COLLEGE COMMONS BULLY PULPIT

RABBI EVE MENCHER: BEING ON THE MARGINS

(Begin audio)

HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bullypulpit 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. And it is my great pleasure to welcome you all to sit in on my conversation between me and Rabbi Eve Mencher who serves as URJ faculty for Sacred Caring Community. Eve welcome to the Bullypulpit, and thank you for joining us.

MENCHER: It's my pleasure to be here.

HOLO: So I want to ask you a question about what it means to be marginal or marginalized, or to feel marginalized because the way I see it we all feel marginalized at least some of the time.

MENCHER: I think you're right Josh that the issue of feeling on the margin is something every one of us experiences. And it's why it's excruciating at times for us to watch in a movie or in our lives when we see somebody feeling that they're rejected, that they can't enter a room, that they have to hide who they are in order to exist from day to day. In some ways it's hopeful that we all sometimes feels marginalized because it means we're able to empathize with people for whom that's a more constant experience.

HOLO: I get why we should be more empathic but it's hard for us to be empathic. There are certain types of marginalization that I think a lot of us find difficult to get past when we see it in another person, a lack of generosity on our part.

MENCHER: Are you saying that when someone seems different than we are in some way that's objectionable that we tend to have to fight ourselves to do the right thing to invite them in?

HOLO: Yes.

MENCHER: So let's talk about that for a moment because, I'm a rabbi, and I'm also a psychoanalyst, and I work with people individually but I also work with whole communities. And we can think about that each of us has parts of ourselves that we hide, that we are uncomfortable with. And I think that when we see someone who isn't able to enter the group we are reminded about how possible it could be for us to be excluded. And I think about elementary school or middle school where there's someone who's different than the other kids. And in order to feel accepted you need to be the same. I don't know if you

remember the novel by Jerzy Kosinski *The Painted Bird* and Jerzy Kosinski took his own life at some point after he was a child in the Holocaust. He was a child who was separated from his parents, for a time lived in the forest. But his image of *The Painted Bird* was drawn from his telling the story of what would happen in a group of birds if one were to be painted different than the others and what do you think would happen. What happened to that bird was that the others would peck it to death. And I think this is a very brutal way of thinking of marginalization and what causes it, but our fear of difference often – and our fear of being the different one often causes us to close ranks in ways that are cruel but also that we imagine to be self-protective. So why should we bother with accepting people on the margins? Why should we do this?

HOLO: So why bother?

MENCHER: Exactly. We need to remember that the very acceptance we are sometimes enjoying, the very sense of belonging is countered by the possibility that either in our personal or our communal history, or in our personal or communal future there will be times when we really are not like everyone else in the group whether it is because we'll age and no longer be the person we were, or whether it is because the political climate changes, or where we live changes. So this fluidity of being reminded that the mentality of protecting the group is very dangerous if it doesn't also bring in the other.

HOLO: You said that there are times when we all have to negotiate or downright hide our difference just to get by. And a lot of time we do it and it's worth it. We hide our difference and it allows for certain functionality.

MENCHER: Sometimes there are aspects of us that are different that we are able to successfully hide without much, at least without cost that we're aware of and it seems to benefit us to hide that.

HOLO: It seems to be worth it.

MENCHER: Okay. So I also want to make a distinction between difference and something that has stigma, shame, and danger associated with it.

HOLO: Okay.

MENCHER: You know, because that's important.

HOLO: Not all differences…

MENCHER: Not all differences – negative. You might be hiding the fact that you are more intelligent than someone else in order to not threaten them and to be hired for a job. And yes, there is a slight danger in having higher intelligence than the person interviewing you. But that's a temporary thing. I want to look at aspects that in the situation you're in it would be dangerous to reveal, you know. Sometimes it's the fact that you're Jewish for some people. Sometimes it's the fact that you have had a psychiatric history. Sometimes, you know, do you put down yes I have been treated for depression. Yes, I was hospitalized. You

know, sometimes it may be your sexual orientation. Sometimes it could be your age. Any number of things. But as we list those we know in certain situations some of those have been, will be risky. So we have to assess that. And there are those in the world who will say it is cowardice to hide those aspects of our identity because we're not helping stigma to be removed unless we reveal it and we should…

HOLO: We're not carrying the battle standard.

MENCHER: Yes I should say I am a Jew. I should wear a Star of David wherever I am, whatever the consequences. So I want to speak about that for one moment and say just the reality is that some of us are in a position to hide. And some of us have things we can't hide, if it's race, if it is a visible physical disability, if there is an age discrimination and if you're very young or very old, unless you are really good at camouflaging that's going to be obvious, you know unless you have an appearance that is not traditionally seen as Jewish. So let's say there are people who are not in the position, who often cannot hide the thing that discomforts others, discomforts them, makes them feel you're not like me.

HOLO: So hiding isn't always the issue.

MENCHER: It's not always possible. But let's talk about when it is the issue because of how vital I think it is for psychological and spiritual well-being to have somewhere you feel fully accepted and known. So I am curious, should we always be revealing? Is it the best thing to announce the thing that is stigmatizing and get it over with and say, "Look, like me or don't like me."

HOLO: This is who I am.

MENCHER: I want to speak about someone who isn't a Jewish person but is a very brilliant psychologist Marsha Linehan. She is the person who developed something called dialectical behavioral therapy. And why I want to mention her is because her work is with people who have chronic suicidal behavior and self-inflicted violence. People for whom it is touch and go whether they can go on living. And her goal has been to develop a spiritually and behaviorally approach that would help people to develop lives worth living. And when I was in a workshop with her I was very surprised when she talked about stigma and shame because she was saying how should people manage those emotions. And when someone said what if a person is living in a situation where if they reveal something about themselves they will experience rejection and risk. And I was surprised. What she said was they should assess can they change the environment safely. And if not they should either move or hide it. Like get out of Germany. Don't stay here or hide it. But do not feel – do not just reveal this and endanger yourself. And I thought this was important in not outing people. And I don't just mean that in whether they're gay or not but outing anything, their disability, their psychiatric history, their employment history. That we see it as dishonesty but it is also survival. Why I tell this particular story with for me enormous poignancy. Dr. Linehan's work is used all around the world in top medical centers. It has saved so many lives. In the past, I don't know when in the past five years, on the front cover of the New York Times there was an article that said when Marsha Linehan was an adolescent and young adult she was the most seriously disturbed child that was on the unit and young adult of psychiatric hospitals.

She allowed her records to be revealed. She had been chronically suicidal. This self-destruction continued into her young adult live and it wasn't until she had a sense of God's love, she is a practicing Catholic and Buddhist, that she suddenly began to find a way to live. It was with therapy too. She chose not to reveal this until she was about 67. Why? Because she could not have done the powerful work if she was rejected early on as somebody who was seen as mentally ill. But when she had achieved what she did she could then say, "Yes I have suffered mental illness." Raise the possibility of other people knowing what they could become and do but do it from a place of safety. And I say that so that I don't think we should always judge others who hide something because they may be doing something that in the long run will make a greater difference than had they revealed this too soon.

HOLO: And they also need to be able to make that evaluation on their own about their own lives.

MENCHER: And the impact. So I also respected – I learned her approach before I knew she was using it personally. That being said, I want to also speak about people whose marginality, so to speak, is something that is not easily hidden. And I think it's important because those among us who can hide something are watching every moment what happens to those who can't hide to know when they can be their true selves. Are you following what I'm saying?

HOLO: Absolutely.

MENCHER: The child who is himself a nighttime bed wetter is watching how the class reacts to the little kid who wets his pants in the classroom. And if he sees that that child is treated with compassion his relief and relaxation about his lovability, acceptability will be enhanced and raised. If he sees that child shamed and laughed at, and if the teacher is impatient think what happens to his feeling, first, I must hide the fact that I'm a bed wetter, but it becomes first I must hide anything that people will see as a defect, as a weakness, as not the same as others. So it has far ranging effects. So why should we worry about the person who is in a wheelchair if they can't get in if there's only one such person we know of, and a large congregation that can get in and is enjoying their worship? Well there are many reasons. Why do we have to bother? I think that is one of the things you asked, why do we? One reason is obviously because everyone of us is made in the image of God. Because we don't know what the contributions and needs, both what the person in the wheelchair who's using a wheelchair can bring. We don't know who they are. And what will we lose by their absence? And what do they need of us? But in addition to that, every person who sees that no one is left on the outside breathes a sigh of relief that I will not be left outside when my time comes.

HOLO: So my question wasn't actually why. I get the why. It's the how. On the assumption, based on my own personal experience looking into myself, not because I'm a student of this. How do we do this when our capacity to engage with different modes of difference is itself different, the capacity within us? Because the difference affects us differently. Do you see what I'm saying? A person who considers how can I welcome a person in a wheelchair develops an answer to that question from a different place than

when they asked the question how can I welcome a whole population of people who are going through really hard divorces, or an individual who's going through a really ugly divorce that they don't want to share, or they do, whatever it is. I don't have the same spirit or motivation with those two populations.

MENCHER: I think, Josh, you've asked several questions. And let me tease out and make sure I'm addressing all of them because I couldn't always tell which person you would think it would be easier to accept.

HOLO: I wasn't telegraphing which one.

MENCHER: So we don't know. So let's just say what every situation has in common, which is to the degree that we see the person who looks different, or is in a life situation different from our own, or perhaps more importantly one in which we feel some sense of moral censure because a person who is in a wheelchair who we know was born with a disability or a person who's using a wheelchair who we know was in a car crash…

HOLO: We don't impute any failure on that person.

MENCHER: Except if we think that they happened to have been in a gang and were involved in a violence.

HOLO: Or drunk driving.

MENCHER: Or drunk driving and they were the driver. So we do look for is this the blame worthy person in the divorce or not. So let's take that apart for a minute and say the first thing we need to do is recognize that there is some way in which the person's current status is making us see them not as a person who happens to use a wheelchair, or a person who's going through a divorce but as a divorced person who was abusive to their wife. In other words, what causes us to see that person as different. We're making that before that they're a person. In other words…

HOLO: I disagree. I see the opposite. What we're saying is this is a whole person. This is a whole person with flaws and strengths and what have you. And I'm not looking at the wheelchair. I'm actually looking at the whole person. And I'm not looking at whether or not he come single to the oneg. I'm looking at the story that that person – so…

MENCHER: You think that causes more marginalization?

HOLO: I have no idea but I don't think it's – I think it's the opposite of oversimplifying it. I think it's actually engaging with the complexity of people rather than…

MENCHER: I hear what you're saying but I'm wondering about it because Matan Koch is a person who's active in the Reform Movement who is now doing disabilities inclusion work. And he uses a wheelchair. And it's my belief that he has cerebral palsy since birth. He's also a Harvard educated lawyer but this is the work he's doing now. And what one of the things Matan has said to me when people talk about language of disabilities inclusion, you

know, it is not wheelchair bound is out, uses a wheelchair because that person is not bound, you know, in this. I'm telling you this because I've learned these things as I've done this work. But you're supposed to use people first language. It's a person who has cerebral palsy rather than a spastic person, you know, or something. It's a person with autism rather than an autistic person, though many people with autism want to be identified as autistic; it's complicated.

HOLO: It's complicated.

MENCHER: But what I want to say is Matan recently said something that I, Matan says many things from which I learn. And one of the things he said was, you know, of course I want people to be sensitive and there is PC language and language that at least evidents the person has thought about the impact. But most of the time people haven't been educated about it. And what matters more is do they see me as a whole person or is all they're noticing is my wheelchair and my disability? Do they see the whole person? So it sounds different from what you said…

HOLO: No, it's exactly what I said.

MENCHER: Oh you were saying that. I misunderstood.

HOLO: But I was complicating that. What I'm saying is if you do that and you take it seriously then you do engage with the moralizing because you've cast dispersions on the moralizing. And I'm saying the moralizing is part of the dimensionality which you're espousing.

MENCHER: That may be.

HOLO: So what prevents us from – forget the institutional questions of putting in a ramp for wheelchairs, as important as that is and none of us dismisses that, but let's take a step back. What impedes, I'm arguing that there's 16 different impediments to my ability to engage with that person's dimensionality and that person's story. And there are different impediments for different cases because one reacts differently when he engages with what one encounters. And from a communal effort, such as yours, help me disentangle the varieties of impediments that you have to engage with to help bring them down. That strikes me as very big. I'm admiring saying this. I'm not dismissive.

MENCHER: You know, the thing about a good conversation is you think of things that are a new way of thinking about them. And as you ask me this and challenge me, it occurs to me I have to do that every time I meet a person. If I meet someone I'm going to immediately form opinions based on where do you live, where do you work, what are you wearing, you know, how much do you weigh, how old are you, what's going on, who's your friend. So I'm always doing that. There's a counter pressure within me saying benefit of the doubt, give the person a chance. I truly believe that it is when we don't see another person. You know, it's like Jacob and Esau. When they could see the face of God in one another's face. When they didn't see someone who will kill me. Someone who is my rival, someone who has good reason to be angry at me. So when we look and see not, my God, I'm afraid my grandchild

will also have autism so I don't want to be near this child because not that it's contagious but it reminds me of something that could happen. Or I don't want to fear that my disease could be so degenerative that I will need to use a wheelchair. So if we can get past that…

HOLO: Can I point something out?

MENCHER: Please.

HOLO: At the risk of revealing my ignorance. There is a rhetoric afoot in this type of conversation. And you have echoed it just now by focusing on fear. The imputation of fear to the person who insists on the walls and rejects. So the empowered, comfortable person who in one measure or another rejects the marginal person is frequently assumed to be motivated by a kind of fear one way or the other. What about raw social laziness? We actually aren't rejecting anybody. We are just too morally, socially lazy to get into gear to do what is in fact work of crawling out of one's own self and engaging on different terms.

MENCHER: I think you're right. That's why people remain on the margins because it's going to require more work or more challenging my own preconceptions. I still think that there's some fear there. I also want to say fear is fear of making a mistake too. By the way, it's not always – it's like how do I do this right? I'm going to say this stupid thing. I'm going to say the stupid… You know, when I – yes you will and somebody may get mad at you but when I used to do work with congregations about how do you visit somebody who's bereaved or who's sick, and there were always – sometimes people didn't go 'cause they were sure they would say the wrong thing. But yes you might. And the person might even say they look upset but how much worse to be left alone.

HOLO: Right.

MENCHER: You know, we're protecting but it's still fear. Another kind of fear.

HOLO: I agree that that fear is there. I just don't hear people talking about raw laziness and I think it's a powerful force. I just wonder if that's a useful way to understand resistance to your work.

MENCHER: I guess this is what it's making me think of. Making me think of little boys sometimes, and girls do it too but girls are more likely in our culture to be able to say, "I'm scared. I'm confused." So if you try and take a little boy to an amusement park where he might be frightened, our culture will allow his sister to say, "I don't want to go on the roller coaster." But, and hopefully this will change, but culturally her brother might say, "It's stupid. It's boring. I don't want to go there." So I think sometimes things get identified as unimportant to me or that really if we go a little deeper it's I doubt whether this person's coming in is going to change my whole community. It's going to threaten.

HOLO: I confess.

MENCHER: I don't know. It's a possibility.

HOLO: It doesn't resonate with me that way. It resonates with me that the language of fear is actually masquerading laziness. And laziness, to me, strikes me as a much, much harder thing to overcome because it's inertial. And it's very, very monumental.

MENCHER: But what's the laziness? For instance, what if a person who is gay comes into a situation in which he or she is a minority? What would be the social inertia?

HOLO: I'll tell you what it would be. It would be encapsulated in the phrase which would be poo-pooed as masquerading fear but I think is in fact honest which is I don't want to deal with it. Whatever that deal with it is. I mean I don't know what it actually entails. Who knows? It may entail nothing. But it's not fear that's motivating my projection of some work that I don't want to do. It is in fact simply that whenever I'm encountered with a prospect of any work I might want to do I don't want to do it. And here's my thing. Let's make this very mild, not about wheelchairs of sexual orientation. Let's make it about kiddish, Shabbos morning, in a synagogue you've never been to, in a nusach that you're not so comfortable with in the first place and you don't remember the melodies in the service but you go anyway. And after you're at kiddish and you're nibbling on your black and white cookie alone. There are no colder winds than the winds of ignoring and loneliness at a kiddish. I speak as perpetrator and victim as it were. And they're not afraid of me. They're just comfortable. They're in their own place. Sure you can articulate why they should welcome me. You want a new member at the very least. But that's not what's active. What's active here they've had a long week. They're with their friends at Shabbos. And they're having a great conversation. They're catching up on the grandkids and yeah, whatever. I mean they don't even know I'm there. And if they do know I'm there they look over and they may acknowledge but they're not going to do anything. And it's not because they're afraid of me. Nor am I afraid of them when I'm the perpetrator here. It's because I'm lazy.

MENCHER: So can we think about that and just take it apart a little bit?

HOLO: Yeah.

MENCHER: You're reminding me of early on in my return to Jewish life. I met with my rabbi then. My kids were very small. And she suggested that I come to the Shabbat morning minyan. And I would love it. And the people would be so welcoming and that would be a great place for me to re-enter. And so I came in and it happened that the rabbi's administrative assistant was sitting there, an older woman, and she said, "Sit next to me. Please sit down." I said, "Are you sure no one's sitting there." She said, "No, it's wonderful. I'm so glad you're here." And I sat down. I didn't know many people. And a moment later a woman came barreling angry out of the ladies' room and said, "Who the hell is in my seat? I sit here every week. What are you doing here? Who told you – who told her she could sit here?"

HOLO: Who told her she could sit here?

MENCHER: I mean it actually broke the ice because I started to laugh. I said, "I'll move. I'll move." So at that moment I got both the beauty and the limits of Jewish community. And what do we go there for? She went there because she wanted her seat. She wanted to feel

welcome. This is my place. I can relax. I don't have to work. I don't have to let her sit here. I don't have to be nice, right. But at the same time as the rabbi and everyone else said, "But you do." So let me just say that tension, it really was very funny to me. I couldn't look at her for years afterwards. She threw me out in this great… And let me add to that that I brought my children to Jerusalem in my first year of rabbinical school. And I cannot even tell you what my son's experience was in elementary school in Baka in second grade. And he said, "My mother told me at the sader that we welcome the stranger. And I'm a Jew and a kid in the class just punched me in the face." In Israel. Okay, so we have the ideal and we have the reality. And the beauty is in the tension between the two because the fact that you're even mentioning being the one at the kiddish who no one's talking to and being the one who doesn't want to talk to the person is what this is all about. It is about sometimes I really do need to talk to my friends and I do need the comfort of I belong and I don't want anyone new here. Even might be good for the synagogue but it's not good for me. I come here to see my friends. But that's okay because we do need to have that. But we also need to stretch. We need to do – you're right it's work. I want to reframe what I mean by fear. It can be (inaudible) fear. I fear you're messing up my conversation. I fear you're going to ruin my Friday because I was seeing my friends. Let's not look at fear as you're going to stab me, kill, me, rob the coffers. Too strong.

HOLO: I think that fear is a word that…

MENCHER: Discomfort.

HOLO: No, it's not even discomfort. I really – look, I don't know what it is for others. I know that as far as I can know myself it's not that fear is quantitatively too drastic a term, it's that it's qualitatively non-descriptive.

MENCHER: So let's look at the simple will to leave things as they are and to be in our comfortable realm.

HOLO: That's inertia.

MENCHER: It's security. Can we also call it security because we're in a comfortable frame and way of being? And to reach out beyond this is going to require effort. It may not be fear. It may simply be – he may be a nice guy; I don't need another friend right now. But he may need another friend. He may need to be…

HOLO: I agree why we shouldn't give into laziness. I get the why. I get the why.

MENCHER: So how about the how?

HOLO: How do you fight laziness?

MENCHER: I believe we fight laziness when we make ourselves exercise because we truly believe it is a benefit to us. The cost of excluding people is an impoverishment of our world and of our character, and that we really are losing something. It is only when we believe that there is benefit do we do it. I mean it may – you know, there was just a vote at a (inaudible)

to say that the URJ encourages and wholeheartedly says that people who have non-traditional gender identity or non-conforming gender identity, or transsexual should be welcomed. Okay, this didn't require very hard work of anybody in the room.

HOLO: No, because they were converted already.

MENCHER: There was not a no in the room. It was entirely ayes. But what does that tell us? Even though they didn't do the work yet and maybe if it was at (inaudible) "Oh no, I'm going to have to respond to that person." But think how good they felt. The feeling was it is in my benefit to feel like I'm part of goodness.

HOLO: If it's not in our self-interest then it's not…

MENCHER: Even if the self-interest is to feel I am good. But I also do believe that we meet people we would never meet. We discover so much richness of life in meeting people who are different than ourselves in some way. So I do believe you're there with the cost benefit. Like Marsha Linehan who says hide 'til you can make effective difference. This is saying teach yourself from earliest childhood with your children, teach yourself as you grow to look beyond what makes you lazy, makes you afraid to whatever it makes you feel to say, "Yes it is a human right. Yes, this is a person with a story."

HOLO: And yes it enriches me.

MENCHER: I will gain from living and being part of creating a world in which nobody's really on the outside who wants to come in.

HOLO: Thank you for all the incredible work you do on behalf of our movement and representing us.

MENCHER: Thank you for this fabulous opportunity to have this kind of challenging and dynamic conversation.

HOLO: Thank you.

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