RABBI SHARON BROUS: ENGAGING TRADITION

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.

It's my great pleasure to welcome to the College Commons Podcast, a colleague here in the Los Angeles area and someone who may be well-known to many of you, Rabbi Sharon Brous. Rabbi Brous was named number one on The Newsweek, The Daily Beast, list of the most influential rabbis in America in 2013, and she was one of the founders of IKAR in Los Angeles, a Jewish congregation that has become a model for Jewish revitalization in the US and beyond, where she currently serves as the senior rabbi. Rabbi Brous, thank you so much for joining us.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Joshua Holo: Among the many public speeches and talks you have online, where I got some of my material—in addition to the many people we know in common and hear about your work—I picked up on a thread that captured my attention, which was, you spoke of, in your Ted Talk, if I'm not mistaken, people who read a religious tradition as a wellspring for anger and aggression, and you call on us. Frankly, you make a very impassioned call on us to read those same texts for compassion and empathy. I wanna know if there is a bottom line, an intractable part of our tradition that is irreducibly violent and that we can't feasibly or convincingly re-read it all, but that we have to reckon with nonetheless.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: That's a really interesting question. I don't want to avoid, ignore, apologize, or justify for our really difficult texts, and the parts of our tradition that are used as justification for violence and extremism and hatred. And yet, I really do believe that to be a person of faith, to be a religious person in the world today is an act of will and an act of choice, and we are all actively engaging a tradition that's thousands of years old, and multifaceted, and we have to determine which path we take. And so, it's not to say that somebody who reads from our tradition a justification for violence is rendering an illegitimate read, but rather that to be human in the world today, we're called to make a different choice.

And so, I don't wanna say that's Jewish, that's not Jewish, but my choice is to live a Jewish life, that is... That's inspired by our tradition and resonant with the core values that speak from our tradition about human beings being created in the image of God. And some of those are absolutely irreconcilable with the most xenophobic and most narrow-minded renderings from our tradition. So, any Jew who's alive in the world today, who's engaging our tradition seriously, is engaging in an act of interpretation. And I believe that it's upon us, it's really our obligation, to search and seek out the voices from the tradition that call us to be more loving, more forgiving, more compassionate, and whole-hearted, particularly in the moment that we're living in today.

Joshua Holo: So, maybe we could sum up by saying religion isn't a matter of degree as much as it is a matter of emphasis.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: I think that's fair to say. I think, actually, in most of the faith traditions that I've ever encountered, there are opportunities for and justifications for really bad behavior and opportunities also for holiness. And so, I think that's the choice that we hold. Do we engage the tradition looking for pathways toward holiness and looking to illuminate the human possibility in this world, or do we use religion as a tool to do exactly the opposite?

Joshua Holo: If we try to do some, maybe radical empathy and empathize with those, whoever they are, the people who choose to make the opposite choice you're advocating for, who choose to read, to take the opportunity for the most violent and aggressive readings of any given tradition. Can we empathize... Try to empathize with them? And if we do that, we imagine them to be acting from a place of, let's say, self-defense. What do we do?

Rabbi Sharon Brous: I think it's always important for us to engage in exercises of radical empathy to try to understand better the people that we don't agree with and I also think that we're making a grave error if we think that everything is equally acceptable and honorable in our world and in our society. And so, while I do desperately wanna understand people who see the world very differently than I do, people who use sacred tradition as justification for violence and for regressive policies that do terrible harm to the bodies of women, of LGBT people, of people of color, etcetera, I don't believe that they're necessarily right, and it's my job to just find what's right in them.

And I think often, the people who are using our texts and our traditions in this way, are wedded to power more than they're wedded to truth. And so, what they're looking for in our tradition is a justification for them holding on to the power that they already have, and our tradition offers it to them. There are many narratives and verses that one could read as permission to engage in really bad behavior, but again, that's a choice that somebody's making that they will take the tradition and utilize it in that way in order to justify holding on to their own privilege and their own power.

Joshua Holo: I don't doubt it for a minute. I mean, I certainly agree that there are people like that in the world and maybe every single one of us is guilty of that in moments. What happens when we genuinely encounter someone who is not angling but who is sincerely, and in many ways, perhaps desperately feeling the need to defend him or herself or themselves, and therefore, relies on the tools of violence that any tradition has, in ways that we can disagree with, but understand? Where does that leave us if they are our adversaries or our enemies?

Rabbi Sharon Brous: Understanding someone else's approach and even feeling empathy toward them doesn't make them right, and it doesn't mean that you have to vote in accordance with their ideas or ideology and it doesn't mean that you have to build social structures in accordance with their ideals. Remember that the greatest defense used for the institution of slavery was the Hebrew Bible. I mean, here in the United States, that was how slavery was justified. And every Sunday, for hundreds... For over 100 years, slave owners would go to church and be told by their pastors, while waving our Hebrew Bible in the air, that they were doing God's will.

That doesn't make it right. It's important for us to try to understand what's going on there, what would make a person feel so desperate to get a kind of divine or ancient permission for their bad behavior, that they would look to religion for that purpose, but it doesn't make it right.

So I think we should always long to engage in deeper understanding and acquire deeper understanding of people who don't see the world that we do but I also think we're making a mistake if we don't... If we're afraid to say that sometimes it's not about right and left, but it's about right and wrong, and there are certain views that even if someone can find a pasuk, a verse, that can justify their position, it's cruel and

it's inhuman and it degrades the human being created in the image of God, and therefore, we don't abide it.

Joshua Holo: Right. So I hear you landing on a place, if I'm hearing you correctly, of comfort with an irreducible adversarialism at some point, between right and wrong. And even if that, adversity, or adversarialism comes from a place of empathy but the empathy may not mitigate the fundamental conflict. And that, if so, so be it. We pursue what we deem right.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. I took my daughters to Georgia, so that we could do some poll monitoring for the election in Georgia, which is really kind of the beating heart of the voter suppression movement in this country and we had a big event at Ebenezer Baptist Church, at Dr. King's church the night before, and I wanted my daughters to experience it with me. So, I took them out of school and we got on a plane to Georgia. And on the plane, we were learning Gemara, which is a Rabbi mother's dream, and she was learning (Hebrew), the notion that Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel engaged in a conflict for many years and ultimately, the voice of God comes down from the heaven and says, "This one is the voice, is the word of the living God, and this one's the word of the living God." And ultimately, the law is gonna go according to Hillel.

And we were talking about what does it mean to... That there's truth in both of their perspectives. And that ultimately, you have to learn to walk the path of one perspective, 'cause you can't always be walking two paths at once. And the conversation very quickly, because of the nature of our trip, I think, took a really interesting turn, which is in the case of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, there was actually truth to both of their perspectives. And there often is truth to multiple perspectives in ways that we are very resistant to seeing, and yet, there's not always truth to both perspectives.

So, for example, in the battle between voter engagement and voter suppression, it's not an (Hebrew) battle, where these are both legitimate ways of winning elections, getting more people to vote and suppressing, in particular, people of color who wanna vote, but rather, there's one path that's right and one path that is wrong and unjust and illegal. And so, I think we have to learn how to build hearts that are able to hold more truths than are comfortable.

The person I disagree with on certain matters or perspectives might also be right, might even be more right than I am. And also, there are certain boundaries, there are certain lines that once they are crossed, we're not all... We're not all looking at us various shades of what might be true and what might be right, but some people might actually be wrong. And I don't want to be afraid to say that.

Joshua Holo: I hear it. I hear it. I don't think I disagree one iota, but I do kind of despair. I don't know exactly what to do with that, but...

Rabbi Sharon Brous: Where does the despair come from?

Joshua Holo: The despair comes from the absolute conviction that the other side sees me. I know perfectly well that it's a mirrored discourse, perfectly mirrored, and that creates an unbridgeability, which is, to me, in the course of human events, cause for despair.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: I think there's a lot of cause for despair right now, but I do have a sense that one of the problems that we're facing in this particular political culture that we're living in is that it used to be that progressivism would push people to try to engage in radical empathy and understand the other side. And now, we see that same kind of attempt at seeing truths everywhere that led the President of the United States to not be able to flat out condemn Nazis marching in this country, and actually taking the life of an innocent protester.

And so, there is a danger to engaging in a good people on both sides mentality when we're talking about Nazis on one side. And so, what I think is very important for us is to establish that there is a tent of engagement, and within that tent, there are people on some kind of broad spectrum who see things really differently and might disagree, but can still believe that they, at the core of what they both believe in, is the betterment of humanity. And I think that the mistake is trying to make a tent that includes absolutely everybody because there are some people who fundamentally wanna undermine the human experience and human freedom of other people. And that to me, renders a person's ideology illegitimate.

Of course, there's always the Derek Black story. There's always the story of the grand wizard of the KKK's son who goes to Shabbat dinner and somehow, over the course of time, his humanity is awakened in him. And we should never give up on people, but there are certain ideologies that there should be no room for in our social discourse. And I understand for a progressive, that's a hard thing to grapple with 'cause we wanna make room for everything, but there are certain ideologies that are rooted in white supremacy, that are rooted in misogyny, that are so detrimental to our society that I don't believe that they deserve a seat at the table.

Joshua Holo: But as I said, I really don't disagree one iota. I just observe that there's another tent out there which sees itself with the same moral, frankly, high ground that you and I see ourselves in, because it turns out that you and I are in the same tent, and, hence, my despair.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: I hear it. It is absolutely devastating and I believe that it's a leadership crisis that has led to a moral and spiritual crisis, and it is tearing the country apart. I mean, a part of it is that we all... The way that societies progress is by eventually shutting down ideologies that have no place as we evolve and move forward. And when those old ideologies are hero-ized and celebrated, long after they should have been put to rest, it awakens something in people who feel a sense of loss, of fear, feel like the world's moving forward without them. And I think it's devastating to see because it's a false god. It's... The whole idea of white supremacy and racialized hatred, and this ginning up of anti-Semitic canards which make people feel like they're part of a club again, right?

There's something to hold on to now in this fast-paced time where people are losing their jobs to automation and the technology. And so, all of a sudden, I'm in something again and I feel like I'm part of something and I'm needed again because there's an Other that's evil and needs to be suppressed, oppressed, or repressed. And it's devastating because people are now shaping lives and communal structures around these ideas that really need to be laid to rest. And so, for the people who invest in that way, from their hearts, of course, I feel a great sense of sadness and loss and not only because I don't want to live in a world that has to continue... That has to continually fight the same battles. I don't wanna have to live in a society that's trying to now regain acceptance for the idea that Nazism is actually a bad thing. I don't wanna have to re-fight the Civil War again in this country, but also because it's devastating for the people who are on the other side of this battle, who could live a very different reality if they weren't being fed this very hate-filled agenda.

So, I do, I hear the despair. I think it's absolutely devastating what's happening right now. And it's a total... I believe that it is a moral crisis in the country, and it's about arguing and offering a narrative that allows people to feel seen and to feel like they belong and to feel like they are loved by virtue of being human beings in the world, not by virtue of how much they can suppress or oppress another person who has less privilege and less power than they do.

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

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Joshua Holo: In some contexts, you say religious discipline, and you tend to think of Catholicism because it has a very enshrined system of discipline around sex and sometimes food and sometimes what you say, and in certain communities and everything, and priests and what have you. But I wanted to ask you what you think Judaism has to offer religious civilizations in terms of wisdom about religious discipline.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: Well, I... We could call it religious discipline, we could call them spiritual tools. I think that there's a... That our tradition offers a framework to help us hold this moment that we're living through and I have to tell you that I felt it in a much more clear and extreme way over the course of the past couple of years. But the very notion of Shabbat and being a part of a religious tradition that creates a rhythm out of time, and tells us that not every day is like every other day, and that we don't just spiral in this endless devolving cycle of days, but instead, we actually stop and engage in a practice in which one day is offered to us as an opportunity to reclaim holiness, this has for me been an absolutely transformative religious engagement and I would say life-giving, and so... And life sustaining.

So, the idea that there's a religious tradition that calls us to breathe once a week, and to sing, and to sit in community, those things are... They're so counter-normative to, in our culture right now. It's so counter-intuitive, and I have found that Shabbat has become like an oxygen and something I'm so struck by now, when the world is so loud and so painful. And then we come into Kabbalat Shabbat and there are these psalms that our rabbis put together over the course of the last thousand years, and you realize that, as challenging as things are right now, we've faced really much worse times. And even still, at the end of every week, they said, "Now, we sing."

And I mean, that just takes my breath away. It's the most obvious thing, but (Hebrew) these songs that we sing at the end of really rough weeks, these days, are the same songs that were put together precisely so that we could find a way to sing again, no matter what was happening outside, and what was burning, and who was being attacked, and from where we were being exiled. And so, the religious discipline of Shabbat is a spiritual practice, but it works best when it's engaged in a disciplined way, meaning, every Shabbat. Right? Because it's you're creating a container so that you can have this experience when you need it.

And that might mean that some Fridays, we don't... We're not ready for Shabbat, and we don't want it and we have too much to do. And yet, the act of showing up and engaging in this kind of discipline is what I think gives us the opportunity to be liberated by it and strengthened and nurtured by it. So, I think about it both as a discipline, but not really as a restrictive discipline, more as a kind of liberating discipline. It's giving us the scaffolding to be able to engage in the spiritual work that we need to in order to even survive these days, let alone to sing through the dark days.

Joshua Holo: It's been my experience individually, but I also think in conversations with my friends and colleagues, that people who take any given discipline seriously generally find it liberating. Discipline itself is, I think, to many, many people, an act of... I don't know, there's something about self-control which is also an affirmation of self-determination, and that is a liberating thing. Self-determination is often a synonym of freedom. And I noted mostly in our University here in Southern California in

exercise, and what I found is, as I'm getting older, there's a... There's an attribution of respect for one's character when that person expresses discipline through exercise, not because of the exercise but because of the discipline. And what happens when you realize how many people... You realize that there's a lot of deep characters out there, a lot of people who really carve out time and commit to something hard, something not easy. The benefits of which are delayed, and there's character there. It's kind of impressive if you stop to think about it.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: I think that's really interesting and I wanna share with you that, right as we were starting IKAR, I had a friend who lived in the city near me, and she was driving to Burbank for a particular yoga instructor, and... Which is ridiculous, because Angelenos, you would never drive to Burbank by choice, right? And vice versa. It's just the traffic precludes any kind of a choice like that. But, I asked her why, and she said, because that's the best yoga instructor in the city, and I get the best workout when I go there. And I was thinking it's so interesting when you take a practice seriously, how far you're willing to go to engage it. And yet, with our Jewish practice, we have built systems around the lowest common denominator, not around the highest, not, like schlep to Burbank because it's worth it, because you will be challenged and pushed so hard that you will feel like I just engaged in a liberating discipline. But instead, make it quick, make it easy, make it English, make it painless. And I feel like that was a real strategic error that we made over the course of the 20th century in trying to determine how to hold Jews. We made the decision...

Joshua Holo: We didn't ask them to rise to the occasion.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: No, we made it so easy for them so that they wouldn't leave and then they left because they don't want easy, because they want Burbank. Right? And I feel now, in the communities that are really thriving in the country today are communities that have reclaimed a sense of challenge and inspiration and where we're not afraid to say to people, "This is what's expected of you as a Jew. You're being called to engage in the world in a particular way." And at IKAR, we started with... And many of our people are formally unaffiliated Jews, disconnected, marginalized and we said, "We're gonna do a really traditional prayer experience here, that when the rabbis, who are the deans of the rabbinical schools come to IKAR, they're gonna feel challenged."

But that means that there's a whole slew of other people who have no idea what's going on, but they're gonna understand that something very powerful and real is happening, and it's hopefully gonna make them wanna learn more and dive more deeply into the experience. And it's not only at IKAR but I see this happening around the country in really beautiful ways, in new communities and in old communities that are regenerating and re-inventing themselves, but they're saying, we need to bring a challenge back into the spiritual discipline of Jewish life, that it can't be simple and work, because nothing is. A simple workout, you don't feel good afterwards. So why are we giving people a simple spiritual workout and then expecting them to come back?

Joshua Holo: I wanna thank you Rabbi Sharon Brous for taking the time to speak with me. It's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you and to get to know you little bit.

Rabbi Sharon Brous: Thank you so much, and thank you for all that you do.

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Joshua Holo: 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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