



PROFESSOR BENJAMIN SOMMER: THE CO-EVOLUTION OF JUDAISM AND
CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA

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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. 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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It's my great pleasure to welcome to this episode of The College Commons Podcast, my friend and colleague, Dr. Benjamin Sommer. Sommer is Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, at the Jewish Theological Seminary, our sister institution. His acclaimed book, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*, came out in 2015, and Haaretz has described Sommer "as a traditionalist and yet an iconoclast. He shatters idols and prejudices in order to nurture Jewish tradition and its applicability today." And Haaretz also characterized Sommers' thought as "a synthesis of intellectual acuity, clarity, deep knowledge of classical Jewish texts throughout the generations, along with contemporary Christian theology and ancient Near Eastern literature." Dr. Benjamin Sommer, if I can call you Ben...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: By all means.

Joshua Holo: It's great to have you, thank you for coming.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for asking me.

Joshua Holo: So to warm things up, tell me one thing about the Bible that an atheist needs to know.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: An atheist needs to know about the Bible, that the Bible is not simply a statement of doctrine, it's not simply a statement of the truth, but the Bible is an anthology of a good deal of literature written by people who are searching for the truth and who made extraordinary progress on that journey, but along the way in that journey, they got to a lot of different important places. The Bible is full of debate and discussion and disagreement. There certainly are boundaries to those debates. It's a book that is monotheistic, it's not atheistic, it's not polytheistic, but what the authors mean by monotheism, what they mean by God, what they think the relationship between God and the world is, and what God is at all, is much, much more

variable than they're probably assuming if they haven't picked it up and read it with an open mind. And when I say read it with an open mind, I don't mean to say that an atheist reader is going to have a closed mind, but what we see in something often depends on what we're expecting to see. And people who expect the Bible to be in a sense, their grandfather's Bible, if you know what I mean, or their grandmother's Bible...

Joshua Holo: A dogmatic statement of faith, a catechism.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Exactly. If you're expecting a catechism, you're likely to get a catechism and not notice how different this is from catechism. So I would just say don't assume it's the Bible of a fundamentalist Christian. The biblical Bible may be very, very different from what you're expecting.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: The Jewish way of studying the Bible deals a lot with discussion and debate. If you read Midrash you get *davar acher, davar acher*, you keep on getting different opinions about a certain verse. Or if you read medieval rabbinic commentaries you get the text of the Bible in the middle of the page and all these different voices by different rabbis around the text of the Bible with lots of different opinions. I think though, to a very great extent, that lots of American Jews make fundamentally Protestant assumptions about the Bible.

Protestantism is the dominant religion of the United States, and Protestant assumptions, I think, permeate our culture. And so many, many Jews... Actually I think even most Jews, most Jews make Protestant assumptions about the nature of Judaism. My colleagues back when I taught at Northwestern University, my colleagues who taught Catholicism told me that American Catholic students are making basically Protestant assumptions about Catholicism. My colleagues who teach Islam tell me that Muslims born in this country are increasingly making Protestant assumptions about the nature of Islam, which are just not accurate.

Joshua Holo: Just because of the cultural dominance of Protestantism in American culture, not to mention religious culture.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Yeah, that is America was founded by Protestants, Plymouth Rock was found... Plymouth was founded by Protestants, and a certain kind of Protestant, and those assumptions are so, so deep in American culture about what religion is.

Joshua Holo: Name it for us, or give me a very, very narrow example of what you mean by Protestant assumption.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Martin Luther and John Calvin, the reformers, pushed back against the Catholic Church, has to do with the role of scripture, the role of the Bible in religion. In Judaism and Catholicism and Islam, scripture is important, but it's important alongside other kinds of tradition. In Judaism it's rabbinic tradition, and also later post-rabbinic traditions, in Islam, it's Sunnah and Hadith, in Catholicism it's the Church fathers, it's the teaching authority of the Church itself, and scripture, it's got a place, but it's not the only pillar on which the religion rests, and furthermore, scripture is often seen through the lens of the tradition. One of the things that the reformers did that Luther does, that Calvin does, and that Protestants do to this day is

they say that the individual can go back to Scripture himself or herself, have an individual relationship with Scripture, they don't always have to look through the lens of tradition.

Joshua Holo: Individual and unmediated.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: And unmediated, and they don't have to look at it through the eyes of the priest or the rabbi, they can... And real religious authority comes from Scripture, not from these other post-scriptural writings.

Joshua Holo: Yeah, it's actually putting down often all the intermediate ages between yourself and Scripture.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Right, there's a...

Joshua Holo: As if it's almost a veil.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: It's a veil, you wanna get rid of that veil, go back to the real true Christianity of the New Testament, of the New Testament community, and that's just not how Jews look at Scripture. Now, I'm a professor of Bible, I'm all in favor of the rabbinical students having...

Joshua Holo: Right, you have nothing against the Bible, right? [chuckle]

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Yeah, nothing against the Bible. I want my rabbinical students to study Bible, but I often do find myself in the odd position, especially when I'm teaching at synagogues, of trying to remind my fellow Jews that the Bible's not that important in Judaism. [chuckle] They've already invited me, the check's in the mail, I can let the cat out of the bag [chuckle] that in Judaism there's lots of absolutely core Jewish beliefs and practices that are barely mentioned or not mentioned at all in the Bible. Life after death does not play a big role in the Bible, but it plays a very big role in rabbinic Judaism. The laws of kashrut that we end up observing, they're not from the Bible, they're from rabbinic texts, so they're based on the Bible...

Joshua Holo: They're extrapolated from the...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: But they're very, very extrapolated.

Joshua Holo: And ramified, yeah.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: And when people, let's say, realize that laws of milk and meat are barely there in the Bible at all, they think that somehow it's not a real law of kashrut, but no, it's a perfectly real law of kashrut. The laws of kashrut, practically speaking, just don't come from the Bible, they come from the Talmud. And so I think that this tendency of American Jews sometimes to assume that the Bible is more important than it is, I think that we're getting that from our Protestant environment.

Joshua Holo: That part I experience entirely.

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Joshua Holo: Before we returned to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on 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.

Joshua Holo: Much of your scholarship has been dedicated to appreciating the daunting complexity of the human understanding of God's physicality or lack thereof...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Mm-hmm.

Joshua Holo: In the Near East, in particular, where Israelite religion grew up, but also in subsequent generations. So I want to ask you in your study, when you studied the Jewish evolution of our understanding of God's... Let's not even call it physicality, let's call it presence. I'm not sure what to call it. What did you learn along the way that absolutely shocked you, and where you had to actually realign your own sense of being a Jew, or at least historically being connected with those Jews. Were you like, "Woah, we believed that?" or something like that, that forced something in you to reckon?

Professor Benjamin Sommer: The example that you brought up is a great example of that in a few stages. Like everybody else, when I was a kid, I was taught that the Bible doesn't believe in a physical God; God is invisible 'cause there's nothing to see. And the rabbis, of course, believe in a non-physical God. We sing this in the Yigdal, we sing this in Adon Olam. I didn't wanna say the song Anim Z'mirot at the end of services, that the minyan that I went to actually did sing because it's so anthropomorphic and blatant in its descriptions of God as an old man with white hair, and as a young warrior with black hair, wearing a helmet and using his arm to defeat his enemies. And it just seemed like, "Oh, come on, this isn't Judaism."

Professor Benjamin Sommer: And then my third year or fourth year of graduate school I took a seminar with my doctoral adviser, Michael Fishbane. It was his last year teaching at Brandeis University before he went the University of Chicago, and it was an extraordinarily, extraordinary class on myth in rabbinic literature and the roots of Jewish mysticism in rabbinic literature. And reading various texts with him, I began to see that actually, the rabbis do believe in the physicality of God, and there is a huge stream in Jewish thought that does believe in some form of a physical God. This was really a shock to me. And that really changed my view of Judaism. It wasn't only an academic class I was doing as a PhD, it's a class that changed my understanding of my own religion as I realized that the physicality of God is very important in parts of the Jewish tradition. So that...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: And around the same time, a professor who was then at JTS, now is at Bar-Ilan University, Ed Greenstein, talked about how Anim Z'mirot, that song that I didn't like

at the end of services, that if you actually read it closely, it's actually anti-anthropomorphic because it's giving us so many different images precisely so that we realize that none of these is accurate, that none of us can see God, none of us can even imagine what God looks like.

Joshua Holo: It forces the fact that they're metaphors because they're giving you so many metaphors that you can't nail one down.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Right. So Professor Fishbane showed me that I had a misimpression of the whole Jewish tradition, that God is much more imaginable and much more physical. And Professor Greenstein showed me that I was reading *Anim Z'mirot* wrong anyway, that in some ways it's much more sophisticated in its use of those images than I had realized. And he was so obviously right in his interpretation, I just wasn't paying enough attention to it when it was being read, in part maybe because I just didn't wanna pay attention to it 'cause I was kinda put off by it, and instead of accepting its challenge, I was sort of escaping its challenge by ignoring it. So that's an example where my studies really changed things.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Later, I wrote a book that dealt with this topic, and when I wrote that book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, I began slowly to realize that what I was saying about the Sefirot in Kabbalah and even...

Joshua Holo: The emanations of the divine sometimes called Godhead, very, very core of divinity, and the emanations of descending degrees of divinity outward from a... In concentric circles, they are called Sefirot because they're enumerated. Emanations is what they're called. So in studying Sefirot...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Studying these Sefirot, and thinking about the ways that actually they pick up on a biblical way of seeing God on an ancient Near Eastern way of understanding what divinity is, I began to realize, well, on one hand I was trying to make a connection between Kabbalah and biblical literature. I was trying to argue that in places where Kabbalah seems new and weird and radical, it was actually deeply, deeply traditional, that Kabbalah was actually picking up on a biblical way of understanding God. Now, in the course of coming to that realization or making that argument, I was sort of surprised and not so pleased to realize that everything I was saying about the Sefirot, as deeply rooted in ancient biblical Judaism, also applied to the Trinity. That if God can have 10 Sefirot and yet still be one God, then God could have three persons and still be one God. And if this idea of multiplicity within unity in Kabbalah has a biblical basis... And my argument in the book is about that biblical basis, that the biblical authors think that unity can have multiplicity when we're talking about God. If that's the case for the 10 Sefirot, it's also the case for the Trinity.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: And somewhat, as we say in Hebrew, (*Hebrew*) against my own intuitions and desires, I had to admit that I had researched myself into a place where I had to argue that traditional Jewish objections to the Trinity are not acceptable, even from a Jewish point of view. That the way that we Jews have attacked the idea of the Trinity, it's actually not legitimate Jewishly, and we need to stop making these claims that the Trinity is polytheistic: The Christians think they're monotheists, but really they're pagans. No, from a Jewish point of view... Forget about even inter-religious dogma, just from...

Joshua Holo: By our own metrics.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: By our own metrics, by our own metrics, the Trinity is a kosher model. I was worried that the Jews for Jesus would pick this up. But as an academic, as an intellectual, I'm committed to truth, to emet, to kushta in Aramaic, and I had to write this, so it's in chapter six of my book, and it really had to change the way I... Not only as a scholar but as a religious Jew, how I view Christianity. And actually, within a few weeks of the book coming out, within two weeks I started getting emails from Jews for Jesus. [chuckle] And I wasn't really always sure what to do with them, because I don't believe in the Trinity, I'm not encouraging people to believe in the Trinity, and certainly don't think that there can be any possible authenticity legitimacy to the Jews for Jesus, but I think that the theological model that the Trinity is based on, it's an authentic Jewish model, and within Jewish Christian dialogue we have to acknowledge that.

Joshua Holo: Authentically... So we maybe put a finer point on it, in the biblical model the claims of monotheism are not specious.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Correct, and from the point of view of biblical monotheism, the idea of a triune God, of a God who is three and yet one, that actually is feasible from the point of view of some biblical authors. I should emphasize not all biblical authors. What I discuss in this book is a debate among different biblical authors, and the truth is that the main thrust of biblical theology is not happy with that theological imagination, but there are biblical writers in the Book of Psalms, in Isaiah, and in parts of the Pentateuch, parts of the Torah, especially what we mono-Bible scholars called the J and E sections of the Torah that completely embrace this model. Rabbinic literature also has that model.

Joshua Holo: Is the argument that it's triune or just that there's the capacity for multiplicity...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Multiplicity. Not specifically tri...

Joshua Holo: Yeah, not three, yeah, that's...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Three, no, none of them go with three.

Joshua Holo: It's the conceptual premise that plurality can exist within unity.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Right, it's plurality within unity, it's not specifically three. And then in Kabbalah, already a bit in rabbinic literature that it's actually more 10, becomes the number in Jewish tradition.

Joshua Holo: That's the enumerated part because there's only 10 Sefirot, and each one has specific characteristics, which...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Mm-hmm.

Joshua Holo: So right, I understand what you're saying. I do find it interesting that I don't... I'm not capable of arguing biblically, but with respect to the Sefirot and the effectively 13th century codification of the Kabbalah and the Sefirot, is there not a... First of all, the mythic embodiment of God, I totally get in medieval mysticism, that's patent. But when I think of the Sefirot, it feels more like ripples rather than bodies or entities, it doesn't appear to be apposite to the question as you've raised it, with respect to the possibility of plurality within unity.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: The idea of the Sefirot, I think, is more about different aspects, different maybe metaphysical aspects of God, but these aspects in Kabbalah have a certain degree of independence because they interact with each other.

Joshua Holo: Yes.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: And insofar as they're interacting, they are separate from each other, so we get multiplicity, we get plurality, and yet in the end, they're all still part of the same unity. Maybe in the end we can even say that they're just illusions that God is one. I think that in the Bible, we see both ideas showing up. Certainly we get the idea of an embodied God...

Joshua Holo: Yeah, the embodiment, yeah, for sure.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: But we also, I think, get ideas of God sometimes manifest in God's self to human beings in ways that involve only a user-friendly, approachable amount of divinity, not the fullness of divinity.

Joshua Holo: Yes, that part is definitely also in the Sefirot, absolutely.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: We get that sometimes in the word "Malach Adonai" in the Bible, which is usually translated as angel, but it doesn't always mean angel in the sense that we mean angel. It often does, it often means an otherworldly being who is a messenger of God, but sometimes it means a small-scale manifestation of God. It's God speaking to Moses or speaking to Abraham, but only a little bit of God to make this manifestation of divinity more approachable. And that manifestation, though, can sometimes act a bit independently of God without undermining God's unity.

Joshua Holo: Right, there's some deputizing going on.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Well, not just deputizing. Deputizing happens when Malach means an angel. I would say there's more... Something big taking the form of something less overwhelming. We don't really have a word for it in English. There is a word for this theological concept in Sanskrit, which is avatara. So I guess we do the word avatar in English, which comes from Sanskrit. In the Hindu sense of an avatar the Malach Adonai is sometimes an avatar of the Heavenly God, sometimes an earthly avatar, and that might be localizable in space and time, it might be in a body, but it doesn't have to be, it might be somehow more metaphysical or more abstract than that. That's an example of where there is multiplicity, but for the biblical authors that doesn't... For the biblical authors who accept this idea, that doesn't undermine the unity.

Joshua Holo: The unity.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Now, the author of the Book of Deuteronomy would say no, it does undermine the unity.

Joshua Holo: Right, right.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: And that's why the author of Deuteronomy says Adonai echad, there is only one Adonai. He doesn't just say there's one God, in Deuteronomy 6:4 the author of Deuteronomy says there's one Adonai, there aren't these different manifestations of Adonai that other biblical authors are talking about. In some ways. I think that the more one thinks about it, the more one realizes that the mystery of this other trend that leads to Jewish mysticism, the mystery of God that insists that God is entirely other, that God is wholly other, that God is something that might fascinate us but that we'll never understand, that preserves the freedom of God to be really surprising and weird, maybe that's the deeper monotheism.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: I can understand why Maimonides thinks that he's the real monotheist and why Hermann Cohen thinks that Maimonides is the real monotheist. But there may be a way at a really, really deep and subtle level that actually the mystics are the deeper monotheists. It doesn't look like that on the surface but they preserve God complete transcendence and freedom while allowing God the freedom also to be in the world, even as God is transcendent. Their God is very much both end, which on the surface makes their God look more pagan but deep down, no, that tells us that actually their God is more radically free and transcendent. And hence were truly...

Joshua Holo: More godly... Yeah.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: More godly. But part of that what comes out of that is the realization, again the Catholicism, Christianity, maybe to a Jew or Muslim, they don't look so so monotheistic but they're a lot more monotheistic than we realize, and even Hinduism...

Joshua Holo: Yeah I know.

Professor Benjamin Sommer: There's an increasing recognition of this among Jewish thinkers. Even some very, very Orthodox Jewish thinkers, there's increasing recognition that many forms of Hinduism really are monotheistic.

Joshua Holo: And some call themselves as much too...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Yeah.

Joshua Holo: And so there's...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Yes.

Joshua Holo: Well, we could talk much longer, no doubt, but I wanna thank you for taking the

time. It's always a pleasure to talk to you...

Professor Benjamin Sommer: Great. This has been great.

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

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