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RABBI LAWRENCE HOFFMAN, PH.D.: PRAYER IS AN ART FORM

(Begin audio)

JOSHUA HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah with a Point of View. Produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish Institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host, and Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles.

It's my great pleasure and honor to welcome my friend and colleague, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, who is the Barb and Steven Friedman Professor of Liturgy, Worship, and Ritual at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute in New York. Widely published, Professor Hoffman has received the National Jewish Book Award not once but twice. And in 1994, he co-founded Synagogue 2000 which was a trans-denominational project to envision the ideal synagogue as "a moral and spiritual center for the 21st Century." Rabbi Hoffman, Larry, if I may, it's a pleasure to have you.

RABBI LAWRENCE HOFFMAN: It's so good to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

HOLO: You're one of the great voices on prayer in Judaism today. And so, I want to ask you as a person who sometimes confronts impediments of my own in prayer, I want to ask you your opinion about what, if you had to reduce it to a single cause, what is the greatest impediment to praying or to prayer today in Jewish life?

HOFFMAN: First of all, thanks for the compliment. I think about it all the time, of course. It seems to me, actually, first of all it's not the greatest impediment that people think it is. They think it's God. They say they don't believe in God. They don't think anybody's listening up there. And so, what's the point of it all? But I think that's actually a mistake. I take them at their word, to be sure, but I think that's not the problem. The essential problem, I think, has to do with a misunderstanding of what prayer is in its form, and the contract that we have between the people who are providing the prayer experience and people are coming to it. I think of prayer as an art form. I think of it as the grand art form because it puts together music and drama and poetry.

HOLO: It's almost cinematic, right.

HOFFMAN: Yes, it's fabulous when it's done right. The problem is on our side, I'm talking now as a rabbi, and I think I speak for cantors as well, I don't mean to be just rabbis; all the people who are involved. It's an art form that we don't do very well. And there's nothing worse than an art form that goes bad. So that's our problem. But the problem of people coming is you don't appreciate an art form unless you suspend your disbelief. Do you go to the opera?

HOLO: Of course.

HOFFMAN: So, did you ever go to the opera because you loved the story? No, who believes that stuff. Right? If I said to you, "Why don't you go?" We're going to talk about a demon and a this and a that. You'd say, "Thank you, I've got better things to do."

HOLO: You go for the tenor and the soprano.

HOFFMAN: You go for the grandness of it all. I mean Faulkner had it right. It's a complete work of art. So, I think of prayer as that sort of thing, a complete work of art. But you can only go if you suspend your disbelief. If I paid attention to the story, I wouldn't believe a word of it. But at the end of it, all that music and so on and so forth, I'm crying at the end of it because there's something about the human condition that gets touched. Prayer is an art form that touches the human condition. But you have to enter into it, suspend your disbelief.

HOLO: More than that, you're saying that they have to be met halfway also by the artists, by the collaborative team that presents the prayer. Not just from the Middle Ages and from antiquity but also those who are the purveyors of it today.

HOFFMAN: Yes, exactly.

HOLO: The synagogue goer has to be met halfway by an excellent artful...

HOFFMAN: Yes, it's a layered art form. It starts with the people who wrote the prayer book and gave you the music. That's the first level of art. Then it's the people who put it all together and the right prayer book and the right script. That's the second layer of art. And then there are the people who do it. That's the third level. And then the last level is the people who go and participate.

HOLO: You started off by saying, you know, a person might suspect that the reason people feel an impediment to prayer is because of the articulation of a God that, if broken down intellectually, they would have to arrive at the conclusion that they – or many of them don't believe in. And you're saying, "No, that's not the issue." Well, what about the argument that it's not belief or disbelief or agnosticism that impedes them; it's more affirmative than that. It's that God, God language, faith styled words evoke notions of Christianity to them and feels off putting in a much more affirmative way than mere agnosticism.

HOFFMAN: Well, there's something to that. But that has to do with the way a certain generation was raised. If you're over 45, let's say, you were raised largely in an ethnic Jewish environment, and you have a lot of baggage about the Christian environment around you. And you tend to associate a certain language as Christian. Fact of the matter is most of the Christian language started as Jewish language.

HOLO: Right.

HOFFMAN: If someone who talks about a game that Harvard football team plays against Ohio State or something like that, and they say, you know, they lost 55 to nothing but we've got all the good cheerers. The problem is that the Christian community got all the good cheerers, you know. So, we now take the old Jewish language but we say, "Oh no, it's Christian." Grace. That's not a Christian term. That's our term. You know, theology generally, that's our term. Even the good news – even the good news is, Besorah Torah. We had it first so you know. But we have to reclaim it. And here's why. If you can't say it, you don't know it. And we need a language that can say it and we don't know it.

HOLO: And we have to speak it artfully is what you're saying.

HOFFMAN: That's right.

HOLO: You're saying you can just drop a term. You can just expect people to open up a machzor or prayer book and engage.

HOFFMAN: That's right. People make the mistake of thinking that they don't know something or they don't want to believe something, they can't use the language. I'm saying if you use the language in the right environment, at that moment you believe it. I don't pray because I believe. I believe because I pray. It's an experience. After the fact, I can't believe I was crying in that opera. After the fact, I can't believe that I was moved to tears of joy in prayer, but I was.

HOLO: The way you're casting it, it's not even really about arriving at belief. It's about allowing yourself to be touched and therefore enriched. And that somehow you come out better than you entered.

HOFFMAN: Yeah, that's right. People think that ideas are what we make up. But that's not exactly true. Even in English we say, "It struck me. It came to me." The great ideas then hit us. I liken ideas to gifts. You know, you wrap a gift. And when you're finished, what you discover is that the wrapping kind of impinges on what you put inside. And the wrapping doesn't quite look the same. I consider worship a wrapping. It's a wrapping of ideas which are the gift. But the gift gets wrapped in worship which is different than getting wrapped in an academic discourse. And, it comes out differently.

HOLO: And it ends up being different by virtue.

HOFFMAN: Absolutely it does. If you do it well.

HOLO: So, it's a heavy lift for both the synagogue goer and the team, the historical team, the actual team, the synagogue team.

HOFFMAN: When I was younger and I was a rabbinic student, I had this great teacher who was reputed to know absolutely everything. Absolutely everything. And his name was Dr. Tepfer, *alav ha-shalom*. Came from England. He had this British accent so you could believe he knew everything.

HOLO: He knew everything, right.

HOFFMAN: So at one point, I don't know why, I said to him I wanted to learn Yiddish. I think because I knew my grandmother spoke Yiddish and I had forgotten it. And I wanted to learn it again. I said to him, "Could you teach me Yiddish," since he knew everything. And he said to me, "Yiddish Hoffman?" He said to me, "You don't teach Yiddish. You just open your mouth and it comes out." He was wrong of course, but that's the attitude people have to prayer. You just open your mouth and it comes out. But actually, it doesn't. It's an art form and it takes the people who are involved, each at their own level, to come together and make it work in a group.

HOLO: You know, you've reminded me of what I think is a myth about Winston Churchill, of course who was known for his quips and his witticisms and his spontaneous wisdom.

HOFFMAN: I love Churchill.

HOLO: Right. Everyone loves Churchill. He's great to quote. The mystique about him was that he was so quick and so attuned that all of this came off the top of his head. And this may be equally apocryphal and mythical but the myth is that in fact he would go home and practice his witticisms in front of the mirror. And all that which felt spontaneous and witty was in fact a practiced, highly developed art form. And you're saying we have to not just receive the siddur but republish it, reimagine it, and reproduce it every time.

HOFFMAN: Not just the siddur. First about the art form though, it's not just Churchill. It's every art form. Van Gogh writes to his brother, and I forget how long he says, but he says it took him two days or 5,000 strokes to get the right petal on the flower. You know, he didn't just do it. Nobody just does it. Maybe Mozart. They say Mozart could just write the music, but I'm not sure about that either. Anyway, back to the prayer book. I don't think the issue is so much the prayer book. I like to say the prayer book isn't really a book. Just looks like a book because it's got two covers on it. But actually, we were praying long before anything was written. So, it's not just a book. I think of it as a script. It's an ongoing script. It's a master script of the Jewish people. And whenever you hold it in your hand you're interpreting it. So, what's really going on is you have a script and if you don't have the right music, and you don't have the right environment, and you don't have the people sitting in the right way, and you don't have a connection between people, the script falls flat. We rabbis and cantors, we're like directors of this script. And when we do the script right, it's an art form that I call a great drama. But it's a drama in, not to people, at people, but it involves everybody, you know.

HOLO: So I want to now move to one of the themes that emerges, not just in prayer but in Judaism at large, that you have spent a lot of time thinking about. And one of the things that I really appreciate in your thought is that you're willing to confront this polarity that I'm about to lay out, or paradox, or tension, which is the tension between universalism and particularism. We of the Reform Movement, who have so consciously sought to embrace the universalistic component of Judaism and to cultivate it, I want to ask you as a human being, as a citizen, as a Jew, does universalism even exist? Is it something that we can actually work with? Is there any idea that indeed is shared by all of human at all in the first place?

HOFFMAN: Why do you think there's such a problem that people have with the two? You present it as a given already. Why is that?

HOLO: I think that Judaism, as a civilization, has been willing to embrace particularism more affirmatively. And I think Christianity is fundamentally a response to that, and an effort to shift the balance of universalism. And I think that we consciously resisted that, or reasserted particularism as a response to that.

HOFFMAN: How interesting.

HOLO: And I think we still do it. And I think we do it for good reason. And I'm of that party. I'm a partisan in this conflict.

HOFFMAN: You're partisan to what side?

HOLO: On the side of particularism. I think all progressivism and liberalism is fundamentally particularistic. And I think all universalism is a violence to progressivism and liberalism. So, I've laid my cards out.

HOFFMAN: Good for you.

HOLO: I think universalism is a lie.

HOFFMAN: Well, I'll play my card then. I think it depends where you start. First of all, let's take a look at the Jewish calendar just so we have things in perspective.

HOLO: Okay.

HOFFMAN: I don't want to think that universalism is something I came up with yesterday. If you look at the Jewish calendar you find that six months apart, you have the two great holidays. You have Pesach in the spring, and you have what we call the High Holidays in the autumn: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My studies, I mean, I just finished the last volume of this eight volume series on the High Holy Days, and I had no idea how deeply it went until I indeed did this research. But I can now say absolutely, without any doubt, completely affirmatively that Pesach is particularistic holidays. You know, that was the original New Year. But the fact is we end up calling the New Year, the New Year in the fall which is absolutely universalistic. Absolutely. I mean the Mishna says, "All who come into the world stand before God." For example, we say, "*hayom harat olam.*" The Aleinu, which is all about – that comes from Rosh Hashanah. On and on and on, I can see nothing but universalism.

HOLO: These are all universalistic. They're not universalists though. They claim universalism which is different. What they are is impositional, especially the Aleinu. We look forward to a day when the world agrees with us. Well, that's not universalist, that's colonial.

HOFFMAN: You're right about that. I don't deny that. However, I don't know – first of all, we don't know what the original Aleinu was all together. We only know what's happened to it over the Middle Ages. We know that the prayer comes early on. That we know, right. Now, when people said that they got to become like us, right, to some extent you're right about that. That's the Bible, for example. We all know that. And to some extent it's the Rabbis. But on the other hand, I don't anticipate that they meant exactly like us. They believe that God had a covenant with other peoples, for example. They had no objection to Noahides, as they

call them. They thought God had covenants with Jews. He made covenants with other people. The only thing is there were limits to what the covenant that God would make. God would not make a covenant that involves certain cruelties and on and on and on.

HOLO: Or polytheism.

HOFFMAN: Yes, that's correct. So, I really understand the kind of universalism that's involved as a universalism with, however, limits. Not everything goes. What do I mean by universalism? I meant to say that all religion, all great religion, and this is what makes them great and that's why they last, all great religion is a response to what I call the human condition. All human beings are in this world with two things that other species, I think, don't have. The first I think is consciousness of who we are. The squirrels in my backyard don't stop for a minute and say, "What is it like to be a squirrel? And should I really, you know..." And maybe they don't worry about that. They just eat the bird food so the birds don't get it. We, however, have consciousness of who we are. We make up a story of who we are. We want a bigger story. Alright. That consciousness leads us to limits. Limits of understanding. Limits of our life. Limits of what we can do. Limits of ending evil.

HOLO: And the desire to breakthrough those limits.

HOFFMAN: And the desire. That's the universal human condition. And secondly, as along with consciousness, comes conscience. So, we are the only ones who say, "That's wrong." Not that it's hurting me, that's just wrong. May not be hurting me at all, but I'll draw the line. You went too far. And on and on and on. So, I think there's certain things that human beings do.

HOLO: So the limits themselves are not universalist but the desire, the appreciation for, the search for limits is.

HOFFMAN: That's correct. I actually think there's three rhetorics that human beings use and other people don't, it separates us from animals. First of all, there's limit thinking. We're the only ones who set the limits, you know. I'd like to tell a story about an animal running through the jungle, a gazelle, and the lion kills the gazelle. And Mrs. Gazelle's back at her lair, you know, and her husband doesn't come home. There's a lot of traffic, she knows. Where is he? She goes out, finds him, he's dead. Here's what's different. She mourns just like we would mourn. But what is different is she doesn't write a book on the subject. She doesn't write a book called, you know, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good Gazelles." Right? She doesn't have the sense that there's bad things that happen to the good people. She just feels what she feels. We, though, have that limit.

HOLO: Okay, but doesn't it get down – that's great. I'm with you. Thus far we agree. Here's the bone I want to pick. By and large – okay you've established a kind of universalism which is unobjectionable. I get it. But in fact, when people speak about universalism, what they really mean, by and large, is they're talking about the universalism about their specific limits. And they're saying, "All human beings..."

HOFFMAN: Got it.

HOLO: And what I'm arguing is the following. When you recognize that the specific limits that you want to claim, when you recognize that they are in fact particularistic no matter what you call them, that the minute you recognize they are particularistic, what you're doing to the other is you're saying, implicitly, your limits are yours and I respect them. And the mere recognition is a kind of respect. At least a minimal respect. And that is a particularist impulse, which is that which applies to me does not apply to you. Therefore, I am compelled to deal with, at least, you on your terms with your limits. That necessity, that simple, practical requirement.

HOFFMAN: And that makes the universalism particularism in its essence?

HOLO: It makes all universalism a lie. And, in fact, merely an expression of...

HOFFMAN: Oh I see.

HOLO: But it makes – the problem with universalism is its pretense to being universalistic. The minute you've pulled back and you realize these limits which you thought were universalist but in fact are just yours - forces you to confront the other in a much more humane way. Because it forces you to recognize the other's limits as their own limits, their own production. So what I'm saying is, it is ill-liberal of Judaism to impose – to say that the Noahide laws are so great, but then to point out that they don't apply to polytheists. That's an ill-liberal thing. And so in my Judaism, I assert very happily, I celebrate my monotheism. And I celebrate the principle of Noahide laws which allows for covenants between other peoples. But I draw the line at the polytheistic part.

HOFFMAN: Fair enough.

HOLO: I say, "He has - God..." I said, "He" bad me. God has covenants with polytheists as well and there I become more Reform than Jewish.

HOFFMAN: Truth of the matter is I'm open to that argument. I think that as time goes on we have different understanding of humanity and a different understanding of the way people frame even the universalistic urge to understand their condition. So, I think that's an ongoing discovery that we have. I have no problem with that at all. I do want to say, however, that if you take your position to its ultimate extreme, you will find that there is no such thing as a group. There's no such thing as more than me. It's a solipsism.

HOLO: No. No.

HOFFMAN: All you know is what you know. And so then you have to deal with everybody else.

HOLO: No, because my system allows for kind of Lockean acquiescence of accession to a system where you choose to associate with. When you are a member of a group you're signing on to the boundaries and the limits that group has set for itself, as Jews do, especially increasingly it's a choice. And so, of course, there are groups. It's just that I recognize other groups. That I recognize their legitimacy, their divinity, their covenantal relationship to the Creator. And I'm willing to deal with them on their terms rather than to

impose some monotheistic thing. Even though the mere logic of monotheism is intrinsically universalist, you know.

HOFFMAN: Two things. First of all, it might be I'd go with you there. The question is not whether polytheism is polytheism. Through the Middle Ages, look this is your field, not mine.

HOLO: No, I know.

HOFFMAN: Throughout the Middle Ages, throughout the Middle Ages, you have Jews discovering that actually Christians are such polytheists actually.

HOLO: Well... It's not that. It's that they recognize that they don't think they're polytheists. And they're willing to deal with them as monotheists with that fiction shared for the purposes of being able to buy food from them.

HOFFMAN: Let me try a different tack.

HOLO: Okay. Alright.

HOFFMAN: Let me try a different tack. I'd like to say there are three ways that we think. One I said was limits. I talked with that already. The second way in which we think is truths. We are hardwired to say true or false, true or false, true or false. The third way, however, has to do with aesthetics. Now aesthetics gets the bad rap because it's only art.

HOLO: Right. Right.

HOFFMAN: We all got sweatshirts with Beethoven looking like a madman. We love the idea of artists but they're crazy, right. They belong in – they're bohemians. So, they're fine but you wouldn't want to marry one. So actually, I'm going to say that we have moved through three stages.

I think that the first stage, for Jews anyway, the first stage for Jews was we emphasized limits. And that's why we had a limit literature, the Talmud and law and Halakha. By the 19th Century I think Reformed Judaism, the reason there was a revolution, it was a revolution away from limit thinking, and it was a response to science and to enlightenment. And out came truth thinking. And so, Reform Judaism redid worship, for example, not to worry about how you do it, the Halakha but to worry about what did the preacher say. And what are the truths of the prayer book.

What are the grand truths? I mean they got rid of Bar Mitzvah and they put in confirmation because they wanted everybody to say these are the truths of Judaism. *Shema Yisrael*. That became our big truth. Stand for the Shema. Sit down for the Amidah. Crazy. But that's because they wanted truths. Now here's the thing. Both truths and limits are essentially zero-sum gains. It's either true or false. Either it's right or it's wrong. Now, I do think that ethics is objective. I'm not a relativist. I do think somethings are true and somethings are false. Don't try jumping into the Grand Canyon. You'll discover that actually it kills you. So, somethings are true and somethings are false. But what we have discovered is part of the human condition is to frame things in the third rhetoric, the third language. And that is the

language of meaning. We are now living in an era where meaning is what counts. So, meaning doesn't mean that everything goes.

HOLO: Right. Right.

HOFFMAN: I don't mean that at all. I can talk with that more if you want to. But for our purposes I want to give you a grand model of what I think religion's all about.

I want to say that we should think of religion as an art gallery. And all the great religions have rooms. And some of the not great ones have smaller rooms, no doubt. But at the moment I visit the Christian room, and the Muslim room, and so on. I'm in my own room. You're born into your room. And you're raised in your room. And it's home. It's familiar to you. You spend your life, at least if you're serious about it, you spend your life redecorating. So, in fact, what we do is we change the furniture, we put up different art on the walls. But it all comes out Jewish. And then, of course, there are different Jews in the room. So, I don't happen to like the way the Orthodox guys over there are doing their wall. But on the other hand, they're Jews.

HOLO: They're still in the room. You got to live there. Right. Right.

HOFFMAN: I think they're wrong but okay. I'm really thinking they shouldn't all be black and white. Whatever it is. Now sometimes, I get in this big fight with them. Say I want my room to look good.

HOLO: Right. Right.

HOFFMAN: Sometimes I go out into the hall and I meet other people. And they say, "You know, gee, you got a room too." And I ask them, "What are you doing in your room?" And they say, "I'll show you." And I go and I look at it. Now, if you are dealing with a truth question, I walk into their room and I say, "All wrong."

HOLO: It's all wrong.

HOFFMAN: If I'm dealing even with an ethics question, though we might share some things, ultimately I have to say, "Does your ethics agree with my ethics? If not, you're wrong." But when it comes to the decoration, when it comes to the aesthetic, how we live our lives, that is the meaning that we find in life. I can see that other religions have a different rhetoric, a different design pattern, a different artistry, but I learn to appreciate it. And I say, "Oh, that's what you do. That's a beautiful image."

HOLO: And you can see in their efforts the same effort as you.

HOFFMAN: That's right. All we have is our room. If all we have is our room, then the truth of the matter is, it's all particularism. But insofar as we share the larger building, and we see that other people are doing the same sort of thing, then we discover that we are all in the human condition discovering our deepest form of our identity. And we do it our way. They do it their way. Once in a while we borrow things. I kind of like the way they do it, you know.

HOLO: Right. Right.

HOFFMAN: And later on, someone visits the museum, they say, “Well, I know where you got that.”

HOLO: And in knowing that you connect with the other person across something in common. Fair enough.

HOFFMAN: That’s exactly right.

HOLO: I like it.

HOFFMAN: It’s all about the hallway, you know.

HOLO: Right. Right. It’s all at the water cooler, man.

HOFFMAN: Yeah, the water cooler.

HOLO: It all boils down to the water cooler. Love it.

(Break in podcast)

HOLO: Alright, I want to shift gears a little bit. I want to thank you again for something you did that I found important and helpful. In a recent address, you articulated the anxiety about identity. Identity formation. Holding an identity. And our keen desire as Jews to pass on our identity, this thing that we love, this Jewish identity, whatever it is. And you proposed a visual. We have an art theme going in this conversation, which is great and you proposed a visual language that I found very helpful. And it was the following. You said, “You know, one thing that’s irreducibly true in the modern world is that the vast majority of us have multiple facets to our identity. You’re a parent. You’re a child. You’re a student. You’re an athlete. My son’s a wrestler. It’s a big deal, you know.” It takes a lot of his time. And his group formation around the team. And all of us have these multiple identities and there is an anxious way to approach that multiplicity. And the anxious way promotes a visual of fracturing, ‘cause all of these pieces seem to be jostling and maybe broken off from one another. But you offer another perspective which is to view this multiplicity as layered. I do think it poses a challenge. The challenge is that if you’re going to say it’s layered, you’re implying a hierarchy.

HOFFMAN: Oh very nice.

HOLO: If you do that, you risk creating other anxieties in imposing a hierarchy. Nevertheless, layered also has a kind of futility to it that things grow up through the layers. And the layers depend on one another, and they build on one another. There’s all kinds of constructive images that emerge from that. And I like it. And I want you to take it, and I want you to tell me if we want a foundational layer to be Jewish.

HOFFMAN: I want to say it’s not entirely true that I think fracture is wrong. We do live in an age of fractured identity. Before, I said that I think we have come to the end of ethnic Judaism. There’s no question in my mind about that. And a lot of people over a certain age fight that tooth and nail and loathe when I say that to them.

HOLO: By the way, the fight probably comes from the fact that the shift that you're articulating and saying, we're post-ethnic, is really recent. So, there's a lot of us, me included, who still experience the ethnic experience. So, it's a living *machloket*. It's a living argument. It's not just an intellectual one. So, I imagine that that accounts for a lot of the resistance you've...

HOFFMAN: Yes it does. When I say, by the way, that we're post-ethnic, some people misunderstand me. It's not that I'm post-Jewish people. Ethnic comes from *ethnos*, the Greek, as you know. And as you're talking about peoplehood, I'm in favor of Jewish peoplehood. I think that's part of what I decorate my room with. And the people in my room, I mean they're my people. I mean obviously, yeah. So, I don't deny that. And obviously, I think there are responsibilities on me as a Jew to other Jews. So, let's just accept that.

I mean by ethnic something else. I mean the kind of ethnicity by which we do what we do because nostalgia for the old world. We do what we do because that's just what Jews do. Actually, a lot of Jews don't do it. We do what we do because we're not like them. They're the bad guys. That's what I don't like. Ultimately, we live in an era in which we need a new rationale for what we're doing. The big question is, why are you Jewish? That's the big question. And you know where I got that first? I got that in Los Angeles. I was doing a program for the Federation 25 years ago. And all these Federation people were in the room, and I gave them all this stuff and spirituality and I said, "Do you have any questions?" I was talking for two straight days, Saturday night, question time. And I say, "I'm not going to give another lecture until I hear what do you think." One hand goes up. Another hand goes up. They say, "What do you think of Israel?" "What do you think?" I say, "Wait a second. I didn't talk about that." But that's all they wanted to know. Well a hand goes up in the back. And it's a young woman. She puts her hand up. She's 25 years younger than everybody else. And she says to me, "I want to know why be Jewish. That's the only question that I worry about." And I turned to her and I knew she was on to something. And, you know, what? The rest of the people in the room were like her parents. And they all yelled at her basically saying, "How dare you. You're a heretic."

HOLO: Right. Right.

HOFFMAN: Alright, she was on to something. Now she's the one who's grown up and those people are passed their prime, if not gone. And so, the question really is what's the rationale for being Jewish all together. Now, if that's the real big question, the question then becomes what is Judaism in a post-ethnic era?

So, for a long time I said it was spirituality. And when I founded Synagogue 2000. I used to say, "We have moved from ethnicity to spirituality." People loved it. They were all looking for spirituality. I knew that. But I now realize, I was only partly right. Spirituality is actually part and parcel of the deeper search for identity. It's a kind of identity formation. And spirituality describes being in touch with a moreness to the universe. You know, m-o-r-e-n-e-s-s. Something more to the universe. I think now we're in the age of fractured identity. When you're not an ethnic anymore, you really are a man or woman of the world. And you can do whatever you want. So now I want to think of how we look for identity. And that's where I like to think of it as layered. The various kinds of our identity are the surface identities like wrestling and, you know, I'm a Jew. I'm a wrestler. I'm a husband. I'm a father. You know, I'm

also a sometime appreciator of Van Gogh, whatever. Those are all the fractured parts of me. Because we all know, what am I going to do tonight? Am I going to stay with my kid? Am I going to go to the synagogue? Am I gonna watch the Van Gogh exhibit? And maybe I'll go wrestle. So, all of that is the fractured part.

But beneath it all, it seems to me there are different layers. So look at it this way. First of all, there's the most surface layer where you're in my class. I say, "Josh Holo." You say, "Here!" That's who you are. Or a little below that, there's all the numbers that make you who you are. The stuff they steal when they steal your identity, you know. I got all my passwords. I got numbers and Social Security number. It's driving me nuts. I'm a numbered person. I got too many numbers. That's my identity though, you know. The real 123-89-77...

HOLO: Those numbers add up.

HOFFMAN: They add up. That's great. That's lovely. I'm going to use that someday. So that's a little layer below it. Since we are looking to matter in the world, I go back to that, we have consciousness of who we are and conscience, which means we feel we need to amount to something. There's something we think deeper is calling us. Different languages that we use. So, there are two philosophers that have appealed to me. One is Charles Taylor who I like to quote. And that Charles Taylor says that the deepest level of identity is the self in moral space. Even if you say you have no moral space, that's your moral space.

HOLO: Right. Right.

HOFFMAN: So the deepest level is when we say, "Here I stand." This is me. This is the essence. I mean, I can do wrestling today but I can become a boxer tomorrow. Or turn from both of them because I decide it's violent, and decide instead I'll go and smell the flowers like Ferdinand the Bull. That's fine too. But that's changeable. But somehow or other, we feel that at your very essence, you should stand for something. You might grow in it, but you feel that that you've got to stand for something. They say that Martin Luther said, "Here I stand." If he said it, I can't say I said it first. I'm sure lots of people said it. But I want to say, "Here I stand." That's the essence. The other lovely image is Daniel. Daniel Dennett the philosopher. He says, "The self must be at the center of narrative gravity." I love that.

HOLO: That's beautiful.

HOFFMAN: We have a story about who we are. And we get that story from the grand story of our room. And then we, because we meet people in the hall, we factor in the world. On the day we die, we think of what our eulogy is going to be. We hope someone will say we stood for something profound, deep, something mattered to us. It wasn't just, hey, you know, whatever. And secondly, we're part of something big. And that's the moral - that's the narrative gravity that we think...

HOLO: We want to write ourselves into.

HOFFMAN: Yeah, write ourselves into it. That's right. So, I don't see that that's a hierarchy by the way. All these things exist simultaneously. But I'm willing to say that's deeper and more important.

HOLO: Yeah, that's what I meant by hierarchy.

HOFFMAN: I guess you're right if that's what you – there are hierarchy, you know, ever since feminism has a connotation.

HOLO: No, but hierarchy definitely has bad connotations. I don't mean to – but I mean it neutrally. Priority.

HOFFMAN: Then I agree with you. People – look, some people don't have food and drink and they're being beaten to death by members of their family, or they're persecuted or something like that. They don't have the luxury to sit around thinking, "What'll I be? What matters?" They're just lucky to live from day to day. But if you're fortunate enough, as we are, we've been graced with this kind of moment in history and our place in the world. We get to ask the deeper questions, which I think is universal.

HOLO: And if I may push back, your whole point about that which is universally human is that yes, the poor person who is struggling just to survive is also thinking about these things. They care about what they – they have a consciousness.

HOFFMAN: Yes, they do.

HOLO: And yes, they're suffering. We should be humbled by our abundance and our kind of – the absurdity of our...

HOFFMAN: You have a point there.

HOLO: But people are people and they care. They sacrifice for their children.

HOFFMAN: No, I stand corrected. I do. You're right. I guess what I meant to say is, we have the luxury to think about it and develop a whole theory about the thing. And they don't have to do that. But we are human.

HOLO: There's an absurdity to our...

HOFFMAN: So now you just said that, how can you not believe in universalism?

HOLO: No, it's not – okay so I also agreed with you and am willing to concede. I do think that the human condition has universal qualities. I think that universal - rather than a universality of our humanity - I bridle at universalism that is a philosophy that we can say that which is my limit is also your limit because my limit is so obviously universal. Right? Obviously, there's only one God. And we Jews, I think it is incumbent upon us from a sociological and historical perspective to be sensitive to this and to rally for particularism as a moral good, which is to say, "How dare you? How dare you tell me where the boundaries are? You who think only because you don't have your ideas challenged everywhere you look every day, you have indulged in the fantasy that just because you're not challenged it is therefore universal. Shame on you."

We who know what it is like to exist in a world where we don't look in the mirror all the time, but we have to look across a gap and see that there is another because we are so few.

Because statistically we can't go through our day with the facile assumption of what we believe is universal. We who live in an enlightenment society, where we can do that exercise and then yell out, "I'm different," and still enjoy the absurd abundance, of which you spoke before, of our modern lives. If we have both of those things, the ability to experience otherness and the luxury of not suffering for it, then we have to be a voice that says, "The universal claim is an intrinsically false claim," and that value and goodness does not come from the shared universalist, of which isn't just me saying that my good is a universal good, but rather the seeing of the other on their terms in accepting the obligation to live productively with that other.

HOFFMAN: It might be that we are just coming at it with different beginning points because it's not as if I disagree with you in your final formation, but even as you speak it, it seems to me you're speaking like a universalist. You're making the universalist claim that every people would make about their own identity. What you just said now, you speak it as a Jew, but I can imagine it in the room where the Christians are, some good Christian liberal friend of mine is saying the same thing. If, therefore, you're saying the same thing that person is saying, then the very claim that we live our identities through our particularism is a universal claim. So, it all depends how you look at it.

HOLO: Alright.

HOFFMAN: I'd like to go back to prayer if I can for a minute. Because where we are now in the conversation is, whether you consider coming at it from a particularist position or whether you consider the realization that we're all human beings in a human condition, we have reached the point where we realize that in this stage in history. we've moved from a zero-sum gain as Jews, where we're not just talking about you're right and I'm wrong, but we're trying to appreciate the other, in your language, and we therefore, are more and more engaged in what it is to be human and the human condition. So, one of the things I want to say about prayer, is that prayer, I think, is a level of discourse that does justice to the human condition. When you enter the prayer room, synagogue, or any prayer space, you can't expect the same sort of rhetoric or the same kind of discourse that you get elsewhere. Now in fact, I tell my students that what's really important is to raise the level of discourse. That's not just papering over something. When people are having an argument, sometimes you can raise the level of discourse and it takes on a higher understanding of what we're all about.

HOLO: Absolutely.

HOFFMAN: And I'm going to give you an example, alright. I mentioned to you earlier, I'm thinking about retiring. And so, people say to me things like, "Why are you retiring? When are you going to retire?" You know, all that kind of thing. And those are all the questions that are good questions. So, my first answers ought to be something like, "Well, you know, tired of what I'm doing." I mean I'm not. I'm trying to think of all the answers somebody could give, you know. Or, "Well, I want to travel the world and see the Taj Mahal," or whatever it is. But actually, I found myself saying, to my surprise actually, I found myself saying to a friend when he asked me, "Why are you retiring," I said, "I think God is not done with me yet." And the minute I said it, I believed it. Now it's not as if I believed it before I said it. It's not as if I had this concept of God who is pulling the strings and was saying, "Come on over here. You've got something to do over here." I don't believe that for a minute. But the question of

what to do with my life at this stage is so profound when I recognized I have limited years to go. God willing, it will be more than a few. But you don't know at this stage.

People I know are dying and going to the hospital and they're no longer what they were. And you realize who knows. So it has this profound importance to me. And without knowing it, there bubbled up inside me a God statement. And when I said it, I believed it in the same sense that I believe any great poetic line. In the same way that I believe anything. You talked about Churchill before – any one of those great statements. Now, it's not as if you believe literally the things that some of those people say, but when they say it, a great poet talks, you nod and you say, "Yeah, that's what it is." Prayer is that kind of poetry.

So, I go to pray because I find a level of discourse that does justice to the deepest aspirations of the human condition. And that's what prayer should give us. We should walk out of the prayer room nodding as it were. And saying, "Yeah, oh yeah." Like we read a great poem. But more than just read it, we made it up. You know, we – yeah, because of the way we all get together.

HOLO: Yeah. Yeah.

HOFFMAN: Yeah.

HOLO: Well I want to thank you for everything you've done to advance exactly that. And particularly for this super fun, extremely interesting conversation.

HOFFMAN: I loved it. I loved it.

HOLO: Just a pleasure.

HOFFMAN: It's an honor. Thanks for inviting me.

HOLO: Thank you for coming.

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