



RABBI AMY SCHEINERMAN: HOSPICE, INTERFAITH AND HALAKHA

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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. I'm very excited to introduce you to Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, who is the Howard County Jewish Federation Hospice Rabbi. She maintains a website with Jewish educational material. And she writes two blogs called the Taste of Torah and Ten Minutes of Talmud. She's served Jewish communities of all stripes. And she travels as a scholar in residence around the country. Rabbi Scheinerman, thank you for joining us. It's a pleasure to have you.

SCHEINERMAN: My pleasure. Thanks for inviting me.

HOLO: I don't know much about hospice except what a lay person knows about hospice—that it's associated with palliative care, end of life, and all the associations with palliative care. I don't even know if this is accurate, but that's what I imagine hospice to be. Is that what hospice really is?

SCHEINERMAN: That's a good way to characterize it. It is a way of embracing people in the last stage of life. Embracing their family and friends as well. To make it as comfortable and natural a transition as possible. And also the palliative care is a very big part of it. So there's no more active attempt to try and cure things, or reverse the condition—which is usually impossible anyway.

HOLO: Right, by the time you get there...

SCHEINERMAN: But certainly to remove pain and anxiety.

HOLO: Does ice cream loom large in this picture? Like foods that people have been desiring and have been...

SCHEINERMAN: For some people. If I were to articulate my biggest frustration with hospice care, it's that people are not brought into hospice care soon enough. That they're so...

HOLO: They're fighting too long.

SCHEINERMAN: Their doctors are fighting a long time. And I have a certain amount of respect and understanding of that. But I've seen too many cases where the doctors don't say soon enough what direction this is going so that people can adjust their expectations—but also then indulge in ice cream and chocolate, or whatever.

HOLO: Right. Right.

SCHEINERMAN: Often, by the time people are brought into hospice care in my area, they are within a week of death.

HOLO: Oh, my.

SCHEINERMAN: Sometimes within a day or two. The worst case I heard of from one of the palliative care doctors when I discussed this with him was he said, “We had a case of somebody who died in transit from the hospital to the hospice facility.” Which I now need to explain to you is a half a mile away down the same road. So that's one of the struggles that we have now is that there isn't enough time to work with the patient. There's time to work with the family—though not always enough. But not with the patient.

HOLO: How much of the experience of hospice care is still counter cultural? I'm only relatively recently aware of hospice treatment as a basic category of treatment.

SCHEINERMAN: I find that most everybody's at least vaguely familiar with it, and acclimates to it so readily and quickly when they realize that everybody in this circle of people is going to be taken care of. And when they find out how well they're going to be taken care of, they adapt quite readily.

HOLO: But is it still something that people have to learn about? In other words, I don't have to ask someone what an oncologist is. Everyone knows what that is. That's part of...

SCHEINERMAN: Not as much because I run into a lot of people who say, “I've never been through this, but my cousin was, or my friend took her mother to hospice—and I heard how wonderful it was.”

HOLO: Is there any overlap between thinking about hospice care and the other public, civic conversation about the right to die? I mean, you see we're dealing with end of life issues. With embracing the end of life in ways that are relatively new in the medical culture of American life. I'm just wondering if these conversations overlap.

SCHEINERMAN: From what I've seen, they're not overlapping. At least not where I am. They're very separate. People are able to acknowledge when the end of life is approaching and understand that's what's happening. And the idea of terminating a life earlier than it might naturally end seems to be a very separate conversation.

HOLO: Sometimes I overhear questions about the afterlife. They're not usually directed at me is what I mean when I say I overhear them. I'm a party to broader religious conversations in that way. Do you think there's something about tackling questions of the afterlife that Judaism is either or well suited compared, let's say, to Christianity to the best of your knowledge, to discuss or to feel comfort with?

SCHEINERMAN: There's such a broad range of ideas concerning the afterlife offered by Judaism throughout the ages that I think it's like a very large menu where one can choose among these offerings what resonates with them. What I'm finding is most people don't really subscribe to any belief concerning the afterlife.

HOLO: What about when you're in conversations with them in hospice?

SCHEINERMAN: It doesn't always even come up. I don't force conversations because with the title of rabbi, if I say, "Now let's have a talk about what happens after death," if I sense that somebody's open to it, or thinking about it, I certainly will find a very gentle way to open that door. But I don't want to force that on people because they know I'm a rabbi. They know I'm available to talk about anything. And those who want to will talk about it. And some people don't want to because it's not part of their belief system. That's not what they're concerned about.

HOLO: What would you say is a dominant concern?

SCHEINERMAN: My loved ones, are they going to be okay after all of this is over? I walked into a hospice room a couple years ago and it was a very elderly man. And his children were there. And their spouses and their children were there. There were some nieces and nephews there who had also brought spouses and also brought children. There was a party going on. And they seemed to be quite a happy family. And they were keeping vigil around his bedside, respectfully but not without humor. And I met them all and we talked.

And I came back the next day, and the same thing was happening. And the next day, the same thing was happening. And then I asked more questions about his wife. And I learned the story of her. This was his second wife. The first marriage had been a very difficult and painful marriage. And this was his soulmate he had finally found. And he loved this woman dearly and lived for her. But she was at the beginning stages of dementia, which they thought might be Alzheimer's, they weren't sure.

That also explained to me why she sat quietly next to the bed and said very little. She was quite confused. Wasn't sure what was going on. And so it occurred to me that he couldn't die because he was scared to leave her. So I took his children aside and suggested to them that maybe that's what was going on. I wasn't sure. But I was certain that many people have the power to decide when they were going to die and when they weren't going to die. And they had their own concerns. And what I've also learned over the years is that some people want to die alone by themselves. And some people do not want to die alone by themselves. And

some people want to die with only a certain person in their presence. And they will wait until that moment to do it the way they want to do it.

So I suggested to them that perhaps his concern was that she would not be taken care of. And he was afraid for her. And also that I suspected that he did not want her to see him die. So I suggested that, come six o'clock, they all announce to him that they are going across the street for dinner. They will be gone for 45 minutes, and he will be alone for 45 minutes, and then they will be back. And before doing that they should all say to him, "We promise you we will take care of her. She will want for nothing. And we will make sure she's well taken care of." And they talked about it for really only about five minutes and decided they could do this.

So they did. At six o'clock they made their promise, which they meant very sincerely. This was a good family. And then they all left and the room was quiet. And we all left. And the nurse reported when we got back that he died within 10 minutes.

HOLO: Wow!

SCHEINERMAN: The man knew what he was doing. He knew his family. He loved them dearly. And it was his last measure of control.

HOLO: Powerful story.

SCHEINERMAN: I've seen others like that. A wonderful love affair. They were very popular couple. They had lots of friends. They were beloved by everybody. People flooding in and out of this hospice room. And finally the wife said, "You know what? I think he just wants me." So she shooed everybody out of the room after this going on for a week. And she sang their song to him. And he was gone within minutes. And these stories aren't unusual. If you know people who do hospice, I'm not telling you extraordinary stories.

HOLO: Right. Those are wonderful stories. Thank you for sharing them. Let's shift gears. I want to ask you all kinds of things. You maintain a website, and you clearly enjoy engaging in Jewish learning. And I wanted to ask you what a Meta-Mitzvah is.

SCHEINERMAN: It has seemed to me for a long time, as I'm sure it has to most Reform rabbis, that Reform Jews, in fact a lot of liberal Jews, have moved very far away from halakha as a way of life or a way of making decisions. But we all have to make a lot of decisions in life on a personal level, familial level, social level. And while we can say that Reform Judaism is about ethical monotheism, what does that impel us or compel us or obligate us to do?

We don't have a lot of ways of talking about that with any kind of specificity. And we have people coming to us who say I have these decisions to make about my family relationships, or my decisions in life. How do I make these decisions? And given that we place so much emphasis on ethics in Reform Judaism, it seemed to me what we need is to give people decision making tools. Ethical principles by which they make decisions, and that these are

best drawn straight out of the tradition. And there are beautiful texts that articulate these principles, and also back them up.

HOLO: Will you give us an example?

SCHEINERMAN: So one of them, from Deuteronomy 22:3, is the commandment to not be indifferent. This notion that you cannot stand by and say this doesn't matter to me, therefore I don't have to become involved is an impetus to moving further into an issue, to care more deeply about it, and to become involved in it in a way that otherwise you might not have been.

HOLO: It expands the sphere of your ethical responsibility.

SCHEINERMAN: Yes. Yes.

HOLO: It's daunting if you take it seriously.

SCHEINERMAN: Well, there have to be sane and healthy limits on everything. But indifference is a very dangerous thing—as we have learned from everybody from Martin Luther King to Elie Wiesel. We already knew that.

HOLO: Yeah. We did already know that. Are Meta-Mitzvah, such as this one, going to—it feels like it's going to push us in a direction that liberal or non-Orthodox Jews are already inclined to go, which is to a broad, ethical mandate without what in the 19th Century they called a ritual halakhic requirements of granular specificity that sometimes leaves us with a question mark?

SCHEINERMAN: No because I'm not an anti-ritual person. So this is, in my mind, a way that we can approach these ethical issues. So here's – I'll give you an example. In my area there are certain intersections, and probably this is true in every area, where people stand and beg for money. This is the case in the whole region. And people know where they are.

And a lot of people have expressed to me their discomfort with this, and what am I supposed to do. There are beautiful texts that you can study with them along with this pesuk from Deuteronomy that talk about the dangers of indifference.

There's a beautiful one in Bava Batra about how you build the gate to the courtyard, the shared courtyard that a number of houses join. And there's a story about a rabbi who regularly studies with Elijah. Would that he wanted to study with me; that would be pretty awesome. But because of the way the gate is built into this courtyard, Elijah won't come to study anymore because it turns out the problem with the gate is that poor people cannot come and make themselves heard at the gate. It has been designed and constructed in such a way that it keeps poor people out so that the people living off that courtyard do not have to deal with poor people.

Now when you study that text, then you're in a position to say to somebody, "Keep some small bills in your glove compartment so they're right at hand. And tell yourself, this is sedakah. I designate this money as sedakah. And now my only job is to distribute it." So then, when you come to these intersections, the money is not yours anymore. It's theirs. Your only job is to get it into their hand. And that has worked for a lot of people.

HOLO: It's a great idea.

SCHEINERMAN: And it solves their discomfort problem.

HOLO: I think I remember Rambam offering another solution, which is very different, but comes from the same place and might also serve. If I'm not mistaken Rambam says if you've given your allotment of sedakah for the appropriate time period and you don't really have the funds at hand to give to any or many panhandlers or beggars in the street who might encounter you, you're not obligated to give beyond what you've given insofar as the calculations of your income. It's not about necessarily the need.

But you have to encounter each of these people. You can't ignore them. You have to greet them. You have to acknowledge them. And you can't go through your day that, just because you can't give them more money doesn't mean you can avoid their humanity and their presence in your life. I thought that was also a very elegant, sort of fiscally and intellectually honest but elegant way of fulfilling the commandment.

SCHEINERMAN: Yes it is. It is. It's beautiful. Fortunately, most of us are not in the position where we can't afford to give them a dollar or two.

HOLO: That's right. Clearly we could put a stack of ones and...

SCHEINERMAN: And we can also greet them. And the other lovely thing that often happens is they give you a blessing. It's a beautiful berakah every time they give you.

HOLO: That's right. That's well said.

SCHEINERMAN: And I've also encouraged people to enjoy that and appreciate that. How often does somebody give you a berakah? Usually only when you're in a sick bed.

HOLO: That's right. Right. Or a mazel tov which counts as a berakah. But yeah, right. That's a lovely – a lovely example.

(Break)

HOLO: You've worked in many interfaith contexts, I can see. I too have taught at a place called the Graduate Theological Union, which is a consortium of Christian seminaries in Berkeley, California. And they, together, support a center for Jewish studies.

My experience was when a bunch of Christian seminaries get together generously and with generous spirit to fund a center for Jewish studies, as generous and in many ways as visionary as it is, it comes from a place of fundamentally self referentiality. Which is to say, Christians have a stake in understanding Judaism, not in a pluralistic point of view of the world is comprised of different peoples amongst them count the Jews—so we should learn about them.

Rather, from the very specific Christian perspective, which understands Judaism as part of its own story. And therefore, they have an interest, a self-interest in grasping Judaism, et cetera. I don't begrudge anybody funding something in their legitimate interest. Nothing's wrong with that. But it does beg a question about Christian engagement with Judaism for the sake of self-understanding on the Christian part, versus why Jews tend to engage with Christians, which tends to be for civic harmony. We don't engage with Christians to understand Judaism because we don't see Christians...

SCHEINERMAN: (*Hebrew*).

HOLO: Yeah, exactly. For the sake of harmony. Do you encounter that asymmetry as well? If so, what does it mean to you? And if not, what does that mean to you?

SCHEINERMAN: I do sense some of that, but I don't give it much thought.

HOLO: Because it's not a primary ingredient for you in the relationship?

SCHEINERMAN: I can't do anything about it. I just hope that in the encounter I will change their thinking. And make them realize we don't exist for you, and you don't exist for us. We all exist together. And, once we learn something about each other, we can slip that in. A lot of Christians, not all, but a lot of Christians have been taught to see the world that way.

HOLO: Right. Right. If they've enjoyed a certain majoritarian privilege, especially in this very powerful country, which is culturally Christian, they get reaffirmed passively.

SCHEINERMAN: My very first experience with that—I was in rabbinical school, and I was taking Greek at Princeton Theological Seminary during the summer. And I was the only Jew in this class, which was really a spectrum of Christians, including two Catholic seminarians. And a woman said, "Can I have some of your time? I want to learn about the Passover Seder." And you know where this is going, but at the time I hadn't a clue where this was going. Not a clue.

So I spent several hours with her, and I explained it to her hoping that—or naively hoping that she was interested in understanding what Jews do. Maybe because she had some kind of allusion that the Last Supper was a Passover Seder, since a lot of people thought that in those days.

And at the end, she asked a few questions that indicated what she was going to do with this. She was trying to formulate some kind of Christological Seder. At which point, I expressed

deep misgivings about it—and quite a bit of anger that she had used my time this way with the intention of using my rituals that way. And I said I was deeply offended by what she was doing and felt I was being used.

She was extraordinarily upset and said she had no idea that this was using and abusing somebody else's tradition. It hadn't occurred to her. But once I explained it, she got it thoroughly. And she said, "I won't do it." So clearly she was open minded.

HOLO: So let's talk a little bit about the interfaith aspect of your work. I want to ask you what you think that the Christian world most urgently needs to learn from us, and vice versa.

SCHEINERMAN: We have a lot we can learn from each other. We've had very different experiences in the world and very different perspective lenses through which we've looked at the world. One of the things that we offer—can offer them is Midrash, which is a way of looking at a text through a lens that they're not used to looking at the world through.

HOLO: Are you getting at the fact that they are prone to attributing authenticity to literalism, whereas we're capable of finding authenticity in Midrash, in—in expansive thinking?

SCHEINERMAN: That—and also because there is a large swath of the Christian world which has been taught that this is what a text means, and one cannot go beyond that.

I had the great pleasure of teaching down in Lubbock, Texas a couple years ago. For one of the sessions, I encouraged my rabbi colleague to invite the clergy in town to come and let's do a session for the clergy, which we did. And we looked at Midrashim from the Bavli, from the Babylonian Talmud on the Exodus, and in particular what was going on with the women during the Exodus.

There's some marvelous stories in (*Hebrew*). And there seemed to be a divide. There was almost an (*Hebrew*) in the room. And it wasn't a physical (*Hebrew*) but you could feel it strongly between clergy who were very uncomfortable with this idea of these stories built in and around the text, and others who were just lapping it up—as if they were out in the desert, which we were in Lubbock, Texas—and this was the first water they'd had in 24 hours. And they loved it.

And at lunch afterwards, there was a very uncomfortable group of clergy that I tried to engage. And then there was a group sitting around a table that said, "Oh rabbi, you people have got to teach us how to do this. You have to teach us how to do this with our texts. This is what we need to be doing." They loved it.

HOLO: They loved the well spring of meaning that opened.

SCHEINERMAN: Yes. Yes. And their Christian New Testament is a text ripe for Midrash.

HOLO: Sure. It's a Midrash itself.

SCHEINERMAN: Exactly. Exactly. And they were starting to understand it that that's what it was. And seeing the possibilities.

HOLO: Was there any demographic correlation amongst the group who had difficulty, versus the group that lapped it up, as you said?

SCHEINERMAN: Well, this was a small sampling. And I'm hesitant to make any generalizations of that sort. If you don't have statistical significance. But the divide in that room, at that time, in that the small group was largely male, versus female.

HOLO: I was going to ask that, as well, and didn't.

SCHEINERMAN: Were you?

HOLO: Totally. I was holding my tongue.

SCHEINERMAN: I don't want to claim that that's in broad strokes. But in my limited experience with doing this with Christians, I have some other data points on that one.

HOLO: We all know that most ancient traditions are less friendly to the experience of women. Even if they're not hostile to women, they're certainly comfortable ignoring women—these ancient traditions, often. Certainly, proportionally that's the case. I think you can say that statistically and mathematically when it comes to the texts and stories and the prominence of women.

SCHEINERMAN: Yes.

HOLO: And, so, if you get a group of women—even in denominations where women have been members of the clergy for a generation or more—there's a lot of spade work to be done still. And you can see why that work is, as you said, it generates a thirst for opportunities to generate meaning.

SCHEINERMAN: Another area that we can share with them is the very notion of (*Hebrew*).

HOLO: Right. Right.

SCHEINERMAN: How to conduct a civil conversation keeping in mind it's not about us, it's about the issues involved and how best we serve. Whatever we consider God to be, whoever we consider God to be, and the broader values that we subscribe to, and the community of people that we're committed to.

HOLO: And the principle that's incumbent upon us to make disagreement productive, rather than either reductive or destructive.

SCHEINERMAN: Beautifully put. That's what I'm trying to say, but you said it much better.

And I think a third element is the mode of religious reasoning that we employ, which helps us keep things (*Hebrew*) argument for the sake of heaven. That, I think, is something that they could benefit from greatly to keep things within proper balance. And there's a great deal we can learn from them.

One of the things we have all learned from in recent years is spontaneous prayer, which is not something that comes naturally to Jews. We're accustomed to opening a book in order to pray. But they're extraordinarily good at spontaneous prayer. And I've watched my colleagues do it and learned it. And it's a marvelous thing to be able to do.

Another thing is their ability to talk so naturally and fluently about faith and spirituality.

HOLO: Yes, I hear this all the time.

SCHEINERMAN: And that's a wonderful thing that we are learning to do thanks to them.

HOLO: We shy from it.

SCHEINERMAN: And along those lines, also to talk about one's relationship with God. Those are great gifts they've given us. So we have a great deal to learn from each other.

HOLO: Interesting. That's a very helpful list. Thank you. I want to close with a question which has to do with your Dvar Torah online for (*Hebrew*) where one of the themes that you discuss has to do with the relationship between suffering and sin.

We all know that most traditional religions associate—or there are streams within those traditions which associate—suffering with sin. The implication being that your suffering is a consequence of your sin or sinfulness. Something which doesn't have a whole lot of emotional currency in today's culture. You tackle it. What's your claim with respect to that relationship?

SCHEINERMAN: In (*Hebrew*) I was trying to draw a parallel, or at least some kind of comparison, between historical revisionism, whereby those who are guilty become the victims. They become the innocents. And the example I gave was Victor Orban's memorial to the victims of the German Occupation, which is this massive sculpture in Freedom Square in Budapest. And it is, if you've ever seen a picture of it, it's quite striking. It's the German Imperial Eagle coming down and attacking and savaging the Archangel Gabriel who is considered the patron saint of Hungary.

And the conclusion that one draws from this, which Orban confirmed in his writings to an architect who had some qualms about this sculpture, is that the victims were the Christian Hungarians. And they were victims of the Occupation. Jews are mentioned nowhere in his statements.

And I drew a comparison to the way the rabbis deal with such issues in the Talmud. They theologically interpret things in such a way that Jews are guilty for the sins of others. And, in particular, I drew on some material from *Ila(ph)*, which is a (*Hebrew*) of the Talmud, and two pieces in particular.

One is in which Rabbi Yitzchak draws a comparison between a pesuk in the Torah, in which we're told the stone tablets were inscribed all the way through, from one side to the other. And the use of a similar—but not even the same expression with the word *ze* and *za* in the Book of Esther—to say that the reason the Jews were suffering and Haman made this decree was because they had engaged in idolatry. They had it coming to them, in other words.

And (*Hebrew name*) makes another similar one, and that is, in some regards, an even better example, because he says this happened to the Jews because they went to Ahasuerus' party. And his students said, "Even if some Jews went to Ahasuerus' party, they couldn't all have gone." Prussia's a very big country. There are lots of Jews outside Shushan. Why are all the Jews having this decree laid upon them by Haman if they're not all guilty?"

And he said, "Okay, so they're all engaged in idolatry." But there's nothing in the Book of Esther that would support any of those claims. So he is revisioning the history of what happened. He's revisioning the whole story to fit his theological understanding that if something bad happens to you...

HOLO: It's because you deserve it.

SCHEINERMAN: Since God is in charge, God must be minimally permitting it, maximally orchestrating it. And, exactly as you said, it's because you sinned and you deserve it. So the only query that needs to be made is what was the sin?

HOLO: Right.

SCHEINERMAN: And that turns the victims into the guilty party, and the guilty party into the innocents.

HOLO: But it also preserves God's justice, because it's a way of looking at the world, whereby if you suffered—it's for a good reason. And so God's inflicting suffering on you is just. And preserving God's justice might be more of a solace than anything.

SCHEINERMAN: That may work for some people.

HOLO: I agree where you're going with this—that it doesn't work for most people today. I do think that for people who saw themselves as in exile and almost existentially suffering, as some of us tend to do now as well, but certainly it was part of the theology of the rabbis in the post-rabbinical period...

SCHEINERMAN: I think there's also a very strong undercurrent, even among the rabbis, that rejects that wholesale. The year before last, I did a session on the suffering as a result of the destruction of the Second Temple and looked at rabbinic responses to the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 by the Romans. And there is deep, deep anger in the rabbinic tradition about God's injustice, or God's complete absence in allowing the Romans to do this. And there is so much that says in the rabbinic tradition we didn't deserve this. This was a horrendous thing that God either allowed, and if God orchestrated it, then God is the almost evil guilty party here.

HOLO: Wow! That's powerful. So we can agree, perhaps, along the lines of what you were describing as the multiple options for understanding the afterlife in Judaism. It would appear that there are at least two, maybe many more, options for understanding the relationship between a God whom we understand to be just and suffering, which appears sometimes just, many times unjust, and often times inscrutable.

SCHEINERMAN: That's how we experience the world.

HOLO: I want to thank you very much for joining us. It was a pleasure. Really a great conversation.

SCHEINERMAN: It's been my pleasure. Thank you for the invitation. It was lovely. Thank you.

HOLO: Thank you.

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