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DR. GREGORY MOBLEY: A BAPTIST AND A JEW WALK INTO A BAR...

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

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JH: You're listening to a special episode recorded at Symposium 2, a conference held in Los Angeles at Stephen Wise Temple in November of 2018.

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JH: I think you're going to enjoy very much the treat that we have in store for you with this episode of the College Commons Podcast. We're joined by Dr. Gregory Mobley, who is Professor of Hebrew Bible and Congregational Studies at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School. He's the author and co-author of a number of books, including some with great titles, such as *The Return of the Chaos Monsters: And Other Backstories of the Bible*, *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots*, and *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interfaith Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*. I look forward to our conversation with you, Dr. Gregory Mobley, and thank you for joining us.

Dr. Gregory Mobley: My pleasure.

JH: So I want to pick up a little bit of a description from your own bio that I wanna dive into a little bit. It says, "Mobley's primary interest is in uncovering in order to appreciate the meaning-making of the stirring stories under the surface of the over-edited, moralistic, and priestly layers of the Bible." [chuckle] So to me, I don't know what your theology is, but that comment is redolent of a fundamentalist sensibility. Is that fair or unfair? [chuckle]

DM: Well, that's for someone else to say. What it's redolent for me is that I think the Bible contains some of the world's greatest stories, that it draws buckets full of prime material from the well of stories. The Bible began to be written, just as the old oral world was ending and the alphabet was invented. And it's as if the Bible is like Noah's Ark, and on... The Bible is recording some of the oldest greatest stories humans know. That is my only point there. I think that there's a sense in which often... Eventually, the biblical editors turned all those stories into sermons or history lessons. And I'm saying... For instance, the book of the Bible I'm writing about now is *Shoftim*, Judges. There's a lot of anti-heroes, you might say, in the Book of Judges. It isn't a go-to place of most people for inspiration. I'm finding it to be just so rich and stirring, but you have

to read beyond the editor at the end that says, "And the people were bad."

JH: The fundamentalist urge is to get past intervening layers to get to a foundational layer, and you're not talking about that. You're talking about...

DM: I'm not talking about that.

JH: A storyful tone that you prefer and that you want to mine.

DM: And the truth is I find every iteration of the tradition interesting. The way I put it is, sometimes I want to pour buckets of water over these texts that have become so religious and moralistic, just to kind of see their gritty, raw, folk artistry. But now the other... Let me just talk about the other issue, and this is... I'm a Christian. The one thing I love about Judaism is its idea of Torah. So the way I understand it is, there's a lot of definitions of Torah, but ultimately it's this entire conversation that begins with T'nach, but it's this conversation between Israel and God walking through history. It continues.

JH: And the layers go on and on and...

DM: And every layer is holy.

JH: Every generation we mine every layer.

DM: Absolutely, and I love that. The truth is, Christians don't acknowledge that, but of course it happens.

JH: Right, or course, right, right.

DM: You can't be alive with an ancient text...

JH: Without participating... Yeah, absolutely.

DM: Without constantly reactualizing it.

JH: But we do enshrine it in theory and in practice, we don't... That's true.

DM: And you make the conversation itself holy, not the... Any single...

JH: Conclusion or...

DM: Or moment.

JH: Yeah, that's right. That's true, that's true, we do, we're trained that way from a young age. If you do participate in Jewish education, you get raised that way, to have a conversation with the different layers at different times with the understanding that you are beholden to all of them.

DM: Well, yeah, and as a guest in a Jewish classroom, in a big Midrash, what I observe is this... If I could use a sports analogy, in Judaism, you count assists, not just baskets. [chuckle]

JH: There you go. [chuckle]

DM: Because actually, the scholars I hear and thinkers make incredible novel points, but they always say, "As Rabbi so-and-so says... "

JH: Right, right, right, there's always an assist.

DM: And that's the game.

JH: Yeah, yeah.

DM: And that's a beautiful game because it allows the tradition to evolve, but it stays rooted.

JH: Yeah. I think that's... I think... Put it this way, I'm happy to be self-congratulatory and agree with you.

[laughter]

JH: So on the Eerdword blog you have a post, I think you were a guest blogger, and you have this... You have a beautiful prose style, and you have a lyrical critique of atheism. You write, "To me, atheism is tone deaf to the ringing of the spheres. It's as if someone swore off music because they felt traumatized by insipid pop songs on the radio." Now, here's the thing. I don't know what you mean, but that sounds beautiful, I love that. [laughter] I do kinda know what you mean, but I want you to unpack the metaphor for me and tell me exactly, what is the ringing of the spheres exactly that they're tone deaf to, and what's the insipid pop that they're being fed?

DM: The ringing of the spheres is actually a medieval idea about their cosmology, that way up in the astral plane somewhere there are circuits and rings of reality...

JH: Concentric circles, right?

DM: Concentric circles that are moving and actually vibrate and hum. So these are such incredible kind of questions, I can't believe I'm foolish enough to attempt to answer, like what is religion? But for me, it is a kind of poetry, a kind of music that is not in competition with other ways of knowing, but rather enriches our experience of searching for meaning because it does add the music that you can make community around, the prayers that you can make community around, the poetry you can make community around. I don't actually privilege religion as a way of knowing, I privilege being a human being, but there are many different dialects we have for trying to understand what we're doing. Religion is no better or worse than math or music or physics or anything, but it has its magic. That's my point.

JH: Got it.

DM: It can elicit and move and repair and do some very powerful operations on people and communities that some of these other things can't.

JH: And your argument that atheism is impoverished by denying itself that.

DM: Yeah, and of course, I was... For some reason that day I was in this mood [chuckle] where I thought I'd come out swinging and say that, these are all provisional things. The last thing I wanna do is be on a crusade against atheism. This keeps coming up, when I'm in a conversation with atheists and I say, "Oh, why are you an atheist?" and they tell me why they don't believe in God, and I always say, "I agree 100%, that God, I don't believe in either." And I think there are a lot of people, obviously, who've been traumatized by religion. That's my point.

JH: Yeah, okay, well that's right, the trauma is the pop song.

DM: That's the insipid pop music. Yeah. You've heard a lot of bad music, but that doesn't keep you from loving music.

JH: Right, right, right. Just 'cause it ain't good doesn't mean there's no Mozart out there.

DM: Yeah.

JH: I wanna talk to you a little bit about theology.

DM: You know, as a Christian, I can get in trouble for this kind of thing.

Good, good. [laughter] If you're gonna get in trouble, get in trouble on my podcast, so that we can say it happened here on the College Commons Podcast. [chuckle] To me, all theology is anti-religious because it proposes to box God into the intrinsically limited scope of our imagination, no matter how you cut it. And although I respect theology, and I understand the yearning that makes us want to know God, and even if it's just an exercise in groping to know God, I get it. But at the end of the day, it feels awfully irreligious to me. [chuckle]

Well, I love what you said and I agree with that 100%. You're playing with the word religious-irreligious. I am a Christian. Worse than that, I'm a Baptist Christian. [laughter] But when I heard you talking, I... It just made me think of the (*Hebrew*).

JH: Yeah.

DM: That is...

JH: Right, that's what I'm getting at.

DM: There is this cloud and then every once a while, some little sediment condenses below it.

JH: Right, right.

DM: But on the other hand, what are our options as these bipeds...

JH: Well, the mystical option is...

DM: There's the mystical option, but it is ineffable, and you know what, it is fun to talk to other people. Humans are really social. You can totally feel like, oh, I'm just a cell in this big body of divinity, but actually sometimes you want to be not a cell of something bigger, you want to be an individuated this who can wrestle with or kiss or mess with, or spark with another individuated individual. It's not all mysticism.

JH: Right, right, right.

DM: It's social...

JH: And theology allows you to create categories across which you can discuss.

DM: Or we can talk, we can have a vocabulary.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning in the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

[music]

JH: You welcome the monsters. This gets back to your storyful sensibility. You love... It's evident, and I've known you for a whopping seven minutes, [chuckle] and it's evident that you love the power, the grit of great stories, and God knows the Bible's got gritty, fantastic stories. You love the monsters in the stories because the same way my wife, she said she grew up and she saw those Disney movies, and she just wanted the villains. [chuckle] But here's the thing. You welcome the monsters. Do you welcome a monstrous God?

DM: I am a believer in my own fragile, fractured way, and if God is only the God of sweetness and light, then God is only in charge five minutes a day. [chuckle] Reality has meteors and volcanoes, and cells that go rogue in people's bodies, and I don't want to imagine that that's not in some way holy that is part of everything. To me, this is the final chapters of the Book of Job.

JH: Right.

DM: When the Lord shows up to set Job right, so...

JH: Where were you when...

DM: Yeah, and he says, "You have no idea. There's wheels within wheels here, and it's not all about what works for you." I might not... Because my mother's still alive, [laughter] so I'm not gonna say the monstrous side of God, but I'm so happy to have learned about Judaism. I think you have better rubrics and vocabulary for not demonizing the negativity that's part of ultimate reality.

JH: Interesting, interesting.

DM: We kind of put it all in this demonic devil figure.

JH: Right, right, right. You bracket it.

DM: We just put it out there, it can't be inside God. And now you would not say, Din, in the stuff he wrote, you wouldn't think of that judgement aspect as evil, but you have within the divine nature...

JH: Din is the quality of God that is judgmental, so to speak, it is harder-edged.

DM: It's tough, it's severe.

JH: It's severe, yeah.

DM: It can...

JH: It's usually counterbalanced with what we know as rachmanus or compassion. So the notion that compassion and harsh judgment, or even just actually fair judgment, is intrinsically harsh, that's really what it's saying, is part of the balance which you're speaking of.

DM: Well, the truth is, Christianity is so many things, but in a lot of sentimental, popular Christianity, it's just God is all chesed. And of course you wouldn't deny that, but you've got... I like your categories. We don't have to have no vocabulary for thinking about the fullness of God, and it's not always beneficent.

JH: So you are remarkably open and porous to an understanding and an experience of God that is clearly not only ramified because it comes from you, but also welcome to all these influences when you're thinking about these things. What can't you wrap your mind around? Where's the brick wall that you hit? 'Cause we all got one.

DM: I have a whole keyboard of consciousness. So right now, we're talking in this real theoretical, almost metaphysical abstract way, and in that conversation I can imagine the reptile brain aspect within God. I can imagine that. But I'm also a human being who gets lonely, and worries, and I still want the idea that there is a creator who wants the best for reality, and that actually wants relationship with humanity, and is calling us to partner, so that is, I'm capable of both. And when I'm in that mode I'm not thinking about... I'm not bringing HP Lovecraft into my

theology.

JH: So my answer to the question is I can't get past the notion that, okay, listen, we're raised in the Jewish world to think of this relational component with God. As you know, the covenant is one of the basic categories of the *raison d'être* for the Jewish people in the human experience, and we own that as part of our self-understanding. But I'm thinking, all right, the relationship I get, the way you described it, this... But then I think, really? If God wanted a partner, this is the best he could do. [laughter] He could have made us more perfect, he could have made us perfect altogether, he could have made... There... He, she, it, they.

DM: Right, right, right, right, right.

16:35 JH: That's my brick wall. I get it, this is the world we got, this is the cards we have, we play our hand, but it kind of doesn't speak so well of God sometimes, I have to tell ya.

[laughter]

DM: Well, that's a wonderful thing just to hear you articulate, that's all I can say, man.

[laughter]

JH: I'm trying to corner you into heresy, help me out here.

[laughter]

DM: I don't have a coherent answer. It just made me think that there's a... I'm in California now, and one of the beat poets, I know that San Francisco, it was Gregory Corso back in the late '50s. And he wrote this incredible poem about marriage, and about how the impossibility of himself, how could this ever work out? How could anyone love me? But finally, he reached this place, and he goes, "But if I'm possible, she is possible." And in my theology that... Somehow God actually is yearning for relationship, even with schmucks like us.

JH: That's right, even with schmucks like us, all right. Well, okay, so we'll chalk it up to God's generosity then.

DM: More than that. Well, who knows? Because by now, I've been polluted by all these Jewish ideas.

JH: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. We can't rewind it either, once the genie's out...

DM: No, once they're there. And God's missing some stuff. So it's not just that...

JH: Yeah, there's yearning, right, there's...

DM: God is missing something because of that Big Bang, and so hey, we may not be much, but any port in a storm.

JH: All right, lets get sociological. [laughter] You said we're too theoretical, you gotta get... All right. [laughter] Jews are, predominantly in this country, middle-class, urban, suburban, liberal. We fit a category, by and large. I don't mean to stereotype ourselves, but there are some reasonable generalizations one can make. And among the voting blocks in the United States, the Jews, if I get my statistics right, are the single most reliably democratic-voting block in the entire country per capita, with the possible exception of African-Americans. And we're overwhelmingly urban and middle class.

JH: So that's a thing, that's a thing. Better for worse, if I get the emails that I'm over-generalizing [chuckle] but that's fine. But it promotes potential stereotypes about Baptists. And we're in a time right now where you and I have an opportunity, and I want us to rise to the occasion, to represent groups that often, in the political imagination of this country, are pitted against each other, or not even that drastically, just on opposite sides, or not mutually understanding, or even not mutually intersecting so much. This country needs intersection and communication, and the great conversations like this one. And it's an opportunity. So tell me something I need to know about baptism that's going to make me see more of me in you, and more of you in me.

DM: Baptists are people who love to sing, they love their families, they love to help people. Change the accents, close your eyes, and it feels just the same. I have my own complicated relationship with Baptists. What did someone say recently, Irv Greenberg said about Jewish denominations? Do you remember the quip?

JH: No, no, I wanna hear it now.

DM: Well, I'm not gonna get it right, but the essence of it was, "If you tell me what your denomination is then I'll know what you're ashamed of." [laughter] So I'm not gonna come here and tell you all the little quibbles I have with Baptists.

JH: No, no, I'm not asking for that. I wanna hear the Baptist genius.

DM: Yeah. The Baptist genius is: You have your entrance into the community, which used to always happen around the time of bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, around 12, was your personal decision. In a Baptist sense, you're standing on Mount Sinai. Whereas before, most Protestant groups and most Catholic groups baptized infants. It was chosen for you to be part of the community. And if I were Catholic, I could make a beautiful story out of that. But this, the genius of the Baptist is, every person in the community has signed on. I think that's the kind of essence of it.

JH: That's powerful.

DM: Yeah, it is powerful.

JH: All right, so now it's your turn. You've been very gracious and complimentary of Judaism and the Jewish people. I love it, and take it, and I'm happy to reaffirm it, but what's niggling behind your ears about... What's going on with these Jews?

DM: Well, when I came to this conference, I was nervous about one thing: Is anyone curious about what's somebody like me think about the Israeli-Palestinian cause? And in a way, I don't wanna answer it. And in a way, after Pittsburgh, that even... I would answer differently today than I would have three weeks ago, because I'm sensing ambivalence and a lot of turbulence among American Jews about that question in a way that might not have been there five or 10 years ago. This... And I get it and it's so powerful, this kind of almost messianic actualization of the Jewish vision in the state of Israel has taken place over the last 100 years, while so much gained. And I would never say anything other than it's absolutely essential and necessary. Still this great community that's been going through time can't... You can't finally settle for land, you... Because finally, all kind of communities that believe, and some types... You all don't use the word "faith" as much as we do, but we like faith, but that live by faith, you can't finally settle for a concrete realization or it's like the journey ends.

JH: Your question is spot on. There are a couple elements to it, and I think you're understanding things correctly as I see them, and I'm only one person. First of all, I think it's not too controversial to simply stipulate that it is true that the American Jewish community is expressing itself internally in ways that are less consensus-driven than it has been in the past vis-a-vis Israel. In living memory, since the foundation of the State of Israel...

DM: Since your life.

JH: Certainly, yes, it is true that there's more turbulence than you or I have ever really encountered, and it's been growing for the last let's just say half decade, maybe 10 years, and it's simmering. I would say this, the interpretational question is the following: When Jews disagree with Jews about Israel, is it on the axis of critique and approval or is it on the axis of passion and apathy? I am pleased to say that it remains on the axis of critique and approval. The passion is still overwhelming guaranteed. The Jewish population of the United States, and I would say worldwide, believes in a secure Jewish and democratic state of Israel. And I would take a step further to say statistically the world Jewry wants a two-state solution of a viable...

DM: Still.

JH: Still. However, however, sands are shifting and it's not uncomplicated, but I would argue that statistically those are true statements. But you asked another question which is really the crux of the matter, which is, do we settle for temporal success or do we take it upon ourselves to make temporal success a springboard for existential success, for human success, for religious success, for some might even say messianic success? And the question is, I would argue, yes, we do use it as a springboard all the way. Why do I say this? I say this because the critics, the harshest critics from the left of the current right-leaning government in Israel consistently invoke religious Jewish values as their motivation for the critique. [chuckle] And that to me says it all right there, that this is about aiming higher. And that's hard, it's contentious. It's fair game to be contentious, that's kosher. This is the course of human events, and that is not going to be anything short of messy. But I do believe that that remains our share, but what that looks like, what's... Fine. We can duke that out and we have to hash it out.

JH: But I remain convinced, and fundamentally optimistic if it's not obvious by now, that the Jewish world, and I mean that globally, has a sense of something bigger, in addition to whatever temporal concerns we have, safety, geopolitics and what have you. So I like the challenge behind your question, and although we may in any given moment be more or less successful in actually moving the ball in that direction, I want to argue that our sights are still on that definition of success.

DM: You know, I'm from Kentucky, but I think the right phrase is Yasher koach.

[laughter]

JH: We say Baruch dayan, which means may you be blessed, in response. I don't know if you know that. [laughter] If you've hung out a lot in synagogues, but that's the... So it's been such a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you very much for taking the time. I look forward to our paths crossing again soon.

DM: Terrific.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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