



## **RABBI GEOFF MITELMAN: TRUTHS, UNTRUTHS, AND THE PROBLEM OF PERSPECTIVE**

**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 Two, a conference held in Los Angeles at Stephen Wise Temple in November 2018.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast. And it is my great pleasure to welcome back for our first follow-up interview, Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman. Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman is the founding director of Sinai and Synapses, an organization that bridges the scientific and religious worlds. You can find our previous conversation on the College Commons website.

Geoff, thank you so much for joining us, it's a pleasure to see you again. We're here at Symposium 2 and we're talking about "Truth." Understanding the truth sometimes feels like it's under assault this is the theme of our conference. What's on your mind with respect to truth and our conference?

**Rabbi Geoffery Mitelman:** So one thing that I'm gonna be talking about a little bit is that our brains are not scientists, they're lawyers. When we think about evidence, we tend not to be able to look at evidence in a dispassionate way, to be able to say, "Okay, is my hypothesis true or not?"

I was on a jury a few months ago and the conversation about evidence was very different in the legal perspective than from the scientific perspective because the lawyers in this jury trial, they were presenting evidence to convince us of a particular perspective there. So the word evidence can mean a couple of different things, and the world that we're living in now, it's becoming more and more that evidence is used in a sense of making arguments and convincing people, rather than trying to find a larger sense of truth.

You can find evidence to find in a variety of different pieces and they're not necessarily incorrect, but they may be incomplete and they may be partial, and they also are designed to be able to convince particular people. In this ultra-polarized world that we're living in, the people that we're talking to, the evidence convinces the people who it already convinces. There's a lot of research that says that if you already believe something, a contradictory piece of evidence will actually strengthen what somebody's pre-existing perspective is, rather than trying to re-think

where they are.

**JH:** Thanks to the net we have at our fingertips, more or less an infinite range of evidence which could be divided roughly 50/50 in any question to be the, "Devil can quote scripture," type thing. So you can see why someone won't be moved at all by an article of evidence when they have six other things in their pocket.

**RM:** Right. That there are a lot of factors in that, that's a big part of it. One is that there is more and more information out there in the world but a lot less wisdom. And so being able to find information, people can actually cherry-pick the information that they want or they'll see something shared.

I mean, I see this all the time on Facebook, of people sharing an article but not necessarily finding what the sources are. And one thing that often happens and I'm guilty of this as well, where I'll see something that one of my friends shared on Facebook and I'll read sort of the headline and then I'll talk to a friend and say, "I saw something on Facebook that was an interesting piece," but I can't remember who said it, I don't know what the source is.

**JH:** Right.

**RM:** And then it becomes my truth. And so being able to untangle all of this, of the speed that the information spreads out into this world and the time that it takes to be able to parse it and figuring out, "What's accurate, what's not accurate? What's my source? Who's saying it? Why?" That becomes much harder right now.

**JH:** And thus far, you've been talking about the nature of evidence but, since you established a comparison with science, let's go back a step prior to the evidence, and ask a question about the question. Because it seems to me that science prides itself on asking very, very narrow questions and giving a specific hypothesis to test.

**RM:** Right.

**JH:** Whereas the social questions often get very broad, very fast, which promotes the Wild West quality of evidence because the question itself can really be tackled from so many different angles, that it's hard to even agree on what we would call an evidentiary standard.

**RM:** And what's also complicated is communicating science from that very narrow, specific element, to the way it's communicated with the public. So in a scientific journal they will say, "Here's what our methodology is, here's what our hypothesis is, here's the audience, here's what we did," so the people can later then say, "Oh, I see mistakes in your research." Now, that doesn't mean that it always happens, there's what's called the replication crisis, that's happened a little bit, but in many ways that's actually science's strength, to be able to say, "Okay, we know actually how we can retract this." So they may ask a very specific, narrow question with all the details, and what they call P-hacking, of your, what's the narrow, the range of error, and how many people, and all these different things, then it gets communicated to the media, of, "Chocolate says it helps your health," and that becomes the truth when in fact, it's so much more

complicated than that.

**JH:** I will say this as a non-scientist.

**RM:** Yeah.

**JH:** It appears to me that the culture of science is suffering a crisis whereby it feels obligated to justify its relevance and so it promotes itself in popular outlets that absolutely expand the implications or claim to expand the implications. That does seem to me to be a scientific crisis.

**RM:** And so I think the problem, I think, is not as much the science, but the way it's communicated, because one thing that we now sometimes say with Sinai and Synapses is that in the world that we're living in, there's this perception that on one side is scientific educated liberal, and the other side is religious uneducated conservative.

**JH:** Yeah.

**RM:** And if you pick anything from either column you gotta pick everything, and you've got to demonize the other side. So that means that science is perceived as those elites, the liberals, they have an agenda. Now that may or may not be accurate, that's a whole other conversation, but it can come off very condescending in a lot of ways.

**JH:** Right.

**RM:** And so it's not just, "What's the information? Well, it's the facts, it's the truth." Well, yes, but if it's gonna impact real people's lives, you've gotta be able to know how to communicate that so that it can be internalized.

**JH:** I agree that there has to be artful, skillful, expert and faithful communication. I'm actually challenging the scientific establishment. If it were true to itself, it would communicate the full narrowness of its conclusions at every opportunity, but in fact, even before we get to the media, let's just talk about grant-making. Scientists have a powerful incentive to be able to articulate broad impact for very, very narrow questions. That promotes distorted communication I think.

**RM:** I think that's true. There's actually, there's a wonderful TV show called Adam Ruins Everything where a comedian named Adam Conover talks about all the problems and all sorts of different pieces and one he does is Adam Ruins Science.

[laughter]

**RM:** And he talks about this that there is... It's misaligned incentives. Most scientists are not buying multi-million dollar mansions, but they do need to be able to support their family in some way.

**JH:** I wanna ask you to cite, perhaps the example that's foremost in your mind, about a broken step of scientific analysis and communication, for an attempted benefit for society, but that's

going awry or has recently gone awry?

**RM:** So I think a lot of a big, big challenge, and it's not just in the scientific world, I think it's in the wider academic world, is a level of siloing and between the scientific communities and the humanities also. And so, you brought up a really important point which is, there's often a very narrow perspective and not only... Forget about scientists talking with the religious people. It's very rare for a scientist to be able to talk with a literature professor, let alone for a scientist, for a biologist, to be able to talk with a chemist. There are not strong incentives to be able to do cross-pollination and conversations here, of... If you're in the scientific community, very generally you're focused on your experiment, 'cause that's what your job is, and that, you gotta teach, and you gotta do this particular piece, but being able to connect it to other elements is really challenging and really problematic.

**RM:** Because we're seeing so much fragmentation of, "What does truth look like? Who am I talking to? What's my sources of inspiration?" And not just the sources of inspiration, but sources of knowledge that there's... We see this, 'cause we do a lot of interfaith work, we have an interfaith fellowship, we have these doctoral students who come and they're doctoral students in astronomy and psychology and they're in conversation with pastors and the doctoral students, we've had a couple who've actually sort of changed their doctoral work out of the fellowship work that we're doing, because it's broadened what their perspective is.

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**JH:** Before we return 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](http://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](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing. Help us out and rates us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

**JH:** Moving to the political sphere, as a reflection of science with respect to global climate change, which is one of the... It's a broad posture, global climate change, and it's suffering all kinds of, as we all know, attacks and challenges. Let's just, for the moment, accept the somewhat stereotyped, uneducated, conservative and religious, versus educated... What was it, secular? Liberal and science. Let's for the moment, accept that, even if it's over-simplified. I have heard the rhetoric of the conservative, religious stipulate that global climate change is happening, but then to question its source. That to me is movement, because not so long ago, they were questioning the fact of the phenomenon itself. Is that movement or is that just political jockey?

**RM:** That's a good question. My hope is that there's movement. Again, it's who do you communicate with? So there's one person who I tremendously respect. Her name is Katherine Hayhoe, who is an Evangelical Christian, and she talks to predominantly right-wing and Evangelical Christian communities in the language of religious perspective, to be able to talk about climate change. And that's something that's an incredibly powerful piece, because if you notice that from a scientific perspective, there's nobody who's fighting against Newton's Laws of

Motion, right?

**JH:** Right.

**RM:** Nobody's saying, "That's not real." There's an economic political element of climate change, and so being able to talk about it in a religious perspective, in a moral perspective, that I think is a tremendous step forward. But I'm also seeing, that from a larger, political perspective and seeing President Trump withdrawing from that Paris Climate Accord, that there's a strong chance of Republicans and Conservatives pulling away from that need. So there may be a little bit of a decoupling happening.

**JH:** Right, right, right. And we might lose some ground because of that.

**RM:** Yeah.

**JH:** When you talk to a person on the right side of our stereotyped categories, they will... And you say, "But you're being ideological." They will look you in the eye and they will say, "Yes. Of course I'm being ideological. That's what I am and that's what I'm doing, and that's what, I'm happy about that. I'm not hiding that." However, if you speak to a committed enlightenment-styled science person or scientist, they are more prone to saying, "I'm not being ideological, I'm being factual."

**RM:** Right.

**JH:** And it seems to me that there is a serious, serious blind spot about the ideology of science, the ideology of the enlightenment, and that we need to come to terms with that, if nothing else to be interlocutors of good faith. Do you agree with me?

**RM:** Yeah, I think that's accurate and I think one difference is that science at its best in the platonic ideal is designed to not be ideological. But it is an article of faith that we can understand the universe. But one thing that people are starting to talk about now is that if it's between science and scientism.

**JH:** Yeah, interesting. Right, because I'm a scientist.

**RM:** Yep.

**JH:** I'm a scientism-ist.

**RM:** Right.

**JH:** Because I'm not a scientist but I'm into scientism. I buy it.

**RM:** Yeah.

**JH:** I buy its ideology.

**RM:** Well, scientism is actually the idea that science can and should explain absolutely everything including religion, God, and that's...

**JH:** But many religious people can hold that and still be religious.

**RM:** Yeah, but I think religious people can hold science. I think a level of scientism is... Science has its own rules that it abides by and that's an article of faith in a lot of ways, that's a...

**JH:** Governing principle.

**RM:** Right. This is, "Here's what we're gonna do and these are rules. And by the way, if it's outside of these rules, we're not gonna talk about it."

**JH:** Right.

**RM:** Which is why, in many ways, I don't really care what Richard Dawkins or Stephen Hawking have to say about God because they're not theologians. In the same way that I'm not going to look towards a religious person to explain the origins of the universe.

**JH:** Right. Right. So scientism owns up a bit to its ideological commitments which I see. But even science... I wanna push back in the platonic sense, 'cause even radical, pure, platonic science still evinces ideology in the questions it chooses to ask.

**RM:** Sure.

**JH:** And so maybe it asks them and then proceeds reasonably fairly within the rules to answer them. But the scope of the questions, the questions themselves, the components of the universe that it chooses to investigate, surely are loaded.

**RM:** They are, I think. But again, in an ideal sense, any question should be up for debate scientifically.

**JH:** Yes.

**RM:** I think that's... Now, are there constraints? Of course. And scientists are humans, and so there are gonna be some... And there are religious scientists who are investigating something that's inspired by their faith, inspired by their tradition. And the idea that there are some things that should not be studied, now that could become politically loaded, do we need to look at questions of gender from a scientific perception? Do we look at questions of race? Do we look at questions of gun control?

**JH:** Gay rights was completely subject to that and abortion, of course. They're explicitly invoked.

**RM:** Right, right and one thing that can be challenging is, what happens if there's research that

doesn't necessarily confirm what our ideology would say? And that can be very uncomfortable.

**JH:** Right, but again the ideology comes into play, because why would a scientist bother to ask the question about when life begins in the first place? I mean, they have protozoa to work with, they don't necessarily have to work with fetuses or whatever. So it strikes me as loaded, and I think that the left needs to own how loaded it is and maybe that can bridge a little bit.

**RM:** Right, and I think you're right, because on both sides for example, if you talk about abortion, that both sides will bring forth scientific arguments, but not necessarily in the scientific perspective, but in the lawyer perspective.

**JH:** Right, right.

**RM:** "I'm gonna use this to convince you as to why my perspective is accurate." But it's not just Democrats/Republicans, but it's also Israeli/Palestinian. There's a same kind of question of epistemology, and humility, and relationship building and that needs to happen across any kind of divide where it's polarized.

**JH:** And maybe Judaism, by virtue of having developed as a minority culture and diaspora, can bring some of that humility, because we have traditionally entered into religious conversations with the understanding that we were the dissenters. And that's a powerful place to come from. Well, Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman, now I can call you my friend, we've met a number of times. It's such a pleasure to spend time with you. I want to thank you for your insights and the pleasure of your company and a wonderful conversation.

**RM:** Thank you Josh, wonderful to be with you again.

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