



DR. MELVIN KONNER, MD, PH.D.: DARWIN, DOGMA & THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

**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.

[music]

**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.

[music]

**JH:** Today, for this episode of the College Commons Podcast, we have the pleasure of conversing with Dr. Melvin Konner, who is the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Anthropology and of Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology at Emory University. He's a prolific writer featured in, among other outlets, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, and he contributed substantially in developing the concept of a paleolithic diet and its impact on health. Dr. Konner, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

**Dr. Melvin Konner:** Thanks so much for having me, Josh.

**JH:** So I would like to pick up on some of the articles you've written, both online and in print, and start with one that you wrote last year in the Wall Street journal titled 'In Tough Times, Religion Can Offer a Sturdy Shelter'. And the title admittedly kind of says it all, the conclusion based on this study is that religion clearly has benefits in reducing certain kinds of stress. But I wonder if you can... Even if it's just speculation, but if you can opine about why is it that religion can afford these benefits?

**DK:** If you look at illness across the board, there's definitely a psychological component. There was an old study that showed recovery from surgery, and if you have two patients per room, the patient near the window recovers a little faster. There are just so many ways in which a comforting word, the bedside manner... I've seen surgeons change the entire state of mind of a patient with three minutes of kind words and interaction at the bedside. Some doctors don't do it because they think it's gonna take too much time, and they certainly... They don't get paid for that kind of time, [chuckle] but it can make a huge difference.

**DK:** And that Wall Street Journal piece, it was very hard for me to pare down the list of studies

that I mentioned in that little 600-word piece because there were so many, and they were from so many different countries. There was one from Saudi Arabia about kidney dialysis patients and how their commitment... Some of them had a greater commitment to Islam and did better with the stresses of dialysis. There was one about the stresses of racism in African American middle-aged women...

**JH:** Right, you cited that one, yeah.

**DK:** They were born in Canada, one in Japan... Japan is not a very religious country anymore, and yet, a religious dimension seemed to have positive effect on common chronic disease. So it's just study after study, and you can argue about what the element of positive impact is. The people say, "Oh, it's just church-going, they could also be going to a bowling league, and the sense of community would..."

**JH:** Community and regularity and...

**DK:** Yeah, plus somebody says, "What's that thing on your face, and..."

**JH:** Right, catches it a bit earlier.

**04:02 DK:** Maybe you should go to the doctor, or you're not looking well.

**04:05 JH:** Because they know you.

**DK:** There is support for both the impact of community and the impact of faith itself and...

**JH:** Both at the psychological and communitarian level.

**DK:** Yeah.

**JH:** So it basically correlates faith, belief, with some core set of positive assumptions about destiny or purpose or something, that trickle down, bottom line, into some kind of positive psychological mindset.

**DK:** Yeah, I think that's well said. I think it's... That sense of purpose and meaning in life can make the difference between survival and failure to survive in a person who's ill. And I think there's something else that... There's a very important dimension of religion and faith that the scientists and philosophers who are trying to eliminate religion don't get. As far as I can see, they don't get it at all, and that is it's companionship. You're never alone if you believe that there's meaning to every action that you take, if you believe that everything you do is observed. And I think it really addresses the loneliness that a lot of people feel.

**JH:** The existential loneliness of going through life.

**DK:** Existential loneliness, right.

**JH:** Would you agree that, of all the faith communities, the traditionally strong faith communities in this country, that Jews are the most likely to simultaneously be a member of a community and nevertheless not necessarily believe that there is a companion on their journey, a divine presence?

**DK:** I don't know if I wanna compare the Jews to all other faiths on that. I think that's true of a lot of Jews, and I think it's probably true of a lot of mainstream Protestants in America. And people have the capacity to compartmentalize things in their minds to a great extent, and Rabbi Mitelman was quoting a study, which I wasn't familiar with, but it said that 85% of Jews would let science trump Judaism if there were a conflict.

**JH:** Religion, yeah.

**DK:** But, for most people, I think there's not a conflict because they're not exactly using the same parts of their mind for science as they are for religion or Judaism. In a way, it's like a child who grows up bilingual and doesn't mix the languages, hardly at all.

**JH:** Mix up the languages.

**DK:** And people talk about code switching.

**JH:** Code switching, yeah.

**DK:** And so I've heard many people say, and I think it was true of me when I was religious, that I could have code switching, I could have part of my mind that I would enter. And, in a way, I still do when I go to services on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. And even in the services that we had yesterday and today here, I really entered into a kind of altered state through the music, the familiarity of the prayers, there is that...

**JH:** It's like a suspension of disbelief that literature can also bring you to.

**DK:** Absolutely, a suspension of disbelief. And I think that that analogy you just made works for me very well, that there's something in the experience of Jewish prayer, I just don't care about testing those experiences against some experimental standard.

**JH:** Right. Because they have intrinsic value that suffices for...

**DK:** I don't wanna say it's the same as reading Shakespeare or watching Shakespeare or going to the Getty and seeing the great paintings there, because, for me, it reconnects me to a time in my life when I really did have faith. And I would never say that I have faith in Shakespeare or Rembrandt the way I did once in the Jewish God and the Torah, but there's a sacred quality in my mind that comes from the weight of tradition, the countless generations, the *l'dor vador* that these texts have passed through, my grandfather or my photo of my father that I have in his short pants and tallit on the day of his Bar Mitzvah. And it's personal, but also there is a... This morning, when the Torah was carried around, and I took my tallit and touched it and kissed it, I wouldn't do that with Shakespeare. There's a quality to the trans-generational passing on of this

text and other Jewish texts that makes it almost more sacred to me with every passing generation.

**JH:** Yeah, an accumulation of sanctity.

**DK:** The accumulation of sanctity. I never thought of that expression, but I like it a lot.

[music]

**JH:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning from the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegetcommons.huc.edu](http://collegetcommons.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 [collegetcommons.huc.edu](http://collegetcommons.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.

**JH:** I wanna launch into the question of the relationship between men and women, and I'm gonna do an extended quote here with your permission. You say, or you refer to studies and you conclude the following: "Across many species they pointed out," these are the scholars whom you cited, quote, "Males exploit strength and aggressiveness against other males to ensure reproductive success. Once they secure a sought-after female, however, the strategy changes. Males must entreat or cajole females into accepting their own small contribution to the process of reproduction. But what if these efforts fail? Unfortunately, as primatologist Barbara Smuts, and her father, Robert W. Smuts, have shown in the periodical *Advances in the Study of Behavior*, male primates may resort to threats and then force."

I read this to mean... And I want you to correct me if I'm wrong and elaborate if I'm right. I took this to mean that, in some measure, to the degree we're generalizing, and we appreciate that this is a generalization, it does seem to boil down that domestic violence is basically sexual frustration of men. That's what I gleaned from this.

**DK:** Certainly there's a lot of sexual frustration of men, and unfortunately, evolution has produced an overlap between the circuits that govern... In the brain that govern male sexuality and the circuits that govern aggression. There just have been too many situations in the past when aggression was successfully called into play by males whose genes then entered into our ancestors somehow.

**JH:** It got rewarded, effectively.

**DK:** Yes, that's right. And if I back up to the beginning of my career when I wrote the first edition of a book called *The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit*, it was in an era, or it was coming off the '60s where I was a participant in the integration movement and the anti-war movement. I was at the I Have a Dream speech two days before my 17th birthday, in defiance of my parents' express directives, [chuckle] and I continued to be involved in demonstrations in the movement for equality for minorities and equality for women.

And yet, my research on human behavior, both in terms of my own direct research and more importantly scholarship such as you've cited, was leading me to believe things that most of my friends in the movement against segregation and the movement against war did not believe, namely that there are inherent biological tendencies in humans and biological constraints which, as I put it near the end of that book, our best judgment tells us to reprehend.

**DK:** And what that meant... And, by the way, in the same ending portion of that book, I was citing Jewish texts, I was explicitly going there, and I even ended one argument with the words amen and selah. But I realized at the time that those of us who were trying to bring more... The realities of biology more into behavioral and social science had more in common with traditionally religious thinkers than we did with traditional social scientists because traditionally religious thinkers have always thought that there were tendencies in humans that were very bad.

**JH:** Right, right. And they thought they had to reprehend them.

**DK:** And they thought they had to reprehend them and control them, and preach about them, and they did it all the time. And I go back to the story of Noah, when God basically changes God's mind and says, "I will never again destroy the world by flood because yetzer lev ha'adam ra mine'urav, the tendency of the heart of man is evil from his youth." And I see a deep truth in that as an evolutionist, as a biological anthropologist, and I also know, I was raised with the idea that there's a struggle in us between the yetzer hara and the yetzer hatov and...

**JH:** The evil inclination and the good inclination.

**DK:** And so I think biology and evolution support that idea, and I think that what makes us human is we have some ability to think about it, to go meta on our impulses and...

**JH:** It's the consciousness, the self-awareness.

**DK:** And on the struggle between the good and the bad. And, by the way, I'm not Mr. Clean. I'm a 72-year-old heterosexual man, I have not done everything right with respect to women. I have been single twice in my life, at the beginning, and then after my first wife's passing, and I know what it feels like to have certain impulses and have trouble controlling them. It is precisely because I think we have those impulses, and I'm willing to go so far as to call them instincts, both for good and bad, that I feel we have to know as much as possible about the biological factors, about how the brain works, about how evolution produce certain things in us, about what hormones do, about the differences between men and women that are not just the result of upbringing and sexism and television, but are the result of, partly of, biological influences. And my friends on the left and also some colleagues in the social sciences, from the beginning of my career until now, have been saying, "You're just encouraging the worst things by saying that it's evolved, by saying that it's biologically inherent."

**JH:** They fear you're excusing it.

**DK:** Right, and it's the opposite of what I'm doing, and that's why I still feel an alliance with religious thinkers because it's a millennial tradition of saying recognize the bad things in us,

recognize the bad things in yourself, turn your gaze inward on what's inside you that could do harm, and that's what gives you a better chance of gaining control and doing good instead.

**JH:** Yeah, you're layering this with a moral layer as well. You're saying that the edified element of the human spirit is not that it's good, but that it is willing to confront evil, and it's willing to be responsible for it and then fight against it.

**DK:** Yes, and I think that also it doesn't depend on just a conscience that comes out of nowhere, or at least as far as I believe it doesn't depend on a conscience that God put in me. It's something that gradually emerged from the communal nature of human society, and that... Partly because of the evolution of language and tremendous intelligence. And one of the things that I think we know now is that humans are uniquely capable of putting ourselves in each other's minds, and the psychologists call this theory of mind. And because we can do that, we can come to agreements that ultimately turn into moral systems. You don't assault my daughter, I won't assault yours, and it becomes a collective thing, and it's not something... It becomes a rule, and it's not something that chimpanzees can do. They...

**JH:** But they too are collective.

**DK:** They do have a collective sense, they have...

**JH:** They have rules and...

**DK:** They have habits, they have things that they know they can't do because it's too much of a risk, and it might even not just be a stronger individual who punishes them, but there might be a coalition that punishes them for certain things. But that is taken to just a much higher level in every human society.

**JH:** Well, then that's what we should aim for, raising that level every time.

**DK:** Raising it more.

**JH:** All the time.

**DK:** All the time.

**JH:** Well, Dr. Konner, I wanna thank you for taking the time. It's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you, and I hope we have a chance to do so again.

**DK:** I hope so too. It was one of the best interviews I've ever had.

[music]

**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](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

[music]

(End of audio)