

## **RABBI JONAH PESNER: ADVOCACY & ACTIVISM**

**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 is my pleasure and privilege to welcome our guest, Rabbi Jonah Pesner. Rabbi Pesner's the Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Senior Vice President of the Union for Reform Judaism. And a proud, I dare say, ordained of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. Jonah, it's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

**PESNER:** Thank you Dean Josh Holo. It's great to be here.

**HOLO:** Clearly the first thing we have to talk about is for you to have an opportunity to define exactly what the Religious Action Center, or RAC, is.

**PESNER:** So the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism is the social justice and advocacy arm of the whole Reform Jewish movement. We're more than 50 years old. Our origin story's, you know, quite remarkable and inspiring. May I share it?

**HOLO:** Please. Please.

**PESNER:** It's a great story. There was a trustee of the Reform Movement, Kivie Kaplan, who went on his honeymoon with his new bride, Emily, to Florida. And they went out one night to go to a country club. And they arrived and there was a sign that said, "No Jews. No dogs." So they turned to the black taxi driver who had taken them to this country club and in disbelief asked if this was common. They had not seen anything like it. And the driver, the African American taxi driver, looked at them and said, "They don't even bother with us." Kivie devoted much of his philanthropy in his life to civil rights and social justice. He became the President of the NAACP. He was actually the last white Jewish President of the NAACP.

**PESNER:** It was quite an organization of white Jews partnering with people of color, blacks at the time, or colored people at the time. It really is a kind of a testament to the black-Jewish relationship and the commitment to civil rights and the American Jewish community. Though largely white at the time, now is actually much more colorful. There's somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the American Jewish community is of color in some way. So things really have evolved. But the other thing that Kivie did when he got back from this experience was he challenged the Reform Movement. He bought an embassy building on Dupont Circle in our nation's capital, gave it to the Reform Movement and said, "You need to be at the center of civil rights and social justice in America."

**HOLO:** Wow!

**PESNER:** And that's when the Center was born. Rabbi Dick Hirsch became the founding Director who went on to be the head of the Reform Movement in Israel, and is a great hero of American Jewish life. Of course, active at the College Institute and the Reform Movement broadly. Rabbi Hirsch found himself in this huge building all by himself. And he reached out to a good friend of his, a black minister named Martin, and invited Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to set up offices at the Religious Action Center. And so it was that the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which was kind of the umbrella organization of the various civil rights groups, was housed at the Religious Action Center. And Dr. King, when he would come to town would actually use our offices as his office. And that's why the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was drafted in part in our conference room. And the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was drafted in our offices. And there's a plaque attesting to that.

But our legacy really was crafted and born out of the Civil Rights Movement. And for the, you know, 50 years that followed we've been part of broad based coalitions both in the civil rights community, the advocacy community, but also in the faith community working across partisan lines and have been part of drafting of critical legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the Mobilization for Soviet Jewry was planned in our offices as well. And we have been, and still are committed to non-partisan work, reaching across the lines of the political aisle, partnering with people of faith, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Evangelicals, Progressives, whoever will join us in inter-faith coalitions to make America as just and compassionate as it possibly can be. Also, to advocate for Israel both for a safe and secure Israel but a two-state solution and a just democratic society there. We also work on global issues, international religious freedom, global AIDS, et cetera.

**HOLO:** That's a big agenda.

**PESNER:** Seventy-two issues.

**HOLO:** I'm sure you have a full plate. When you think of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism you think of a kind of a lobbying model at the top end of the power pyramid. But I know that you bring a different sensibility in addition to that. So, tell us about the two modes of approaching how to deploy power to achieve your goals.

**PESNER:** I really appreciate your understanding the evolution of the RAC and where we're kind of headed. The RAC was set up under a theory of change that one could really affect policy when you were set up in Washington and could play kind of an inside game. Be at the tables where legislation is crafted, and through the relationships you have on Capitol Hill and the White House. That's put us in a very powerful position.

**HOLO:** It's a great legacy.

**PESNER:** You know, and Rabbi Saperstein who is my predecessor, and beloved colleague, and my mentor spent 40 years on Capitol Hill building the relationships so that we can get in the room. And when legislation's being crafted we have a real say in what that legislation

looks like. When we want to be in partnership with the White House, a Democratic White House and Republican White House, we can be there. In fact, Rabbi Saperstein was kind of famous for having partnered with the Bush Administration on global AIDS, human trafficking, and international religious freedom. Three areas where we found areas of shared values and shared concern.

**HOLO:** President Bush was very public about his commitments to those things. And his AIDS commitment was somewhat counter-cultural for his party at the time. The way it was played in the press, at the time, was clearly that that was a faith-based commitment. All of the things that you mentioned were faith-based commitments.

**PESNER:** That's right.

**HOLO:** So I can imagine he was friendly to our work.

**PESNER:** He was. And, in fact, there is this very funny story because there were a lot of other issues where we had strong disagreements with the Bush White House. So, at the Hanukah party one year, when President Bush saw Rabbi Saperstein on the receiving line, he gave him a huge hug. And David's wife turned and said, "Does he know what you do?" But that's what David does, right. David, when he was confirmed as Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, it was an overwhelming bi-partisan agreement. He had Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio who are obviously not in agreement with us on a lot of issues. But he really believed in David and his commitment to bringing Christian conservatives, Evangelicals, and Catholics together with progressive Christians and Jews of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform together. David was the master of the inside Washington game.

As his mentee over the years, what I brought to the RAC and to the Reform Movement was the other modality, I think, that you were eluding to which is the local grassroots organizing approach. Where David had really figured out the kind of national level, federal advocacy approach, I had figured out through my work with mostly Christian pastors, actually, broad-based organizing. How do you bring churches and synagogues, mosques, other local institutions into a relationship, build a network of real power and put pressure on local mayors, local city councils, where you could on governors and really effect change at a local level?

**HOLO:** Does the method of either community organizing or, we'll call it, lobbying as a shorthand, does the method you choose map onto more or less local versus national? Or are there other factors that come into play when you determine which method you're going to deploy?

**PESNER:** Well, I think what we figured out is that it really is a both/and. Lobbying is just being in the legislator's office. The organizing is building the power that's behind that lobby visit. So, where David, I think, really saw opportunity was to work with me to give us more strength and leverage whether it's in a congressional office in Washington, a mayor's office on a local level, or the President.

**HOLO:** Because you have the voters behind you.

**PESNER:** Because we have the voters. I mean, in essence...

**HOLO:** You do the work to get the vote.

**PESNER:** Exactly. And frankly, the other entities, whether it's APAC or the NRA or other highly successful Washington lobbies, figured this out over the last two decades. The stronger they are locally at the grassroots level... that's right.

So, we're building Reform Jewish heft. That's exactly what we're trying to do. We've had remarkable success, partly around HUC-JIR Los Angeles where we're working with the Reform congregations and HUC. We have Reform California, which piloted for us over the last five years what would it look like if we had nearly 100 Reform congregations with their rabbis and HUC students together building collective power in San Francisco, L.A., San Diego, Orange County, and Sacramento, and then putting pressure on the state legislature, on the Governor to do things around racial justice, immigration reform. And we've had some real successes. And then that then gives us this network where we can get into congressional offices with hundreds of members of our congregations who then can have a federal impact. So, we just, working with HUC in Cincinnati, have launched Reform Ohio which takes on even more urgency because not only do we think we can have some statewide wins for justice, but it's a much more purple state. And it means that we can really reach out to Republican and Democratic federal legislators and really help influence national laws.

**HOLO:** You have more gains to make in a less...

**PESNER:** And this really is not about partisanship. It's about figuring out how we can actually do some work in Texas and Arizona and work with Republican legislators and just help Congress be its best self.

**HOLO:** So I want to push back a little bit on the non-partisan issue, but respectfully. I certainly respect that it is both a good thing and encumbered upon you to articulate very clearly that the RAC is non-partisan and indeed to be non-partisan. I get that. But talk it through with me a little bit what it means to claim, and indeed to be faithful to the claim, that your goal is not partisan and your methods are happy to be non-partisan because you're happy to get people from both parties. But your agenda, though not pegged to a certain party, therefore, literally I suppose you could say it's not partisan in fact is a progressive agenda. And progressivism is, in fact, associated with the Democratic Party for all intents and purposes. So, teach me about that dance.

**PESNER:** That's a great question. And I would go back a little bit upstream to put it in context which is, as a rabbi asked me the other day, "When did Reform Judaism become so political?" And I said, "When Isaiah spoke through the power." Which resonated with him. You know, so really it started...

But this isn't about Reform Judaism. It's about Judaism. And it's about Isaiah marching into the temple which is a corrupt institution and speaking truth to power. And it was about Amos

and Micah, and Hosea, and Zechariah, and the various prophets of the Jewish people not just speaking truth to power but organizing power to be the kind of divine presence on earth, to bring about justice for the most vulnerable populations. And it even goes, I would say, upstream to before the prophets where God spoke very clearly to Moses and to the Israelites and said, “Be for the widow, the orphan and the stranger.”

And the rabbis teach us that these three categories, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger is to be for the most vulnerable. So, if we believe Judaism calls us to be for the most vulnerable, we can abdicate our role in the public square to make sure that our society is arranged in such a way that the most vulnerable populations are protected. So, for us, this is about enduring Jewish values, right? And then we acknowledge reasonable people can disagree about the best public policy to amplify those values.

We work with plenty of thoughtful, either ideological conservatives or Republican partisans, first of all on where we can agree on matters of public policy, or where we can reasonably disagree but say, “Well we have shared values. So, what kind of compromises or what kind of ways we can work together?”

And we often think about this in terms of the Talmud, right? Where the minority opinion is always published and kind of *eilu ve-eilu* [“There’s more than one way to skin a cat”]. It’s always acknowledged that although Hillel was the rabbi whose opinion was the opinion that carried the day, Shammai’s opinion was always honored and acknowledged. But as I like to joke with people, though Hillel and Shammai debated about the right way to light the Hanukah menorah. Hillel said you start with one candle and end with eight and Shammai said no, you start with eight and you end with one. And both sides were acknowledged as legitimate and both sides were printed. We don’t not light the Hanukkiah because there’s a disagreement. So, for the Reform Jewish Movement, we debate and we discuss. And we have lots of members of our congregations who vote one way in elections. We have other members who vote other ways in elections. We have a Commission on Social Action that helps us set policy. It’s representative of the broad Reform Movement. There’s hundreds of leaders who participate in developing our resolutions. They then get circulated to our boards. And we honor the dissenting voice. But then the Reform Movement, based in our thousands year-old Jewish tradition, both of the Torah, the biblical prophets, and then the rabbinic literature make a decision. And that’s – so at the Religious Action Center I don’t make it up. It comes out of Reform Movement policy that gets debated and discussed, rooted in Jewish text and tradition. We honor the dissenting voice. We publish it and print it. But then we have to advocate for the thing that we have landed on as our public policy which goes back to enduring Jewish values. That’s why we really are rigorously non-partisan. It isn’t just lip service. It really is about being about Torah, not about being on a certain platform.

**HOLO:** I don’t think it’s lip service in the generative energy and purpose and methods. I think it’s affect ends up being de facto partisan because if we were to do a statistical analysis of which party adopts the methods or the legislative preferences that the RAC lands on, it’s going to be some tremendous preponderance leaning towards the Democratic Party. And at a cultural level, we all know that. We all probably prefer it that way because that’s the

preponderance of the Reform Movement. It's a preponderance of American Judaism. Am I missing something or does it...?

**PESNER:** No, I think the outcome by the, say if you look at the result, the result is that we tend to skew in the direction of one party much more often than the other party. Which is why I think we have to be rigorous and utterly committed to that non-partisan generative process that gets us there so that we can look at process and say it's maybe correlative but it's not causal.

**HOLO:** Okay. Fair enough. So it's correlative and not causal. That's...

**PESNER:** And that's just is what it is. You know, I try and make sure that every time we get into something to always find ways to work with Republicans and conservative wherever possible.

**HOLO:** Right. And that is important because you're always keeping that door open. And clearly you also are able to go through that door in many cases that are important. So, again, I hear what you're saying. I like that notion that it's correlative but not causative.

**PESNER:** And by the way, and this is where we really lean on the College Institute and the CCAR and our rabbis to really live what we say about locating our self in Jewish sources, Jewish texts, and Jewish tradition. We had your counterpart, Rabbi Jonathan Cohen who is the Dean of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, come and teach for us for an entire morning on racial justice in Jewish text and tradition. So, that we were saying we're starting from our sources. We're starting from our rabbis. And he looked at some wonderful midrashim that nobody had ever seen before that really do deal with color and race and skin, and discrimination. So that our Commission on Social Action could say, "Well, our positions are not just coming out of the progressive agenda. They're coming out of our enduring Jewish values."

**HOLO:** Absolutely. And I think that the Reform Movement is moved by the work of the RAC. We care about it a lot. So *kol ha'kavod* ["Well done"]. It's important work.

(Break)

Before we return to the Bully Pulpit we want to tell you about other programs on the College Commons platform for digital learning. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, synagogue subscriptions offer in-depth learning including online courses, live interviews, and a new program called The Teaching Podcast, selected episodes from the Bully Pulpit enhanced with texts and teaching tools. We look forward to meeting you at [CollegeCommons.HUC.edu](http://CollegeCommons.HUC.edu). Now, back to – oh, one more thing. Help us out and rate us in iTunes. And whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

**HOLO:** I want to suss out a problem with you; a social problem which you've weighed in on. A couple of years ago you wrote an article in which you expressed real regret about a legitimately regrettable chapter in both Israeli and American life in close proximity to one

other for completely different reasons. Prime Minister Netanyahu and Paul Ryan independently expressed concern about their opponents' voting efforts but they did so in ethnic terms. Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke of Israeli Arab voters as if they were a kind of hoard threatening him or Israel. It really was ugly for American Jews to hear, if I may say so.

**PESNER:** Amen.

**HOLO:** And then Paul Ryan spoke of voter turnout that he was concerned about "especially in urban areas" which we, any American knows is code for African Americans or maybe Latinos, but usually it means African Americans. So you, rightly and inspiringly, took umbrage and called them to task. For that I congratulate you. But I want to engage with the other side of the argument, as you are so committed to do. What do we do with the fact that all of us, progressives, conservatives alike, we all allow ourselves the right within moral bounds to discuss voting patterns amongst demographic and ethnic blocs. We are okay in certain context characterizing voting patterns along those ethnic and demographic lines. And it's positive when they favor us. And it's negative when they don't favor us. No one in principle - I mean this was Netanyahu's counter argument, by the way. They're a voting bloc. They're a populous in Israel. And if they're my political opponents, which is no mystery, then I'm concerned about them organizing and voting against me. And I will use my bully pulpit, no pun intended as it was, to – and yet – and yet, for us it crossed a line as did Ryan's comment. Help me suss the nuance.

**PESNER:** I really appreciate the question because I think all we have to do to really think about it is just drop in the word Jew. The Jews are voting in big numbers. You've got to get out and vote. If we ever heard that, we would be outraged. And it goes back to Kivie Kaplan, no Jews, no dogs, right? There's a self-interest in the way we approach, think about social justice, that people forget about. He understood we're a religious minority. My grandmother Fanny, God bless her, she was 16 years old when she left Russia by herself. Got on a boat and came to America in 1916 for a reason. The rabbi of her town was dragged to his death by being tied to a horse by his beard. She witnessed that and she got the heck out of Russia. And she came to America because she understood it was a place where religious minorities could be free. I carry that into the RAC. We are about people of color. We are about the widow, the orphan, stranger. We're about the immigrant. We're about those who suffer. And we're about Jews because we know what it is to suffer. So when we see our elected officials looking at the swarming voting bloc as a threat, we understand it in that code where it's like the Jews. Be careful the Jews, they control the media. We know what the damage is to democracy is if you ever characterize a group in a certain way. So do I understand why Netanyahu was concerned about a particular demographic? Sure. That doesn't mean it's acceptable.

**HOLO:** I know you understand. I want to talk about the moral bounds and what's beyond and what's within them. That's what's interesting to me. When NPR discusses descriptively voting blocs, they'll say African Americans vote this way or that. They will factually declare that - Jews too. They'll say older Jews in Florida are guaranteed to vote, you know, Democrat. And it's diagnostic. It's clinical. But it's clearly ethnic. It's also, by the way, accurate. Why is that qualitatively different?

**PESNER:** Frankly, I don't do that. What we focus on is – it's particularly because the Voting Rights Act was written in our conference room. We are trying to get every American citizen to vote and make sure the right of every American citizen's right to vote is protected. How they vote, we hold up our enduring Jewish values in the positions that flow. They then have to make their own choice about what decision to vote in the voting booth.

**HOLO:** I agree. I guess I'm not asking you in your official capacity as the Executive Director of the RAC. I'm asking you as a citizen who has all the concerns that we share, you and I and our movement. I'm asking as a person who seeks to be morally attuned. Why does it bother us when someone like Ryan says what...?

**PESNER:** I think it 'otherizes.' I mean, I think it really is a dehumanizing thing. Right? It's like thinking about "working class whites." Look, I've spent my rabbinic career at the grassroots level listening to people. Whether it's in Scranton, Pennsylvania talking to people who live there or in the barrio in L.A. I just like hearing their stories and what their concerns are. I understand why people look at big data and why the pundits or strategists are all trying to figure out how elections work. Though, obviously, in the last election was proven totally wrong.

**HOLO:** Wrong.

**PESNER:** So to me, again, it dehumanizes us to be – I'm not a bloc. I'm a human. I have a story.

**HOLO:** But it doesn't...

**PESNER:** I vote a certain way because I make a choice in a moment that reflects my values.

**HOLO:** When you see it on CNN, it doesn't bother anyone that they should say – in other words, yeah, I agree with you that that's what happens. But when Ryan says it adversarially to the black community, or about the black community and when CNN says the same thing descriptively – no one's questioning the facts. Somehow it doesn't bother us. I don't think people are offended when these media outlets describe in relatively neutral terms, but clearly ethnic terms. I'm trying to suss out the difference. Why one is so offensive to us and feels like an attack on...?

**PESNER:** I suppose one is just descriptive of a pattern versus the leveraging of a fear, right. That's why I used the Jew analogy. The Jews are voting. That triggers people's fear. Those people, right, whenever we think of those categories, you know, I'm not sure it matters that much, but you're not...

**HOLO:** You're not convinced that we shouldn't be worried when CNN...

**PESNER:** I don't love it.

**HOLO:** Yeah, yeah.



**PESNER:** It's not something I'm so comfortable with. And it was proven wrong in this election.

**HOLO:** Well, yeah. There is the issue of accuracy.

**PESNER:** And the value of it, frankly.

**HOLO:** Probably the most radically particularistic group of people who could otherwise pass as white, aren't we the ones who would argue that it does matter, the group, the bloc, the commune, the collective? And doesn't community organizing presuppose the same thing?

**PESNER:** Yeah, no. I mean and the kind of – the commitment to the collective is the commitment to like what can we do together. What's the thing we can build together?

**HOLO:** So, to you the real difference is the fear mongering effectively, as opposed to saying Arabs overwhelmingly will not vote, which is just a fact, you know, not shocking to anyone. But if it's a called action to counter them...

**PESNER:** Right, by making people afraid. By using the other as...

**HOLO:** As Ryan did with the urban community.

**PESNER:** And to this President's credit, what he did incredibly well was be in communities of people who have felt unheard and invisible because they'd been characterized. And amplified what they wanted to hear. Now what he has done, you and I both know that's utterly dangerous, is do what...

**HOLO:** He does the same thing for other....

**PESNER:** Exactly. And on steroids. And in utterly dangerous ways.

**HOLO:** And use of the force of his now office in ways that are totally detrimental.

**PESNER:** Incredibly dangerous. And we've spoken very, very publicly about that.

**HOLO:** No. Which brings me to my next question. You listed a daunting amount of real issues, really compelling valuable, meaningful issues. Give us a sense of what your top priority, the campaign of Urgency of Now is the organizing principle, but tell us what the top three initiatives are underneath that principle.

**PESNER:** I really appreciate that. And I would invite any listeners to visit the website Urgency of Now. You know, it's [RAC.org/UrgencyofNow](http://RAC.org/UrgencyofNow) where we've helped people navigate these very complicated...

**HOLO:** It's a great website. You give all kinds of practical tools and ways to think about it to do the religious action that you stand for.

**PESNER:** Thank you. And hopefully to help people focus, right, because as you said, there's so many things. And by the way, as a side note, people often laugh and say, "Seventy-two issues! How can you be for 72 issues?" It's actually really important. What that means is we're not always working on 72 issues, but we have clear policy on a range of issues so that, for example, when a city council somewhere decides to pass a resolution banning circumcision rites, or circumcision, we actually have clear policy and guidelines on how you actually beat back on anti-circumcision. There are a variety issues that our movement needs us to be there for them.

**HOLO:** Without necessarily spending all of your person power.

**PESNER:** Before the election we had already identified through a real discernment process by engaging the leadership of our movement that racial justice was a key priority for us because of our role in the Civil Rights Movement. And a recognition that as much progress as we had made with the passing of the Voting Rights Act 50 years ago and the Civil Rights Act, one in three black men go to jail in America where as one in seventeen white men go to jail. Mass incarceration. The new Jim Crow. Voter disenfranchisement. When the election happened, it became clear to us that we needed to not abandon that and pivot away from that but actually double down on it. You know, we have an administration now, a Department of Justice that is self-described as a law and order Department of Justice. It will mean that people of color, urban folk, immigrants, obviously, refugees will be disproportionately impacted. And so, the work to really do bi-partisan criminal justice reform, which there really is real bi-partisan agreement on this. Nobody on the conservative side believes it's a good use of taxpayer dollars to keep millions of people incarcerated. Given the economic consequences of that choice.

**HOLO:** And the tide is shifting still very recently that conservatives would be willing to engage in that with...

**PESNER:** There's a debate in the kind of conservative community because they're the kind of Jeff Sessions, like law and order conservatives and some of the, frankly, older guard who pass these laws in the '80s that are now defensive about them. And you have a younger brand of libertarians and conservatives that are saying this is ludicrous waste of...

**HOLO:** That's crazy.

**PESNER:** Right. It doesn't make any sense.

**HOLO:** And that's your opportunity.

**PESNER:** Correct. Correct. And frankly, because it is also a good example of where we need to be powerfully federally but we also need to be effectively locally. Most criminal justice happens on a local level. So, most of it is about law enforcement on the local level, local prosecutors, decisions that get made. Most people are imprisoned in state and local facilities. This is an area where the Jewish community, which is largely white but not completely white, when we show up in solidarity with communities of color and local communities, we can really have an impact. The other few areas where we're really helping

out congregations and our folks focus is to go back to those vulnerable populations. Knowing that we're going to be challenged with policies both by the Administration and by Congress that will really threaten vulnerable populations. The question is what can we do. We are in the process of developing policy around becoming sanctuary congregations. Something that the Lutherans and the Presbyterians and the Methodists have already done which is, how can local synagogues if not provide literal sanctuary, open their buildings, more metaphorically provide legal services to undocumented people, provide financial support, and get them into a secure network. We believe that our synagogues will join with churches to build politically to help either defend the cities that have already made this decision, or flip cities that are in the process. So, that will be a whole area of work. There will be areas of work around the protection of LGBT folk, which is going to be a really challenging couple of years. Already, we saw the transgender kids, students, our children in our schools, now are not protected by the federal Executive Order. And so, we're calling on synagogues to develop teams to get into school boards and demand that they actually protect transgender children.

**HOLO:** Was Obama's position based on an Executive Order or a recommendation? Or the bathrooms were recommendation?

**PESNER:** He leveraged the Department of Education's role. It was a joint order from – I have to get this right for you – but it was jointly issued by the Department of Education and I think the Department of Justice as protocols for what schools had to do. What this President did was he refined Department of Education policy to say, you can make your own choice. So now it's not a mandate from the Department of Education. They have the leverage of funding. So school districts will follow what the Department of Education does because they depend on the funding.

**HOLO:** So wasn't just prudential. It was using funding as a...

**PESNER:** I believe. But I could certainly be incorrect on that.

**HOLO:** Either way, agreed we face a more challenging landscape right now under the Trump Administration.

**PESNER:** Right. And it puts us in a particularly awkward position because we fought for and won the Religious Freedom Restoration Act back in the '90s which really was to defend the right of religious minorities like for a person to wear a yamaka in the workplace. It was a classic example of why we have to be concerned about religious minorities. The RFRA, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, has now been misused by states that want to oppress or discriminate against gay and lesbian people, and use religious freedom, right. So, like the idea that a representative of the state wouldn't be required to issue a marriage license because that would impact on her religious freedom. Well, she's choosing to be an agent of the state. The state doesn't discriminate against LGBT folk. So, we want to continue to defend religious liberty, but what we think is real religious liberty. Not discrimination in the name...

**HOLO:** Not as an excuse to discriminate in the public sphere.

**PESNER:** Exactly.

**HOLO:** I want to thank you, Rabbi Jonah Pesner, for spending the time to talk with us at the Bully Pulpit about the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, our Religious Action Center. Really an honor and a pleasure.

**PESNER:** It's mine. And I'm so grateful for the partnership. We actually work with all three campuses of Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in the United States. And we work with the faculty, and the staff, and our deans are, along with Jonathan Cohen and David Adelson, Josh, you've been great partners with us. And we're honored to teach on your campus.

**HOLO:** We're honored to have you. That's a great partnership. Thank you.

You've been listening to the College Commons Bully Pulpit podcast. Produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. We hope you enjoyed this podcast. And please join us again at [CollegeCommons.HUC.edu](http://CollegeCommons.HUC.edu).

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