



## DAPHNA ROSENBERG: A LIFE IN MUSIC

(Begin audio)

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 welcome to the Bully Pulpit Podcast Daphna Rosenberg. Daphna is a singer, composer and prayer leader in the Jewish Renewal Community Navatehila in Jerusalem. She travels throughout Israel and around the world connecting people within and across communities to each other and to God by giving concerts and leading prayers and workshops.

(Music)

HOLO: Daphna, it's such a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

ROSENBERG: (*Hebrew*).

HOLO: So I read up a bit on your bio and your music. And so the first thing I was curious about was the fact that you call yourself – you had a stage in life where you were a wandering troubadour. And so that begged the question, you know, where did you wander? And not only how far did you wander on earth, but you also imply that you wandered away from and back to your Judaism. So give me the literal wandering and the figurative wandering.

ROSENBERG: Okay. When I finished my – I did my first degree in Israel at the Hebrew University in French Language and Literature and what's called like a general BA. I finished that when I was 27. And I wanted to go traveling like many Israelis. Even though that was about six or seven years later than the norm. Like I didn't do it after the army. And I went traveling for six months in the Far East. I went to Nepal, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia. And I traveled for six months.

HOLO: Also a typical route for many Israelis.

ROSENBERG: Yes. Yes. Very typical for many Israelis. Tibet and China as well, I was there. And after six months I went back home. And I think it took me about three days to understand that I want to continue. I stayed in Israel for a few months to make a bit of money working with the Jewish agency doing all kinds of things. And then my cousin was on her way to – was on her way to Canada with her two little children. And she wanted help. I said, "I'm coming with

you.”

HOLO: And you were born in Canada, right?

ROSENBERG: Yes, I was born in Canada. Though my parents made Aliyah when I was three months old. But I still have a lot of family back in Canada. So she said, “I’m going to visit. Do you want to help me with the kids?” I said, “Sure.” And I made some money. And after a few months I left again. I left with her. Spent some time there. And then I just – and then I just continued and I went to – I continued to - a friend of mine joined me. And we continued to Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and spent a lot of time there. And when my money finished I went back to Israel and made a little bit more money. And continued being on the road. And then I went to India for six months. My money finished again. I went back and made a little bit more money. And then I left and was on the way to Italy and then I went for about four years. All in all it was about seven years on the road.

HOLO: Wow! With your guitar or without?

ROSENBERG: So, no. When I started I did not – I was not singing or playing the guitar. In my travels just before I was – about three years after I started my travels, when I was 30, I was living in a rainbow community in the mountains in Italy, in Tuscany. And on my third night there I dreamt a dream that I’m playing the guitar and I’d never touched a guitar before.

HOLO: Wow!

ROSENBERG: And I woke up in the morning and I said to my friend that I had this dream. And he said, “Okay, I’ll give you my guitar.” And he started to teach me A minor, E minor. And I was so excited. And like I spent every day like singing and - singing and playing the guitar and writing music. And there was like a whole new world for me. And then I left this community after about two months. And I said, “Okay, I have to find another place.” And I found myself in a Franciscan Catholic community in Assisi in Italy. And they had guitars there and I was singing. I was singing like Hebrew prayers in the church there. And they like absolutely adored it. They were like, “Wow! We have like somebody singing and speaking the holy...”

HOLO: The language of the Torah.

ROSENBERG: Right, the language of the Holy Land. And then after that, I said, “Okay, I have to buy a guitar.” So then I bought my first guitar in Naples, Italy. And I found myself just wandering around from there. I continued to Canada, then Canada, Hawaii, back to Italy, New Zealand. It was like all over I spent.

HOLO: What was the hardest place for you? The place where it was the most sterile or more painful of all those places?

ROSENBERG: Sterile or painful? I think it doesn’t have to do with the physical place. When I look at my – at those years I think of the places that were hard were the places where I was

having a hard time inside, not outside. And where I felt sometimes, you know, I traveled most of that time, those seven years I traveled on my own, I met a lot of people but I had like periods of traveling on my own, traveling with other people. But I think lots of lonely moments but were, when I look back at it, I think those – it was moments of really looking inside, of looking inside. And it brings me to what you asked. After I was like what was I, you know, what was I – not the physical traveling but the inner traveling was very strong. One of the things that I decided at one point was to let go of my origin, of my Jewish and Israeli origin. And since I had a Canadian passport I could say I'm Canadian. And I changed my name. For a year I traveled with – I called myself – I called myself Jazzy. That was my – a friend of mine helped me. And it was a very powerful experience putting back the baggage I had of being Israeli, Jewish, my family, home. It's like I needed to see who I am not connected to my home. And I think that was a very powerful experience. And when I look back today I know that this was totally necessary to bring me back to where I am today.

HOLO: Yeah, I can imagine. Not many people take that step though of actually experimenting with disengagement. Did you also disengage in terms of communication with your family?

ROSENBERG: A little bit.

HOLO: There's only so far you can go, right.

ROSENBERG: Well, you know, there was a period of a few months, which was a hard and painful one. But we went through it and I'm very, very close to my family. Was, still am. With a, you know, being very close to your family has its ties.

HOLO: Double edged sword.

ROSENBERG: Right. Double edged sword. But I'm very close to them.

HOLO: Right. Right. And what you're really saying is that I posed the question with respect to sterility and pain and what you're really saying is that pain is fertile, not sterile.

ROSENBERG: Yes.

HOLO: So what was the – what was the kind of Judaism you were leaving behind, or Israeliness that you were leaving behind. And what was the kind of Judaism and Israeliness that you returned to?

ROSENBERG: So I grew up in a, well what I could call like a Modern Orthodox home. My parents came from Canada. It was something that wasn't very known in Israel at the time. I mean we didn't drive on Shabbat, but we did answer the phone and watch TV on Friday night, but we didn't put the fire, like fire on for cooking. A combination that was very, today I think it's more apparent, but at the time, like 50 years ago, this was – either you were (*Hebrew*) or...

HOLO: You were secular or...

ROSENBERG: Sorry. You were secular, religious, or ultra-Orthodox. Those were the – those were the options. And my dad sent us, my parents sent us to a school in Haifa. I grew up in Haifa. To (*Hebrew*) school which was a private school which was not religious. It was secular. But they did teach a little bit more religious studies than they did in regular schools. But all my friends were totally secular. So I went to (*Hebrew*) Shabbat and all my friends, their parents took (*Hebrew*), like a – they took them to on Saturday with the cars and like I walked. So it was very – or when I ate at my friends' houses I was eating on like plastic plates because I needed to eat kosher. And so it was very different. And I think as a child and as a teenager at the time, it wasn't easy. And I remember having discussions with my dad about this. Like as a child it's very hard to have like two...

HOLO: Two worlds.

ROSENBERG: Right. Two worlds. Looking back now, I think that was probably one of my gifts of being so open to many different ways of living as an adult. And open, liberal, able to...

HOLO: It stretches you.

ROSENBERG: Yes. It definitely stretched me as a child. And I think it was my, as you said, it was – it's a fertile not sterile. So it's like – it was the ground from which I could grow into, I think, what I'm doing today.

HOLO: Did your parents speak to you in English growing up?

ROSENBERG: They spoke to us in English. And between me and my brothers, I have two older brothers, we spoke Hebrew.

HOLO: Yeah. Typical pattern.

ROSENBERG: Yeah, and I still speak English. So when people say, "Oh you were just three months old, so you're Israeli?" I say, "Well, no because I grew up in a North American household, in a Canadian household." Even though all my friends were Israeli and I was speaking Hebrew and Hebrew – I say English is my mother tongue but Hebrew I speak better.

HOLO: My children do the same thing. Their mother's (inaudible) is Portuguese but they speak English better.

ROSENBERG: Okay.

HOLO: For the same, exactly the same reason. It's a very common dynamic in immigrant societies.

ROSENBERG: So I think – so I grew up in a – I didn't learn much Judaism. And it was very – it was religious and traditional, the house, but it wasn't, in my sense it wasn't spiritual. It's like I

went to Yom Kippur. We went to shul, you know, you read the book. And the (*Hebrew*). Actually we didn't go to Kabbalat Shabbat. It was like the holidays and sometimes on Shabbatot. And it was mostly my brothers and my dad that would go to shul every week. And my brothers had like they studied with a religious studies. And when I went on my travels I think I was looking for the spirit. And I lived in any – in any possible spiritual community. I lived in a Hindu community. I lived in a Buddhist community. I lived in a Franciscan community. Lived in an organic community. I lived in many different places.

HOLO: You were seeking.

ROSENBERG: Yes, I was definitely seeking. I was seeking to find something that's not – that's deep inside of me. And I think one of the biggest gifts that I got those years, is not just the spirituality but is the music. I would not have imagined, if you asked me 20 years ago when I was 50 this is what I'd be doing, leading – singing and leading and traveling around the world doing music. There's no way I would believe you.

HOLO: I think also, at least the narrative of young Israelis is that it's also one of the typical qualities of the journey is that spiritual vacuum that they're looking for. And maybe it's generational. I don't know. But you clearly came back to something. And what did you come back to?

ROSENBERG: When I came back a friend of mine invited me to come to some community in the desert in Israel to celebrate Yom Kippur. And I remember that so strongly. It was with a Jewish Renewal rabbi. And it was the first time that I – even though I had celebrated, you know, Yom Kippur for so many years with my family, I remember calling my dad at the end of Yom Kippur and saying this is the first time I understood what Yom Kippur was about. It was a very, very deep experience. It really going into it, understanding what it is. I was very taken by the - suddenly something really has (*Hebrew*). Like it...

HOLO: We say the penny dropped.

ROSENBERG: Thank you. The penny dropped. That the combination of my Jewish roots that I am very, very connected to, that's what I grew up with, to the spirit, to the spirituality. And the combination of the two of them was like, wow! This is it. And then I was in – I was meeting people and I was singing and playing. And after about, I think, two years I was still – when I came back after seven years I came back to Israel and I was want- still wandering around Israel for three and a half years searching for communities. Living in a yoga community in the south. Living in a vegetarian community in the north. I was like all over.

And then I was going through some kind of a personal crisis in my life and this friend of mine said, "Go see this couple, Ruth and Michael Kagan." So I said okay. And I called Ruth and I said, "Hi, like my name is Daphna and I'd like to come and see you." And she said, "Okay, I'll pray about it." And then she called me like two days later and – and I came back. And we started – well right now I want to say this is Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan who leads our community. And I want to say like the rest is history. Yeah, I came to her. In the first few months I was

working with her on like a personal basis. Like she was a personal, like a spiritual (*Hebrew*). I don't know...

HOLO: Influence.

ROSENBERG: Well it's not like – in a Jewish Renewal world the (*Hebrew*) are like...

HOLO: Oh like a guide?

ROSENBERG: Yeah, like a spiritual guide. It's from the – it's not only from the influence but from the word (*Hebrew*). Like bringing abundance.

HOLO: Oh. Oh, I see.

ROSENBERG: Okay. So she – so we had a very close – we were working together and she was really helping me and teaching me a lot of like (*Hebrew*), the inner world, the inner Jewish spiritual world. And after about a few months – after a few months she said to me, “Would you like to lead Kabbalat Shabbat with me?” And I said, “Sure.” Because I was – I was already playing and singing in all kinds of circles singing anything from Hare Krishna to (*Hebrew*) to all kinds of, you know, different traditions. So I was leading – and rainbow songs. I was leading many circles. She said, “Do you want to lead Kabbalat Shabbat?” I said, “Sure.” And I remember that evening we sat in the living room and she said – we went through the (*Hebrew*) and she said, “Just choose a pesach that speaks to you and write...”

HOLO: A verse from Psalms.

ROSENBERG: Yeah, a verse from Psalms. And I mean some of those – from that first session that we had I think at least five or six of the songs were written that evening were came to our – in our first CD.

HOLO: The flavor of a lot of the videos that are posted is that living room flavor.

ROSENBERG: Yes it is.

HOLO: I've noticed.

ROSENBERG: Yes.

HOLO: It's a charming quality.

ROSENBERG: Yeah, that living room has produced a lot, a lot of things. A lot of connections. A lot of spirit. A lot of – a lot of heart.

HOLO: Well, would you sing us a song that - or a verse of whatever your settings are that captures a little bit of the spirit that you're...

ROSENBERG: So today's Saturday, so I thought that I'd like to sing the (*Hebrew*).

(Music)

HOLO: It's beautiful. Thank you.

(Break)

HOLO: The Psalms are typically the greatest prayerful inspiration in the Jewish tradition as a body of literature. And for the Christian tradition by extension. But I want you to tell me what it is about the (*Hebrew*) because I looked at the songs which you have composed settings for as opposed to the traditional ones you may sing. You've drawn a lot of from Psalms in that tradition and in the spirit. But tell me what it is about the Psalms for you personally that so moves you.

ROSENBERG: I think that the original reasons why we've composed so many Psalms is because we started with Kabbalat Shabbat. Kabbalat Shabbat is composed from six, actually no, eight Psalms. Six before (*Hebrew*) and then two Psalms afterwards. And they're beautiful Psalms. They're Psalms that have nature in them and connection to God, and yearning and difficulty and – and joy and music. Like it – there's a whole world to them. It's not a surprise that so many people want to compose. Like that's what they are. They're songs. They're not just Psalms. Like they're – they're meant to be written with music.

And I think that's what definitely at the beginning that's what drew me to compose Tehillim. I've composed also other things like from different – from different prayers, like from morning prayers, from (*Hebrew*), from the High Holiday prayers, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, (*Hebrew*). I don't think there's something that's just specific in what I compose that's just Tehillim. It's just like anything that I use in my prayer I want it to be connected to my heart. And through composing and chanting and singing it that's what brings it. So it could be anything. It goes all the way also to – I also compose like poetry. I've composed, you know, (*Hebrew*) Israeli poets.

HOLO: Israeli poets.

ROSENBERG: And the composing is really what connects it to my heart. It's like I own it when I compose it. And then it's like my personal prayer.

HOLO: I mentioned before the hominess, the (*Hebrew*) of your videos, the ones that you choose to post. They're so – there are kids. I don't know if they're your kids. But they look – I mean it's such a homey feeling. And some of the most charming ones are with the kids. I was wondering if you would sing a song that has – I'm trying to think. I don't remember...

ROSENBERG: (*Hebrew*) maybe?

HOLO: Yes. Yeah, that's it. That's it.

ROSENBERG: We have...

HOLO: It's a completely different vibe.

ROSENBERG: Yeah, this is actually – I would probably say this is the first song I ever composed. (*Hebrew*) is from Psalm 95, which is the first (*Hebrew*). And when we sat together, Rabbi Ruth together with me in the living room in that first session. That was – I looked at the Psalm 95. That was the phrase that I – that spoke to me. And that was the first song for years that would be like a – we had the children at the (*Hebrew*), some of the children – one of the girls there was Rabbi Ruth's daughter that sang it. And also, later there were other children like Rabbi's niece that was singing. And different children that were part of – their parents were part of the community. And they would actually sing it also at the (*Hebrew*). But they would start like the first verse and then everybody would join. When we recorded the CD we wanted the kids' voice to be at the beginning of the – at the beginning of it. So I'll be happy to sing it.

HOLO: Yeah, it's got a great feeling to it.

ROSENBERG: (*Hebrew*). The sea is His. He has created it and the land was the creation of His hands.

(Music)

HOLO: In the Reform Movement in America we care about influencing Israeli Jewish life. It's one of the ways we think about how we expend our resources, our money, and our time. We send our kids. A lot of American Jews think this way. But Reform Jews in particular are aiming for real change in Israel. We invest a lot. The Hebrew Union College has a campus. The Reform Movement has – it has created the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. I could go on and you're familiar with all this. How do you experience our efforts, our desires to shape Israeli society from a distance?

ROSENBERG: I think the – I mean the Reform Movement also in Israel is growing in the last few years. So there's an influence both from the Reform Movement in the States and in Israel. I think that the direction that I think it is moving is, what you say, is like social justice change. And I feel that there's an influence on Reform Judaism. Like on - like being egalitarian. And I mean of course everything that's happening at the Kotel, though it's not only the Reform Movement. There's like Reform. There's Conservative. There's Renewal.

HOLO: There's partners, yeah.

ROSENBERG: Yeah, there's a lot of partners. But I that that's – in that sense it's definitely – it definitely has an influence. In general, I think there's a lot of people in Israel are looking to reconnect to their Jewish roots. I think I grew up in an era where if you were, as I said before,



you were either Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox, or secular. And a lot of people are looking for a connection, a renewed connection to their Jewish roots, not through the Orthodox Judaism. And the Reform Judaism is one of those ways. Like it's important for me also to say since I'm personally not...

HOLO: In the Reform Movement.

ROSENBERG: Not in the Reform Movement. And my rabbi, Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan is a Jewish Renewal rabbi. Ordained by (*Hebrew*). That there's a whole movement in Israel that we're part of, and the Reform Movement is part of, of finding ways for Israelis to connect to their Jewish roots without having to be Orthodox. And I think in that there's a very big influence. For the Reform Movement there's more and more Reform communities. Or I would say there's lots of (*Hebrew*), many Renewal communities that are – some of them are connected to the Reform Movement. Some of them are Renewal like us. Some of them are communities on kibbutz in (*Hebrew*) that are not necessarily affiliated with any. I mean there's (*Hebrew*) in Tel Aviv. There's (*Hebrew*). Those are not necessarily affiliated communities. But they're definitely wanting to find their connection to the...

HOLO: And they're part of the shared spirit of the non-Orthodoxy in America that...

ROSENBERG: Right. Right. So in that sense, you know, you could say that the Reform Movement that's so big in America is also influencing Israel is also bringing a rising interest of people connecting to their Jewish roots in a new renewed, heartfelt, connected, spiritual way.

HOLO: And you see some success there?

ROSENBERG: Oh yeah. Definitely.

HOLO: You're a part of that.

ROSENBERG: I mean I'm a part of it.

HOLO: Of the broader spirit of renewal.

ROSENBERG: Right. Right.

HOLO: Lowercase r on renewal.

ROSENBERG: Sorry.

HOLO: Lowercase r, renewal.

ROSENBERG: Yes. Yes. Yes, there's definitely...

HOLO: Altogether.

ROSENBERG: Right, altogether. And I say some are affiliated, some are not affiliated. But there's a whole renewal movement that's definitely happening. And (*Hebrew*) are sprouting like everywhere. Like (*Hebrew*) in kibbutz (*Hebrew*) 30 years ago nobody would even talk about that.

HOLO: Right. They feel uncomfortable.

ROSENBERG: Right. I mean we've had in our community two prayer leaders that were both kibbutzim, like they grew up on kibbutzim. They came to (*Hebrew*) the first time without knowing (*Hebrew*) was. Okay, they were like in their 20s.

HOLO: Typical socialist kibbutz.

ROSENBERG: Right. They had no idea about that. And something about our community, Navatehila, helped them like connect to something in their Jewish roots. Both of them now, by the way, are Orthodox. Both of them moved from – they found...

HOLO: They skipped a step.

ROSENBERG: No they didn't skip. They went through it.

HOLO: Right. Right. Right.

ROSENBERG: They went through the step. Like they would not have been able to enter the Jewish tradition through an Orthodox door. They were able to come into it through our door because it was an open door. And now they've chosen their way to reconnect to the Divine.

HOLO: So as a last question, you come to us as an Israeli. What do you personally bring that's uniquely Israeli to us as a gift? And perhaps more broadly speaking, what is it that American Jews need to know about Israel?

ROSENBERG: I think as a musician and a prayer leader what I feel is that when we come here to bring is a deep connection to the words of the text. I think that our compositions and what we write in the music are very, very connected to the text because it's our mother tongue. People who write music like back here in the States they – they're not always connected. They write the music but it's not always connected to the – to the words. I think we bring a very strong connection to that with our music. And also, there's a diversity in Israel. Somebody once asked me not long ago like what's the influence like of our music. And because we grew up in a land that there's so much music, there's Moroccan music, and Western music, and Eastern music, and there's like a blend of so many things, world music that we grew up into it. So I think we bring, when we come to here with our music and prayer, we come with a very deep connection to the words, and to the music, and the spirit. And I feel that the Reform Movement is really embracing us. Like the doors are really, really opened for it. I think that what the Reform Movement here in the States has to give to us in Israel is an

openness to celebrate Judaism in a different way, in an open way. I think that's still – there's still – we still have a lot to learn in that. How to celebrate your Judaism in an open way. And I'm saying not to us specifically Navatehila but to Israel. Before I was talking about what Navatehila and our music bring to the States but now being like what the Reform Movement can bring to Israel as a whole. It can be egalitarian. It can be women and men. There's like an allowance. Allowance in the sense of to allow.

HOLO: Permission.

ROSENBERG: Permission. Thank you. A permission to be Jewish and to express it in an open and liberal way. I think that's a good gift.

HOLO: Good. We're proud of it then. That's great. Both sides of the – of the relationship. It's a real pleasure. It's a (*Hebrew*). So would you take us out with a song of your choice?

ROSENBERG: Yes. Our latest CD that came out just about six or seven months ago is called Havaya. One of the things it is very strong and our spiritual work is connecting. Connecting to the divine. Is finding our own connection to the Divine. And helping people also finding their connection. And the word Havayah is actually the four letters of (*Hebrew*) written a different way. And when you say Havayah in Hebrew it means Being. And which is another name of God. And the (*Hebrew*) is like I said Havayah in front of me always in everything I do. So we look at it as like the everything that happens to me during the day, every person that I meet, every encounter, every thing I see is part of God, is part of Being. And the essence of that is being a hava. I added the – I composed this composition I added to the pesach I added the word (*Hebrew*). Which is what I like to spread most.

(Music)

HOLO: Daphna Rosenberg, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. It's been a pleasure.

ROSENBERG: It's been a pleasure for me too.

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