencing 2020 from your own little bubble been like?

**Abe:** It's had a profound effect on our lifestyle. We're not getting to see our friends like we often do in during normal times. Of course we're not hugging our grandchildren, which is very difficult at the beginning of the pandemic. We didn't even see them other than through the window. They wouldn't come into the house and it's been a profound change in our way of life and at our age...I'm 78, my wife is 76...at our age where we're so established in a way of life to have that totally disruptive. It's been a difficult adjustment.



**Trent:** My family, we had to make a decision with my younger brother. He still lives at home with my parents and he has asthma and some preexisting conditions. So early in the pandemic, they decided to quarantine their household. So I didn't see my parents for three months. And, you know, we would kind of sometimes wave from the windows because my toddlers--we couldn't explain it to them. And they all wanted to see Grandma and Grandpa. And it was really tough for them. And my brother had a hard time 'cause he's been a social butterfly through university and had to stay in his room. So it was, it was an adjustment period for us.

**Abe:** So on a professional level, I'm the manager of public affairs for B'nai B'rith Canada, which is Canada's oldest human rights organization established in 1875. So in my professional life, it's also been disruptive and altered in many ways. Our annual staff meeting in Toronto of course, was canceled. Many of the activities that I'm involved in through my work on a variety of different issues that would normally require face to face meetings of course have been canceled as much as possible. I've been trying to use technology that's available, but again, because I wasn't raised in this technology. I often find that it's difficult for me to deal with, but I guess I'm managing--I'm managing the best way we can. And you know, one of the things that I've learned over these many years is the human spirit is very well...the human spirit is very adjustable. We do make adjustments in our lives. As certain events come into our lives. We're an amazing species of so many ways.

**Trent:** Has it affected fundraising within B'nai B'rith or the Jewish community?

**Abe:** Yeah. It's affected the fundraising profoundly. Everybody in the Jewish community and outside of the Jewish community, of course, is trying to raise funds that they desperately need. It's very difficult. You know, whoever you speak to about possibly making a gift has the same story and the demands on my resources is overwhelming and it's, I, I just can't support everyone. So yeah... Fundraising has been seriously affected for sure.

**Trent:** Yeah, and after I'm done my day job, I sit on the Alberta Muslim Public Affairs Council's board. And as an organization, you know, AMPAC has made some waves, but we're a fairly new organization and we rely heavily on fundraisers. We don't have that many people involved and we're nearly 100% volunteer but right before the pandemic, we hired an executive director. So that's put a strain on us with now the annual fundraisers that we typically did, we can't really do. And it's also hard to ask your community or communities to donate when everybody's in the midst of a financial crisis and a pandemic. You know, I'm not exactly a great time to ask for funds.



**Abe:** Tell me, Trent. Are you able to access some of the funding available through local, provincial, and federal governments?

**Trent:** Yeah... We've, we've applied for grants, but you know, even then, you know, I think pretty much every organization still needs their fundraisers if for no other reason than to talk about the work that's been done and to connect with community members and stakeholders. You know, and it's, it's also, you know, a lot of these annual fundraisers--whether it's through a local charity that everybody attends--you know, some of these events people look forward to and it's kind of hard to suddenly have an empty calendar. I think it's hit people pretty hard.

**Abe:** Absolutely. And you know, we, we've got Rosh Hashanah, which is the beginning of our Jewish new year that starts on the 20th of this month. Next week, all the synagogues are of course confined to the number of people that attend the services, which has having a serious impact on the fundraising because the high holidays, which is what we're just entering right now, the Rosh Hashanah - Yom Kippur has always been a major fundraiser or at least a generator of funds. And that's not going to happen this year. And it's going to have a profound effect on the synagogue's resources. We saw the same thing with our Jewish youth camp at Pine Lake this year which was canceled, which relies very heavily on tuition for their campers. Yes, everything. Our Jewish family service--which caters to 16 and a half per cent of our community that would be below the poverty line--is very seriously stretched for resources. It's had a profound effect on every Jewish organization in the city and the country.

**Trent:** Yeah. It's something that I'm seeing across communities. And, you know, I feel like many of us that are able to go outside, have to have a debate. Just because the synagogue or the mosque or the church has reopened... Is it safe to go? You know, just because they've got the social distancing is there's still a risk involved? Lots of people are weighing that. Even, you know, when haircuts, when we are allowed to go for haircuts, again, some people are like, 'sure, I can go, but should I go?' So small businesses within our communities are affected, but at the same time, we're trying to balance the risk because many of us care deeply for our elders. And it's young people in my age group that are spreading the virus the most. Whereas when older people get it, they don't have the ability to fight it off. It doesn't mean that young people necessarily do based off of some of the data, but it's something that we're definitely not prepared to deal with as a society.



**Abe:** Okay. I think that, I can say with some degree of confidence that we probably...there's probably as much that we don't know about this virus, as we do know. So we're still trying to find our way. I was invited to come to a meeting at the Al Rashid Mosque last week to meet with the president and their communications director. And I just happened to arrive during afternoon prayers. And I was really quite amazed at how many people had arrived for afternoon prayers at the mosque.

**Trent:** There's been a huge desire in the Muslim community to return to prayers, especially for prayers on Friday like the Jummah prayer. Personally, I haven't gone to the mosques during the entire pandemic. I--I've been praying at home because I just, I feel I get exposed to quite a bit because in my day job, I work in housing with the communities experiencing houselessness. We wear masks and everything, and they do temperature checks. So, it's probably pretty safe, but I'm pretty worried about going out in public if I don't have to go, you know, and if I can pray at home and that works for me. I would like to go to the Masjid more, but it's just one of those things that I'm weighing everything carefully about what I do. Like last night, instead of going to Goodlife Fitness, I just ran around my neighborhood and hopefully I can keep that up when it gets colder. But it's definitely, I think we're all weighing that risk benefit in our minds. I think.

**Abe:** Yeah I'm very much doing what you're doing as well. We commemorate the passing of our parents every year in a Memorial called Yahrzeit and this year, and normally you would go to the synagogue and there would be 10 people there. And you'd be saying the necessary prayers and lighting candles. Well, this year I did it all at home. Lit the candle, the Yahrzeit candle and said the prayers. And that also is so much out of the ordinary because, since the death of my parents, it was common that on the anniversary of their passing, you go to synagogue and do a community prayer. Well, this year that all changed. So everything that we considered to be normal and took for granted has been turned up on its head this year.

**Trent:** There, there was something that Imam Sadiq Pathan--he's at the Al Rashid quite a bit--I don't know if you've met him...but he, he said something that really resonated with me. He's like, 'your place of worship, whether it be, you know, church, synagogue, mosque. This year in COVID, the mosque is in your home.' You know--like you can do the worship--you could in a mosque in your home. There's no change. It doesn't have to be a special building in times of crisis. You can make your mosque anywhere, your place of prayer. I thought that was pretty powerful because as you mentioned, some seniors haven't left their homes. And I think that as an age group, they're disproportionately affected. And especially within religious communities, people that use their place of worship as a communal place as well, to connect with friends and family, you know, that has been severely impacted.



**Abe:** Yes, for sure. And we've had very much the same message from some of our Rabbis as well, in Edmonton. That all of the things that we would normally go to a synagogue can actually be conducted at home. And it's perfectly acceptable. One of the hugely impacted organizations or Jewish organizations in Edmonton is our Jewish Seniors Drop-In Centre. And don't let that confuse anything because it's called the Edmonton Jewish Seniors Drop-In Centre. But many of the people who attend the activities--there are non-Jews and those seniors relied almost entirely....so many of those seniors relied almost entirely for their socialization at the drop in centre. Which has been closed now for the last four or five months, so it's been a very difficult for them. I know and a lot of them also look forward to their lunches almost every day. So I think seniors probably are suffering more than anyone else through this pandemic.

**Trent:** I can definitely, I agree with that. And I think that there's other barriers that people haven't considered is the effect on, on mental health. You know, not every senior has the extreme privilege and blessing of having a spouse or having their spouse that's still alive. So if you were alone in your home, you know, it's, it's social isolation, you know? Whether it be in a prison or in a detainment or in the pandemic, you know, it is extremely negative for your mental and physical health to be alone and not connected to people. And for seniors who are struggling to adapt to new technologies that we're using, you know. Seniors aren't typically using 'Instagram Live' or 'Tik Toks', you know? And seniors may not have a cellular device that has video output. Like recently we got my parents onto Google Hangouts and they love it now, but it took a while to get them to figure that out. And they're not that old, you know, I think that we're really underestimating the damage that this isolation could do to some people.

**Abe:** It's huge. I fear for my future offspring. I think that what we've done may turn out to be more damaging than the actual virus. This is going to have a profound effect on future generations in terms of their economic well-being. They're going to be saddled with huge debt. God only knows how they're going to manage. I fear that the standard of living that I and my children and grandchildren enjoyed--their children and grandchildren will not enjoy that same level of standard of living. Only history will be able to tell the entire story of what it is that this pandemic has done to the world.

**Trent:** In your life thus far. Has there been any major events that resembled this event in any capacity obviously



**Abe:** Of course! For me, the trauma of the Holocaust is every bit as much a trauma as--possibly even a greater trauma--than what the pandemic is. My family--I was born under Nazi occupation Romania with my father away in a slave labor camp. And my mother and I [were] confined to a ghetto in a two room house with a dirt floor with 15 other people. Where 35,000 Jews were cramped into an area that normally has 5,000. People around us died of hunger and of typhus, mass killing. When we were liberated by the advancing Russian army, there was only 11,000 of us left. So the trauma of that--even though I was very young--I saw how my parents were traumatized. My dad never, ever recovered from the horrific experience he had in a slave labor camp. He was blinded in one eye. He suffered physically and mentally all of his life. So, that trauma has been carried forward into COVID. My mom and dad died a few years ago, so they weren't around to experience trauma of the COVID. But there's no doubt that they would have been able to compare much of what's happening now to what's happened to them and us during the Holocaust.

**Trent:** I can imagine that as you said, the intergenerational impact of these events. We might be able to withstand this quite well, but we don't know to what degree will these societal changes affect future generations, as you said.

**Abe:** So tell me, Trent in your professional life where you're dealing with homeless or houseless people, are you finding that the incidence of infection is very high in those communities?

**Trent:** It, it, can be. I--I've lost a lot of people during the pandemic. I've lost two people because we have 20-person caseloads, but I didn't lose them to COVID. I lost them to other factors. Health conditions and overdoses. Overdoses have gone up during the pandemic. And that's been actually worse than the pandemic itself because people are so socially isolated and they've had their supports cut off. And many of their supports are either not working or working at home. Many departments have had to cut staff or resources. So, these people that were transitioning through a state of houselessness for addictions are now themselves completely alone. And these people don't exactly necessarily have the latest technology to video call. They might have a cell phone, but it might--could be a burner phone, could be something that's not a smartphone. So these changes have, have really impacted the community. And COVID when it hits them. They have so many preexisting conditions from life on the street that it's usually kind of the end of the line there



**Abe:** Well, you bring up a really important point. What is the lesser of the two evils when dealing with this pandemic? Do we stay locked down and deal with all of the tragedies that come out of the lock-down? Or do we just go about our lives and try to be as safe as we can and deal with what inevitably is going to be a loss of life? But again, which is the lesser of the two evils? I am still not sure myself. I'm still dealing with it in my own mind, but I'm leaning towards trying to get our communities back to normal again. So let's take that away as our most important message during this conversation that we've had together is that we need to find way to build bridges amongst our various communities. We're a very diverse city and that diversity is what we should be building on. And that could also become our strength as well. So I'm a, my time is short, you're just getting into it. So I encourage you to stay focused and keep doing what you're doing. And, you know, I will be there to help in every way that I can, as long as I can.

**Trent:** Well, and I hope, I hope that doesn't change anytime soon Abe because I'm pretty sure that the community relies on your voice and guidance on a lot of these issues. And you have an incredible experience and you know, I don't think that we would get as far as we have been getting without the experience of our elders.

**Abe:** Yeah. Well, I like to think that we still have something to offer. So anytime we're called upon to help the young people. Because the young people have to be the ones to take the leadership roles.

**Eric:** My takeaway from this conversation is a lot of the media is concerned about seniors because that seems--they seem to be suffering the main effects of COVID. But one of the points that they brought up was, what is the effect going to be on our children, on our grandchildren or what their, what are their future's going to be like? What are the economic consequences? We can see some right now, but what are the economic consequences that are going to be 5, 10, 20-years from now?

**Salima:** And Abe has this great quote where he says, "Only history will be able to tell the entire story of what it is this pandemic has done to the world." And that really got me thinking about [how] we're always living through history, but it almost feels like it's in our face that we're living through history right now. And that--how will this story be told? And I think we're also in this moment where we're reckoning and confronting racial inequality and how history has been told. And that---whose story of this moment in history will be told as we move into the future? And as we live through this moment, how are we capturing our stories for history



**Eric:** The Shared Mic is an initiative of Age Friendly Edmonton, which is a joint project between the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council.

**Salima:** We want to remind our listeners that the Seniors Information Phone Line (211) is available across the province of Alberta and will connect seniors with organizations and services in their community. Please subscribe to our podcast and tell your friends that they can find us wherever they listen to their podcasts. Apple, Google, or Spotify!

**Eric:** Leave us a comment. And if you're generous, give us five stars!

**Salima:** And stay tuned for our next episode.