

RABBI RICK JACOBS: AMERICAN JUDAISM IN ISRAEL

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 great pleasure to welcome my friend and colleague, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, and more importantly alumnus of this campus of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. Rick, it's a great pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

JACOBS: Josh, it is a great pleasure to be back here in L.A. First of all, look outside. The sun is shining. It's warm. People are smiling. I can't imagine why I left the L.A. campus or Southern California.

HOLO: ...the same thing.

JACOBS: I know. I know, but it's a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

HOLO: Well, we're glad you got your money's worth already. And it's great to have you.

JACOBS: More than that.

HOLO: We're going to talk about Israel today. I want to start by asking you if there's a difference between our interest in thinking about Israel and Zionism from the liberal perspective and our approach to Israel and Zionism from the Reform Movemental perspective.

JACOBS: Well I think the distinction between liberal and Reform is an important distinction. I think that we're trying to re-sculpt both. I think what it means to be a liberal Zionist today is something that is embattled. I think there are plenty of people who would say, you know, liberal, again, we can get inside liberal, you know, liberal Jew, liberal political. What does it mean to be a person who not only loves the State of Israel but loves what it promises, and what it sometimes delivers, and what it is failing? And how to instill a Reform Movement's deep love, I would even say an unconditional love for the State of Israel, at the same time be deeply committed to repair and improve and to partner and to be so engaged that we don't walk away, but so engaged that we lean in more closely?

HOLO: As an expression of that love. Not as a mitigation of it.

JACOBS: Absolutely. I think both are in need of some reflection, some orienting, and we have to figure out how do we plant the Reform Zionist the feeling, commitment inside of little

ones, in our students, within our wider movement. And it was once upon a time it just happened. It was part of the mother's milk. Was part of the water we drank. It's not that. And Israel has become so embattled in so many it often times is the thing that we avoid because we're trying to build a larger sense of unity.

HOLO: And insofar as we're speaking from the left side of the spectrum, so to speak, with a liberal side for lack of a better term, it also becomes embattled insofar as Zionism as a term has been wedded to the right, and has been divorced from our mother's-milk consciousness. Before the '90s or the '80s maybe we actually associated Zionism with liberalism. And we had notions of socialist Zionism.

JACOBS: Absolutely. And I think one of the conversations or arguments I can have on any given day with Israeli political leaders is that they will define very often a very narrow circle of what it means to be pro-Israel. I said, "If you draw the circle that narrowly, you're going to miss not only the largest slice, but an incredibly devoted and committed slice." But they're not going to agree with lots of current public policy, but they will agree the State of Israel is one of the great gifts and one of the most powerful realities of Jewish life. But I think we have seen also in our communal discussion here in North America we've also drawn a very narrow – if you're not aligned with these policy stances then you are not pro-Israel. And even if you argue with whether it's pluralism or issues that are threatening the democracy, those are things in an embattled moment that we can't question. And publicly we have an old conversation. It's worn out. It's tired. We need to be able to constructively engage, and particularly with people that have Zionist and Jewish views that are not shared but there's a bigger something that we share, a sense of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish collective) a sense of *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people). And if we can't instill that, I'm fearful for the Judaism that we practice.

HOLO: When you're speaking to a group that you consider most your people, however you define that, Reform Movement, insiders, liberals, whatever it is that most is our crowd, what is the Zionist political challenge that you face most aggressively, that you have to confront? And then once you confront that how do you refashion that conversation that you're saying is tired?

JACOBS: I think for too long the question is an argument. It's not actually a conversation. You know, we start in such a place of deep discussion about whether it's settlements or two-state solution, or what are the true pillars of a democratic Jewish state. And I think it's trying to step back from that and saying, "What's my connection with this whole enterprise?" Is it the headline that makes me connected? Is it the issues, the challenges? Or do I actually have - I spent my junior year abroad in the '70s in Israel. And I went to Hebrew University. And I walked into David Hartman's seminar on Maimonides, Spinoza and Halevi. All of a sudden, here's this Modern Orthodox thinker makes Aliyah with his five kids, and he opens up a world of possibility that I start to say, you know, I need to open my Jewish life and my, you know, kind of Israel life to a much broader cross-section. And I, like that's when the spark goes up. I lived on an Orthodox kibbutz. And I coached a wonderful high school basketball team of *edot mizrah* (Jewish communities from the Arab world and east of Israel) kids, in a part of Jerusalem that's now a *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) neighborhood. So I have a connection that's so personal and it's so, you know, on a human level that it helps me to

transform the political arguments and the deep divisiveness right now in our discourse in Israel and among our communal leaders here. I find that we're not paying attention to how are we going to cultivate that. The Seventies are different than the 21st century. And if you're 20 years old today trying to forge that connection, it's a very difficult enterprise. And I think we can't start with issues. We've got to start with what is my experience of the community there, in its complexity, in its beauty, in its inspiration, and in its maddening qualities as well.

HOLO: So I get the personal. I get that. But what if people on the left, again, appreciating that that's a complicated generalization, what if they readily connect emotionally but they find a painful, and to them, seemingly impossible disconnect between the personal connection and Israel? Or, even more complicatedly, with Zionism itself? What do we do about Jews who are questioning not 1967, so to speak, but 1948?

JACOBS: I think it's not personal. And that if you have a close relationship you can have the most dysfunctional political reality and you won't be bothered by it. No, you'll be bothered deeply by it. But there's an underpinning to it that you can't walk away from. So I like to think of it here in North America, how do we construct a sense that I'm connected to *Am Yisrael* (people Israel)? That I'm not just a Reform Jew. Not just a Reform leader. I've could actually have a relationship with people who are very different, think very differently, pray very differently, vote very differently, and have a very different view of the Jewish state. I think for many people Israel is that very difficult challenge to having a broader experience of peoplehood. And we in the Reform Movement we were much more comfortable in 19th century terms with the religiosity, with values, with texts. And that became the underpinning. And all these complicated people who also are part of the tribes of Israel, oh my gosh, that's really hard to come to grips with. I'll just give you a story. So I was in a wonderful community in Westchester, New York. And my Orthodox colleague down the road at Young Israel called me up on *Erev Rosh Hashana* (Jewish New Year's Eve). He said, "Rick, I did it." I said, "What do you mean you did it? You finished your sermon for Rosh Hashana? What did you do?" He goes, "No, I did it. I finally did it." I said, "What?" He said, "I finally got my Orthodox colleagues to redraw the map of the *eruv* (Sabbath boundary, within which you can do certain activities on the Sabbath that you could not otherwise do on the Sabbath) in our community to include your congregation Westchester Reform Temple." He worked for years. And Orthodox colleagues told him, "You're crazy. Why do you want them inside the *eruv*? Put them outside. Why are you making it easy?"

HOLO: "Who cares?" Right?

JACOBS: So I run to the synagogue that night. I mean I was just moved to tears. This guy fought and fought to put us in his *eruv*. So, I told the first person that I bumped into at our synagogue. Wonderful, long-time, classical Reform Jew. He said, "Rick, that's ridiculous. It's such an anachronistic bit of nonsense. Who cares?"

HOLO: The *eruv* is the Shabbat boundary within which you can pursue certain activities, [but] beyond which you cannot [on the Sabbath]. And by establishing the *eruv* you're essentially saying that this is my community wherein I would want to pursue those activities in the first place. By including Westchester Reform, into what is a deeply Orthodox notion in the first place, is a profound statement that so moved you.

JACOBS: Correct. And this individual from my congregation basically said, “I don’t think there’s anything noble about what he did.” I said, “He drew a map of his Jewish world and he put you in and me in it.” What are we doing today that redraws our map that includes our rabbi, his community, worlds that are not the worlds that we necessarily live in? And I think for me part of what Zionism awakens and the current reality is that, you know, you look at the demographics of Israel, whether it’s the Sephardic, whether it’s the ultra-Orthodox, the religious Zionists, the *hilonim*, the secular Tel Aviv community, there’s so many parts to that experience that are just foreign for us. And some of the political cultures are completely foreign. As well as some of the Jewish experiences are just not what we know. So how do we, again, not just on a personal level, like, “Oh I had fun going to your Yemenite community for Shabbat,” but how do we actually draw a map and an eruv around Jewish peoplehood that includes some very, very discordant views and practices. And I’m not going to say, for example, that, you know, sitting with a group of settlers on the West Bank and saying, “Gosh, it’s so amazing how different we are.” But some of those differences really start to divide us in very deep and problematic ways. And that’s also one of the big issues for us, as you raise it, which is really where do we find that commonality. If there are people who say, you know, I can have a Jewish state that’s not democratic.

HOLO: Right.

JACOBS: That’s not such a big deal for me. Where, you know what? The Supreme Court is on the highest part of Jerusalem but, you know what? We’re going to lower it because we just don’t think it should trump Jewish tradition. Oh, and democracy and civil marriage. So we’re in debates that are existential. It’s about major core realities. It’s not about a little veneer. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a little Reform synagogue in, you know, Talpiyot and can we build something in Rosh Pina, which we are. It’s about the very marrow of Zionism. The very marrow of the Jewish state.

HOLO: So, I was trying to draw you back from the politics and the experiences to core Zionist position. And you’re now drawing me even further back to the core national proposition which is Jewish peoplehood prior to Zionism or anything else. You’re really trying to bring us to our baseline suppositions as a civilization, as a people, as a group. I want to know what you’re finding. Are you finding that we have enough to work with?

JACOBS: I think we have constructed, particularly in North America, a very universalistic Jewish worldview. The ethos of our young people is, you know, *tikun olam* (the ethical mandate to ‘heal’ or ‘improve’ the world), in the most beautiful sense of I want to just be anywhere I am, on a college campus, in my home community, I want to be involved in shaping a just and compassionate world. *Kol ha-kavod* (“well done”) that is a core to being Jewish. But where are the roots? Where does it go down? How does it get a relationship with a particularity within the Jewish community? Where those messy things that aren’t just, you know, wonderful, big, rational, big ideological categories. And I think Zionism is that messiness, very often, that comes in and says like wait a minute. It’s not just some noble thing of the other. The other happens to be a Palestinian Muslim that lives in East Jerusalem. And, you know, kind of how are you constructing a Jewish way of life? Again, for Israelis, very often it’s the universal that’s missing. Right? And for us, very often, it’s the

particular that's missing. And for us to have *tikun olam* without a grounding in text, without a grounding in community, without a grounding in a wider circle of responsibility I think it's a little bit elusive. And we're seeing some of its limited effectiveness in holding us to our tradition, to our people. So, I think the project that North America, by the way, is so powerful that we actually have something beautiful to offer the particularity of Israel. Which is why when Israelis come and spend long periods of time with us, they're amazed. They say, "Oh my gosh. This is a whole world. I'm going to take some of this back with us." And our young people go on birthright or they go on their first year at HUC, and they got an experience that they never had before. They say, "You know, the rhythm of Jewish times is just amazing and they guy on the bus was telling me about his struggle with the electric company. And all of a sudden, we forge this bond." So I think there's a moment where the *mahatzit ha-shekel*, right, the half shekel was the annual tax. And of course, all the great interpretations they were only half without the other. I think right now in terms of diaspora Israel we're half without the other. And too often, the diaspora we feel like in some ways we're more than half. And I think Israel, often times, will say we're way more than half. And when we can actually figure out what we each can contribute, and receive, and strengthening a global Jewish community. A global Jewish set of commitments. I think Zionism will be set in a more sustainable context, and so will our diaspora Jewish life.

HOLO: Speaking as the head of the largest movement in the largest diaspora community in the world, do you think that we are doing the legwork of building those bridges reasonably successfully? Are we progressing? Are we doing more of that underlying work on which the relationship will be built? Or are we failing?

JACOBS: I think we are succeeding but in a narrower slice than we need to. So if, for example, we think about how we bring Israel and Israelis to North America. We are seeing that *shlikhim* (emissaries) coming to our summer camps, hundreds of them every summer which they are. We're also training *shlikhim* (emissaries) to be in congregations, to be in the early childhood center. To work with B'nai Mitzvah. To be part of the *kallot* (study retreats or programs) that, you know, the NFTY regents are doing.

HOLO: To experience American Judaism.

JACOBS: And be changed by it and bring something beautiful. We bring probably the largest number of young people to Israel with a semester in high school, the EIE program, NFTY in Israel. We also have Mitzvah Corp. We go to Israel with our kids, not just to be tourists, not to be teen, you know, explorers, but to roll up our sleeves and to work in some of the difficult neighborhoods, whether it's South Tel Aviv. And to look at some of the really, really difficult, painful realities in Israel and just say, you know, what can I as a kid from Minneapolis, what can I bring. So first programmatically we're doing deeper immersions in Israel, and to think about, you know, not just birthright as ten days but what leads up to birthright. And what does birthright kindle? As a spark, how do we take that spark and make it flame when they come back? To use it as a catalyst for Jewish identity, and for a more mature relationship to the State of Israel. And to work with a wider set of possibilities for what it means to be pro-Israel, what it means to be a Zionist. And to be able to say even forthrightly in public, you know, "I am a Zionist." Whether I'm on a college campus – I'm on the Vassar campus and I say I'm a Zionist. I have just isolated myself in ways that are quite problematic. So, I think we

are programmatically trying to figure out also how do we put Israel into the fabric of our informal and formal learning. And how do we give a conceptual framework for Israel and not just the emergency, there's a crisis with security. There's a crisis with pluralism.

HOLO: I want to hear you talk a little bit about one of the fissures across which we have to build these bridges and that is the specific American internal Jewish conversation. I won't even say right and left. I will say hawk and dove, vis-à-vis current Israeli policies regarding the Palestinians. For example, what's going on in that conversation with you? And what are your thoughts?

JACOBS: On some of these core conversations, which by the way we have fewer and fewer of those conversations in North American Jewish life because it's so polarizing.

HOLO: Right.

JACOBS: A lot of our rabbis, cantors and educators, and lay leaders say, you know what? Let's just talk about something that can actually galvanize us.

HOLO: Polarized and ever shallower I fear.

JACOBS: We raise our young people, especially, to have idealism. You can love the United States of America and fight with all you might to change really, you know, I think very distressing patterns whether it's criminal justice reform, or voting rights act, or the income inequality. And it aligns with our values. That's what our Jewish values teach us. It's not some secular thing we learned from a political party. We actually believe that that's part of our core Jewish identity and our core commitment. And what we have today are some of those core commitments are at odds with Israeli governmental policy. So it's not just, you know, I have a political difference, but my values say that the Arab citizens of Israel are absolutely not just deserving of equality but of equal access to education, and all the different municipal services. So how do I feel when Israel doesn't just have a different policy, a right-wing government or a left-wing government, but some of what it publicly does are at odds with my most cherished Jewish commitments? That's a very difficult place for us to be. And we see that there's a growing divide exactly along those lines.

HOLO: Distressing in its own right.

JACOBS: I remember when I invited Prime Minister Netanyahu to speak to our San Diego Bi-Annual. And some colleagues and some lay leaders reached out and said, you know, "He doesn't agree with us about lots of things. Why are you inviting him to speak to us?" I said, "Because he's the Prime Minister of Israel. And I want us to have a conversation. I want him to meet us. I want him to see the largest movement in Jewish life that's alive, well, serious."

HOLO: Influential.

JACOBS: Influential. And deeply committed to Israel even though we disagree on many, many core questions like settlements. We honored Rabbi David Hartman with an Eisendrath Award at the San Diego Biennial. And his son, Donniel Hartman, said, "My father always

marveled at the Reform Movement. It was treated so badly in so many core ways by official policies of the Israeli government. And yet you kept expressing love and support.” He said, “How does that happen? It’s remarkable.” And wouldn’t it be nice if we got to a point where we actually didn’t feel disrespected whether it’s going to the *Kotel* (the Western Wall in Jerusalem) and feeling like we’re second-class citizens. Or when it comes to a Reform rabbi not being able to, you know, perform marriages. Or the way in which our conversions are still given.

HOLO: Or subsidies for religious enterprise.

JACOBS: Today’s news are ultra-Orthodox rabbis in the Knesset, in the government who are spewing out lots and lots of vile words about us. Some of which they know not of what they speak. But the reality is they know that we are helping to change the reality and it frightens them. It shakes their world to the core. But ultimately, it’s about making sure that Israel is for all of our people, and for those who are not Jews, that they have a stake. And this is a project that will not be reversed. And we do it out of respect, and we don’t want it to become a yelling or screaming or a harsh dialogue because honestly, that’s a way that we undermine our core value. We actually – I’ll just give the example at the Western Wall we understood that the compromise was a two-way compromise. The section that we have is a modest section. But it is a section of the *Kotel*. And it is a pluralistic, egalitarian place. And it’s not that that’s what we’re fighting for. We’re actually fighting for the whole society to be literally one wall for one people. One society for one people with different expressions. So this is a symbolic change. It opens possibilities. It gives us, with a government that actually does not align with some of the changes that we’d like around civil marriage, and funding equality, and some larger redefinitions of Jewish life. But this is symbolically to say that if this can change, if Reform, and Conservative, and Women of the Wall can sit with authority over a piece of the holiest site, have a budget from the State of Israel, and have the ability to say, “We’re pluralistic. We’re not against. We’re for something,” that signals also something here in North America as well that there is a larger we. And that in that...

HOLO: And a real conversation to be had.

JACOBS: And a real compromise in Jewish life. I think that is also important for our people to engage in that earnestly. And in somehow in an urgent way to know that this is about our own viability as well.

HOLO: So what’s top of your agenda for challenges you have to face most urgently with respect to Israel?

JACOBS: I think what we’re seeing is questioning of the Jewish democratic core of Israel. I don’t know a Jewish state that’s not democratic. I can’t imagine one that isn’t.

HOLO: You’re saying that Jewish and democracy are related terms that you can’t separate.

JACOBS: I can’t separate them because the values inherent in the Israeli democratic system are essential Jewish values in practice.

HOLO: Let me push back a bit on this particular issue. It's hard for me to see democratic values as genuinely Jewish. When you speak about certain values of human dignity I can peg that to text and to Jewish experience and it feels legitimate. When you tell me, as I think I just heard you say, that the enlightenment nation state project of democracy is rooted or has roots, or has authentic expressions in Judaism. That to me has more of a stretch.

JACOBS: I am not suggesting that the political structure we call democracy came out of the Book of Exodus or it came out of some, you know, rabbinic mindset. But I think the exact human values that undergird the system, to say that a Jewish minority would rule a non-Jewish majority and we would in that potentially compromise our human rights, our civil rights, I mean that's unthinkable to me.

HOLO: You are drawing on those core values.

JACOBS: Absolutely.

HOLO: And you're arguing that there is a modern political expression which we in a general way call democracy, referring to the protection of these rights.

JACOBS: Correct. And I would say also that the Jewish state, you know, I think we have a very imperfect expression of the Jewishness of the Jewish state. And we need to, you know, I think we need to dismantle the Chief Rabbinate. Whenever we've seen that in history and around the world it's been a force for dividing Jews and for establishing hierarchies that have not served the wider project of engaging more people more deeply in Jewish life. And I think that the idea that political parties lobby on behalf of Jewish definitions of who is a Jew and what conversion is legitimate, and whether *mikva'ot* (ritual bath, necessary for conversion and other rites). I don't think we can have a United States separation of religion and state. I think the project of a Jewish democratic to fuel that synergy and that interconnectedness requires us to revisit the way in which we have privileged an ultra-Orthodox definition, which has been disastrous to the secular majority and...

HOLO: And to the Diaspora.

JACOBS: It has been a deeply, deeply flawed approach. However, it is a demographic reality that that community is growing. And that doesn't make it right. And doesn't make their imposition on Jewish life whether it's on *Pesah* (Passover) to go around and find every little bit of *chametz* (leaven, which is forbidden by traditional Jewish law during the festival of Passover). But I think that we have a real challenge. And some of the different realities. What will happen with the two-states for two-peoples isn't just a political discussion. You know, Ariel Sharon woke up the demographic ticking time bomb and says, "If we don't find some way it will eat away at the very core of society." I'm not naïve as many people, I think are that we could somehow just will peace between Palestinians and Israelis. It's nonsense. And there are many who hold the Israeli government accountable. But equally Palestinian leadership has been beyond flawed. And I don't think the U.S. has actually been perfect in how it's tried to broker. But if someone could come up with a good solution that's not two-states you either lose the Jewishness or you lose the democracy. We lose at either of those.

HOLO: It's sort of Friedman's triangle of land, Jewishness or democracy. You have two of three but not three of three. We can't have everything. This goes back to compromise. But most importantly it goes back to the cracking open of the imagination that we in American Judaism could bring Israel too if we exert our influence more. Embedded into that influence is the love of which you spoke, but also our unique perspective which is a rich one. A successful one, I might add, here in America. One that has a lot to offer the Enlightenment nation state model of Israel. I think that this brings us back to your desire to build bridges, and to make sure that American Judaism brings Israel as much in that direction as it can by throwing its weight around, and by having those conversations. So thank you very much for leading us in that conversation, and joining us at the Bully Pulpit. It's always a pleasure.

JACOBS: Thank you. It's been a great pleasure. And I hope that some of the conversations will echo and that we'll be able to, as a large and diverse and deep and committed movement, be able to forge a Zionism and a liberal Zionism for our movement, for our people, and for the well-being of the Jewish state.

HOLO: *Ken yehi ratzon* (may it be God's will).

JACOBS: Amen.

HOLO: 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.