

RABBI AARON PANKEN: JEWISH TEXTS MATTER

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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 real pleasure to welcome my friend, colleague, and the President of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, Aaron Panken. Aaron, thanks for joining us.

PANKEN: Thanks Josh. It's great to be here. I'm very excited to be part of the Bullypulpit.

HOLO: Well I get to talk to you about something dear to both of our hearts and something that governs the business that you and I share here at the college which is texts. Jewish texts are great but why should people who have busy lives and other concerns bother studying them? Why are Jewish texts important?

PANKEN: As a person who began life as a Reform Jew and didn't have an enormous amount of exposure in early education to Jewish texts I came to the study of texts a little bit later in my life. And really I would say mostly in high school I had the experience of being with some really wonderfully intelligent rabbis and texts scholars who began to study Bible, began to study commentaries with me. And also eventually to Mishnah and eventually to (inaudible) and Talmud. And what I found was I never felt as much a part of the Jewish people as when I sat in front of a text and I read words that someone had written two or three thousand years ago that had been studied and interpreted and reinterpreted over all these centuries. I felt that I became part of the ongoing life the Jewish people because I became part of that interpretive chain.

HOLO: How much of that experience was a function of the gifts of the rabbis who introduced you and how much of it was a function of this experience that you so eloquently described?

PANKEN: Well really it's a combination. And I think extraordinary teachers are able to help texts come alive in a way that takes a text that might initially appear boring or irrelevant or disconnected, you can see that actually there are values in that text. There are conflicts and struggles that human beings have been having and experiencing since the beginning of time in one form or another. And that those are very much alive in our own lives. So I think, you know, the value of the teacher is to be able to take a text that has been around for a long time and make it relevant and immediate for the student. But the texts themselves, when you get to the point where you've studied for a while you begin to be able to interpret texts yourself in a way that actually can bring that meaning out, sometimes even without a teacher. And so when I sit, for example, with havruta or if I'm studying to prepare

sometimes, you know, for a class or even just sitting by myself studying, there are very meaningful experiences that come out of a text for me when I'm just reading and trying to interpret it myself. And so I think there are kind of two phases to that where you start with a teacher and then you get to a point where you can do it yourself as you grow.

HOLO: So we're going to get back to some of those texts and experiences that maybe live most powerfully for you. But I want to get back to something about the way you introduced your own engagement with texts. You said you were raised as a Reform Jew and you found these texts only later in life. It's hard for me not to hear an implicit critique of Reform Judaism that texts are not made a part of Reform Jewish life early on.

PANKEN: Well, look, I think it varies, you know, from congregation to congregation, school to school. You know, different individuals have very different experiences within the Reform Movement. I have been an advocate for a long time in writing and thinking about this that I think it is important for us to take on the task of studying Jewish texts very sincerely, very strongly early in our children's lives. And to make sure, also, that there's kind of a curriculum or at least access to text study that goes on throughout the entirety of a person's life cycle. Why? If I think about how I studied a text when I was 18 years old and then I come back to that text when I'm 30, and then I come back to that text when I'm 60, I imagine it; I'm not yet 60. But at some point I imagine I will come back to a text and look at in a very different way given the difference of my own perspective. And there have been examples of in the prayer book, for example, of prayers that I've said daily or a couple times a week for years and then until I get to a particular moment in time when I've had an experience that opens up a deeper, different kind of meaning in that prayer, I will see that prayer entirely differently. And a prayer that I had really taken as something I never fully understood become deeply meaningful.

HOLO: The way you just described deriving meaning from these texts seems to me very similar to what anyone, anywhere derives from great art and meaningful things anyway. So why bother with the Jewish part?

PANKEN: Let me respond to that actually with a story. Which is when I was a rabbinical student in Israel I went to Beth Hatefutsoth, Diaspora Museum, and there was a large set, I think they're still there although it's been renovated, there were a large set of models of old European synagogues that are in that room.

HOLO: Yeah, I know.

PANKEN: I remember looking at all those models of the synagogues and I chuckled to myself and I was kind of pointing out, "Oh look at that. That synagogue was made almost like a log cabin." The synagogue was this way and that way. And I was kind of laughing at the whole thing. And there was an older man standing beside one of the models and he said, "Why are you laughing?" And I said, "Well, I don't know. I just find the different models are kind of funny. It doesn't, you know, I grew up in a New York City synagogue. These just seem kind of rustic and almost silly to me." And he said, "You shouldn't laugh at that actually. That's your family. Those are your people. And even a synagogue model that looks very strange to you is something that is connected to you in a very deep and meaningful

way.” And that’s what I feel when I study texts. I get to hear Rabbi Akiva; he’s part of my family. I get to hear Maimonides talk about something; he’s part of my family. I can understand it in a different way and it’s the combination of kind of the family conversation and how meaningful that is for me to listen thousands of years later and somehow feel a connection. That’s why Jewish texts matter. That’s why it’s different than reading a science fiction book, or reading a newspaper, or Shakespeare, or anything else you can read.

HOLO: As great as those things are.

PANKEN: Exactly. And there’s meaning and import to them too but there’s a different level of connection that I have and I feel when I engage in Jewish texts.

HOLO: It’s ours. Which really forces me to go back to what I see as an important critique and something for us to think about. What if, given the fact that you came to texts late and that you are probably representative or worse, you’re not representative insofar as many Reform Jews never come to texts at all? If that is the situation we find ourselves in in Reform Judaism, what if the absence of texts in liberal Jewish lives is not merely a coincidence of liberalism and absence of texts but in fact a correlation between our liberalism and our absence of texts?

PANKEN: Well, look, I think one of the challenges, I mean you bring up the challenge of liberalism which I think is inherent in some of the conversations we have about texts. So for example, and it works in two ways that I can discern right at this moment. One way is liberals tend not to privilege one text over another. So that means, you know, a text which is very meaningful to me, for example the Talmud, I will not look at the Talmud in the same way I will look at the New Testament, for example, even though there are many parallels and there are interesting pieces that are in both of them. And from a scholarly perspective there’s plenty to be learned by comparing them. But when I look at the New Testament, that for me is not a sacred text at the same level as certainly the Torah or, you know, the Talmud. And that, again, is because our family has in a sense edited these texts in as part of our collection and edited the New Testament out. So those are communal decisions that have been made for thousands of years. You know, and you make those decisions on a regular basis. So liberalism will say to me, “Well there might be something valuable actually to the study of the New Testament and therefore I can’t really say that my text is better or privileged over another text.” I would actually try to knock that down frankly. I think there is a connection to your text, as I mentioned before, that makes that text somehow more important to you than the other text.

HOLO: Not platonically better but better for you.

PANKEN: Better for you because they’re part of – they’re related to you.

HOLO: They’re yours.

PANKEN: They’re yours, right. And so that means that the other texts still can have plenty of scholarly value. It can be interesting to study. It can even shed light on the texts that matter most to you.

HOLO: And can be better for the community to which it belongs.

PANKEN: Correct. Correct. And so – and in fact the dialogue between you and your understanding of your text and the other community and the understanding of the text can be fruitful and very interesting, right? So that's...

HOLO: And it couldn't happen if we were mutually committed, or respectively that is committed to our...

PANKEN: Correct. And it also couldn't happen if we weren't liberal enough to even have the conversation. So that's the first case of liberalism. The second case of liberalism is also to say when we think about applying texts there are going to be pieces in those texts that don't make the jump to the modern world. And liberals do have the ability to say, you know, I'm going to read, for example in Deuteronomy, one of my favorite, most difficult passages in the Torah says that if you have a rebellious son (Hebrew) that essentially you should take him to the city gates, have him adjudicated by the elders, and stone him to death. Okay. And there's plenty of commentary after that, in fact, that says this never happened. It never took place. Of course, the commentators distance themselves from this. And there is in a sense a liberalism even early in Jewish tradition which says there are things that we actually cannot apply and we should continue that. Some of the texts that are most of concern in terms of gender relations certainly are problematic and they're kinds of things we should take a liberal approach, in my opinion, too. But I also want to say that we shouldn't dismiss out of hand the value of those texts. We should study them and there's something to be gained by learning them. But we have to contextualize them in a greater...

HOLO: And even when we choose to edit something out effectively, or radically edit it we're doing it from a place of prior commitment and assumed commitment.

PANKEN: And there are other values that come to play in that we apply which say which texts we're going to edit. You can't simply say I don't like that text. You have to be able to weigh those two values and make a decision.

HOLO: You can't walk away from it just because. Fine, but insofar as learning is a resource allocation of the single most precious resource any of us has which is time, it seems to be there's some game and the liberalism and the Judaism are slightly more at odds than the binaries you've set up in the following way. It's not for most liberal Jews favoring Talmud over the New Testament in the ideologically understandable ways that you described. It's much more complicatedly about them learning about Shakespeare and memorizing them Declaration of Independence which they do claim to own similarly at the expense of the time it takes to learn Hebrew or Aramaic and the texts. That strikes me as a much more pointed problem for liberalism and the lack of texts.

PANKEN: Now let me say a couple things about that. So I'm not sure how many people are really memorizing the Declaration of Independence these days and that's a whole other issue to throw in there because it's an important issue. The question of oral traditions and maintaining and preserving. We live in a society where things happen in 140 characters and

then they disappear from your screen and they're gone. And that is a completely different mindset than what used to happen which is I'm always reminded of the movie Fahrenheit 451 where people at the very end of this movie, it's an incredible scene where books are being burned and no one has access to books so what do people do? Well they love books so much that they memorize them and walk around and live in a camp and repeat them.

HOLO: And they become the books.

PANKEN: And they become the book.

HOLO: Like we do in Hebrew.

PANKEN: Exactly. We're the people of the book. That's exactly what it is. So I think the interesting question here, I think, is how do we get people to appreciate the value of the books that are handed to them, the texts that are handed to them? And I'm afraid, I actually am worried quite a bit about modern society as we exist now that the ability to really concentrate on a long thought process, the attention span is shortening. The ability to have a deep conversation that's prompted by a thoughtful story, a parable, an analogy, those kinds of things.

HOLO: And specific (inaudible) texts as well.

PANKEN: And so the fact is actually, if you sit down with a group of people and you study a text and you have the experience, a powerful experience of talking through the possible meaning of that text, that's something shared. It makes community. It creates the opportunity for people to reflect of their own life. And it gives you the opportunity to bring a gift of learning that you may not always agree with. But at least it's something that – literature is often thought of it's a kind of gift of a well thought out idea that is presented to you that you can then confront. And so from that perspective I think we ought to be working counter culturally to make sure that we're creating opportunities for people to have this kind of learning. I think it's absolutely vital and I worry about a society in which it doesn't happen.

HOLO: I agree about the quality of the learning. When it comes to the choices of what you apply your time to learn though I do see a game of the class time and the cultural investment we make in Shakespeare or what have you, versus, and I used versus advisedly, Talmud.

PANKEN: Yeah. Look and I wouldn't be the first person to line up to knock Shakespeare. Shakespeare is pretty good, okay. So I don't think I'm going to throw out the entirety of Shakespeare or other classic works that are important. And we should study them. And there is much to be learned from those.

HOLO: And we claim those as ours.

PANKEN: And we claim them as ours. You know, it's a question of canon you're really bringing up here which is, you know, that there is a canon of wonderful literature that we should study and there's no question we should. But I also think that we are in the business,

we Jews, of creating Jewish identity in the next generation. And studying Shakespeare is not going to create Jewish identity. Maybe the Merchant of Venice but that's not the identity I want to create. Right, but so the question is how do you create Jewish identity? How do you give people Jewish experiences that are meaningful and most importantly collectively valuable? So that I have the Jewish experience of reading Talmud. What that does for me, and this is the amazing thing about Jewish texts to me, what that does for me is I can go to Istanbul, I can go to Rio de Janeiro, I can go to Australia, I can even go to Israel and in those places I have a common language because people are going to use terms that I know from the Talmud. People are going to talk about concepts that I know. Even if we disagree, which we will, we still have a basis for communication. And yes you can get that with the classical canon of English literature, sure but there is something to me almost, and I don't want to be too mystical 'cause I'm a cold-hearted rationalist, but I think...

HOLO: For those who can't seem him Aaron has elements of red in his hair which implies a Litvak group.

PANKEN: Exactly. It's probably true. No, but even as a cold-hearted rationalist I do find it spiritual to study texts. And I find it spiritual to show up 6,000 miles away and have somebody talk about a Torah portion in a way that's similar or sometimes radically different than the same way I read it the same week somewhere else. There's something compelling and connecting in that which is really powerful.

HOLO: I completely agree with you. I have had the experience of leafing through thousand-year-old manuscripts where you can smell the ink and the paper. And you can see the Hebrew letters of our forbearers. I've had the privilege of actually reading it. So tell me one of the texts that moves you that way.

PANKEN: Well I'll tell you two of the texts because I hate to have to choose. But one thing that happened to me last week we have a librarian at our New York campus. He has been digging through old collections that we have and cataloging things that have been sitting unread for quite a while. And he pulled out a book from, I think, 1522 which was an early volume of Jewish law. He showed me that on the page written in the hand of the censor was the statement that this book is approved for reading by the Jews in that community.

HOLO: Probably Italian.

PANKEN: Yeah, it was Italian or Spanish, I'm not sure. I didn't have a chance to look closely at it. But what was amazing to me about that was here I had always heard about censors. There are Talmudic texts in which the word "non-Jew" is replaced with the word "Turk" or other words that, you know, to try and clean up the texts. And what that showed was the kind of cultural interaction that took place. And that was absolutely fascinating because here you have Jews living in a world that was very different from them and trying to carve out a Jewish identity and having to live with essentially the mandates of the state in a certain way. And he showed me four or five different books, very small collection, of all these fascinating things.

HOLO: The Venetian printing house Bomberg, despite its name, was effectively not Jewish and they would hire Jews. And there was a negotiation there about how to print and what to print for Jewish consumption.

PANKEN: So even the printed books themselves have a story to tell and a narrative that's absolutely fascinating. Now in terms of narratives or texts that I think are absolutely extraordinary, one that I've studied a lot, I'm actually in the middle of kind of finishing a paper about this is the story of Honi ha-M'agel, Honi the Circle Maker. Fascinating story of Honi who is a magician and whether or not he's accepted by the rabbis. You get in that story, without going into too much detail, you get in that story the tremendous sense of, you know, how is it that we deal with magic. And when magic works how do we treat it? what do we make of that? And so you're a kid who goes to college and finds out that their roommate is using an Ouija board and has some success in predicting the future, one has to confront these issue of magic and, you know, rationality of how one thinks about all these issues. Wonderful story there. The story then goes on to a great Rip Van Winkle story of Honi sleeping for 70 years. Honi comes upon a man. This man is planting a carob tree. And Honi says, "Well, excuse me silly man, why is it that you're planting this carob tree. They take 70 years before the fruit is actually usable so you're never going to see the fruit from this tree." And of course, he says, in a very famous and well-known story, "Well that's true but the fact is that 70 years, you know, my children – my parents planted for me, my ancestors planted for me. I'm planting for my children." So a beautiful sense of continuity and everything else. However, I've studied this story for years. I started doing some research on the symbol of the carob tree and what the carob tree means. And the carob tree you think in that story is something beautiful that he's bequeathing to his children. Honi by the way then goes to sleep for these 70 years. He wakes up. He sees the carob tree has bloomed and his kids are eating. Now the carob tree if you look at it is a symbol of subsistence. It is a symbol of barely being able to eat. It's a symbol of a food that's for animals that humans in suffering have to eat. And what's amazing about what has happened now that I looked at the carob tree element is the rabbis are very concerned with magic. And they don't want magic to actually feed anybody. So the carob tree actually becomes a symbol of something that is suboptimal, that is not good. It's just barely making it. So the point of the story actually becomes – all of this is about Honi the magician he has trouble making rain the right way. He doesn't do that exactly right. Even the story with the sense of the carob tree and everything, which we take in such a beautiful way most of the time, the whole story is about saying dismiss magic. Don't pay attention to it. And it shows the rabbi's tremendous sense of Jewish law and God being at the forefront and not giving even an inch to other kinds of approaches to the mystical, you know, to the powers of the universe. So that's a great example to me of you can study a story for a long time. There are lots of layers and meaning. And the carob tree to me changes the meaning of it entirely. But there are a lot of other ways to read it. And there's a beauty to that kind of multi-valent understanding of different ways to read the story.

HOLO: It's one of the great pleasures of our jobs, yours and mine, that we get to engage not only with the texts but with the future generations of those that will be interpreting them. So I want to say what a pleasure it is to speak with you. And I don't always get the opportunity just to hang with you and talk about ideas. So all the more pleasure. I'm looking forward to the next one.

PANKEN: It's a great pleasure for me. And thank you Josh for the wonderful invitation, and for doing this. It's a great program. So thank you.

HOLO: Thanks.

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