



RABBI YOSHI ZWEIBACK: MUSIC AS A TOOL FOR HEALING

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.

I'm very excited to welcome you all to this episode and to get to know our guest on the College Commons Podcast, my friend and colleague, Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback, Senior Rabbi at Stephen Wise Temple. Rabbi Zweiback is also a musician, and he is the Founding Executive Director of Kavod, an all-volunteer non-profit dedicated to promoting human dignity. He's the father of three and married to Jacqueline Hantgan. Yoshi, welcome to the podcast.

Yoshi Zweiback: Great to be here, Josh, thanks for having me.

JH: So I wanna start off with the part about you that I personally know the least and have experienced the least, which is that you're a musician. We all know that music can be an incredibly powerful way to touch people, so I want you to tell me the story or an anecdote of one of the most powerful encounters with music that you've either witnessed other people experiencing or that you've experienced.

YZ: Actually, one of the most moving experiences I've had happened recently, right after the shooting in Pittsburgh. I write music with actually a lot of people, but my main collaborator is Rabbi Ken Chasen, who's a dear friend from youth group days. And we go way back, and we've been recording music together and performing together since 1996. And so we're working on a new album, and we had a date scheduled to go to our producer's studio to mix a song and to approve the final mixes for the album. And then on Saturday we found out about the horrific shooting in Pittsburgh, and Monday morning I actually remembered the... A snippet of a song that I had been working on about a year and a half ago and hadn't completed, and it was inspired by the Sylvan Kamens, Rabbi Jack Riemer poem, We Remember Them, in the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.

YZ: And I had created the beginning of a song back in 2017, and hadn't done anything with it, but I have gotten very good at... Every time I have a song idea I record it on my phone, just as a voice memo. And so I pulled up that voice memo, and I re-listened to it, and I was like, yeah, this could be a really meaningful piece of music and a fitting response to what was happening. And I often write those in those kinds of moments 'cause I feel... What can I do? So I took the

voice memo, I emailed it to Ken and I said, "Ken, I have to go up to the temple and talk to the kids and the teachers and parents about the shooting." It was first thing Monday morning, which is typically my free day, but I said, "I'll be done by 9:45, I'll pick you up, and we'll go to our producer's house." And I sent this to him and I said, "Finish this song." And he emailed me back like, "Oh, well, I'll try," noncommittal.

And then when I finished my meeting with the parents, I went to my car and I looked at my phone and there was an email back from Ken, he said, "I think you'll be really excited about what I've done." And then I picked him up, he showed me the song, we got in my car, drove to the producer's, and recorded it that day. And then later that same week, we invited colleagues from across Los Angeles, mostly cantors, but a couple of other musicians who aren't cantors, and then a couple of rabbis, and we gathered in the studio, we recorded all the vocals. I invited a friend who's a filmmaker to come and he videoed the session, and then he cut a video of what we'd done. Our producer, Kenli Mattus, mixed the song, and on the Tuesday, actually election day, we were thinking, everything going on in the world, is now the time to release this song? Then we said it's the end of shiva, it's the time to do it, and we put it out, and within a week there's 10,000 views.

Now, you never know if people listen to the whole song and if it touches them, but just based on the number of people who emailed us and said, "Can I get the sheet music? We're doing it this Friday night," or who wrote comments saying that it was just what they needed at that moment... So to have an experience like that where something didn't really exist, in this case we had an idea for a song, but it went from non-being to being in a period of just a few hours, and then that you could share it very broadly within the period of a week is really exciting, and just so meaningful.

JH: And there is something about the shareability of music, even without technology, and people commune over music. It's a powerful medium. I know it's obvious to say it, but I'm always moved by it.

YZ: And it's something that, really since I was a kid, my aunt Debra Lerner, who lives in Kansas City, is a wonderful, wonderful musician. And when I was a kid she would bring her guitar to all of our family Seders and family gatherings, and I wanted to play the guitar. And so we have pictures of me at Passover Seder sitting next to her with a little ukulele that my mom and dad bought me when I was five years old, just strumming along. And I didn't know how to play the ukulele, I just wanted to strum with her. And then my first... I started writing songs at age five, a couple of which we still have recordings of. They were pretty nonsensical, there was one song called To My Ashin, and no one knows exactly what Ashin... Was I trying to say nation? Not sure. [chuckle] But I wrote this song called To My Ashin. And then another song I wrote was When I Was a Man and Not a Pipsqueak. [laughter] That's a true lyric, 'cause my brother used to call me a pipsqueak, so I sort of imagined a time when I would become a man, yeah.

JH: Would become a man.

YZ: But then when I was 14 I started playing guitar, and my first job in Jewish education was song leader at the temple; I could barely play the guitar, but I was 15 and I was game. And then I went to Camp Kutz and learned how to become a song leader, and then I started song leading at

Jewish summer camps, and actually this... We just found out yesterday about the destruction of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple Camps, and I worked at Gindling Hilltop Camp for four summers as song leader, program director, drama specialist. So I spent a significant portion of my life doing music at camp, and teaching Judaism through music.

And then I started composing... Actually it was at Hilltop that I wrote the song... The melody that actually is my best-known melody. It was a setting of Hashkiveinu, and Rabbi Steve Leder, who was the assistant rabbi at the time, every night at Hilltop they would... And at Kramer, they would sing Shelter Us, which was by a guy named Larry Jonas, who I never met, but he had worked at the camp years earlier. And it was an English setting of Hashkiveinu, and then they started just reading the first line of the Hashkiveinu prayer, and then they'd sing Shelter Us. And Steve said to me, he's like, "Do you write music?" I was like, "Well, I never really have, but I kinda..." I didn't tell him the story about when I was a little kid, but he said, "Would you write a melody to the Hashkiveinu? The verse from Hashkiveinu that this English is based on, and then we'll kinda put them together?"

And so I said, "Yeah," and I came back a half an hour later, and I was like, "What do you think of this?" And he was like, "That's exactly what I was looking for." So we taught it that night, and that was in 1990, and now there are generations... And it's spread around camps all over North America, and there really are generations of people who are now having children and they'll tell me, every now and then I get an email where they'll say, "We sing your Hashkiveinu every night to our kid." And my daughters, I sang it to them from... Literally from in utero, I would get up on my wife's tummy and I would sing to them when they were in the womb. And they've told me stories about when they were at a youth group event or at summer camp, they said, "My Abba composed that," and people are like, "No, I don't believe it."

JH: No, that's from Mount Sinai.

YZ: That's my one claim to fame musically.

JH: All right, all right, sing a bar just so we know what it is.

YZ: Hashkiveinu Adonai Eloheinu l'shalom, l'shalom.

JH: L'shalom. I know it. See?

YZ: There you go.

JH: All right. You and I have interacted mostly in your role as senior rabbi at Stephen Wise Temple, but I know that you have a lot of experience as a Jewish educator, and up and down the age scale, too, because you were running the school here at Wise before you became the senior rabbi, and before that you were running the Year in Israel program, meaning you were educating rabbinical and graduate students, so you have quite a scope, a perspective on Jewish education. And I wanna ask you in your educatorial persona, if you were Hillel and someone came to you, tell me all of the... Teach me all of the Torah standing on one foot, what is it?

YZ: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, God freed us for a purpose. That's it; that's the whole story. And I think embedded in that is, first of all, the beginning of empathy.

JH: Now begins the commentary, friends, just so...

YZ: Right, now I'll talk for another 40 minutes. But yeah, so our master story is rooted in our experience, and the degree to which it's a historical experience in this regard doesn't matter to me at all, that's our story and we're sticking to it. [chuckle] We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and so the empathy for the other is core in that story...

JH: Meaning that we embrace the fact that we come from slavery, rather than trying to dispense with it and to deny it as part of ourselves, we embed it in ourselves.

YZ: Right, we could have a master narrative about the Jewish people that could begin with the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in 1948, and that would be a different kind of story, or it could be a story that's rooted in the Maccabees and that would be a different kind of story. But to have the master narrative of the Jewish people... And I really think there's lots of evidence to support that claim that that's the master narrative. If you look at the way the liturgy functions, if you look at the way the holiday cycle functions, the Friday night kiddush, that's it. That's the core part of the narrative. And it was a choice to make that the part of the story that we emphasize, so I think that's really important.

The notion that God freed us, to me... And again, the degree to which I, in my own theology, think that God played an active role in freeing us, I don't; that's not my belief system. But as part of the master narrative, I think it's so important because it suggests that there's a direction, there's a vector to it all. We were not meant to be slaves, and we were meant to experience freedom, and that's the purpose is that we're meant to bring freedom to the world for ourselves. And so in terms of our own dignity that's really important, but it's also important for the rest of humanity. To me that's the core of Judaism.

[music]

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 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]

I wanna speak recently about the time we're living in, which feels fractured. I don't think it's a particularly controversial thing to say that now in November of 2018, after the mid-terms or despite the mid-terms, I'm not sure which, this country feels very, very divided. And I wanna ask you if you've personally witnessed religion or a religious experience of any ilk, doesn't have to

be Jewish or it could be Jewish, whatever, that has been compellingly deployed to help bridge this fracture?

YZ: Certainly I've experienced moments of that here at Stephen Wise, and here in the Los Angeles community. And again, just because it's so much on my mind, two Fridays ago we had scheduled a service to honor one of our rabbis, Rabbi Ron Stern, for 20 years of service to our community. And he has been a leader here at Wise in building bridges around the city through LA Voice and other organizations; LA Voice includes a lot of clergy voices, and it's cross-denominational. So we had invited some of our partners at LA Voice to be here that night. It was a real beautiful mixing of predominantly members of our temple, but people from other faith communities coming together to remember, also to celebrate a teacher and a leader in the community who's devoted so much energy to building these bridges and to doing acts of tikkun in our community. It was really healing and beautiful, and I think trying to find those ways to reach out and find common ground is something that is really important to me, and I think there's lots of voices in Judaism that point us in that direction.

YZ: Certainly every voice doesn't; there are some more extreme voices in the tradition that tend to suggest that maybe we shouldn't do that, you know? Kind of a fear of the nations. But when you look at Maimonides when he talks about darkay shalom and there's a halachic principle that...

JH: The paths of peace.

YZ: The paths of peace, that finding where there are certain things we do for the sake of building these kinds of bridges that will lead us towards peace. So in a divided nation, in a nation where there's a lot of xenophobia and hatred, albeit I still believe it's a very small number of people, but it's a significant enough number to be frightening to us.

JH: And to shape elections and to...

YZ: Absolutely, but to really... As much as the tendency or the inclination at moments like this is to draw inward and close ranks, I think it's precisely at moments like these that we need to reach out. So last Friday night, this is now a week after the service I was just describing, Congressman Ted Lieu, his office reached out to us and said, "I wanted to be here at the previous celebration, but I'd like to join you this Friday night in solidarity." And to have a member of Congress, not Jewish, who said I wanna be with you. And one of the things I said on the bimah in thanking him for coming, as I said, one of the things that makes this moment for us as Jews different from moments that we've experienced in the past that might have filled us with concern is that we have people like Congressman Ted Lieu and others who are saying, "I wanna reach out, I wanna be there with you." And to me, that feels... You're the historian, but to me that is what makes this moment in Jewish history unique.

JH: It's certainly rare and important, and I couldn't agree more. And I also have been aware of some of those very encouraging signs in what is a sometimes distressing, if not worse than distressing, landscape. But here's to the good signs and here's to your work in making them happen. Another part of your career that I don't know how many people actually have reason to

be aware of is that you've spent a number of years in Israel, and you and I actually haven't spent a lot of time talking about Israel, but I wanna ask you what you think that American Jews need to know about Israel that isn't so obvious, or what do we need to be able to be better partners, but also to be able to express our concerns more effectively and more... With a greater sense of shared destiny and progress?

YZ: Well, you mentioned shared destiny, which is what I was gonna put my finger on, is that the sense that we have a shared past, and that in our present there's so many things that we need to work on together, and that whether we're always aware of it, whether we care to admit it at times, but the idea that we have a shared destiny, I believe all of those things. And I think once you acknowledge that and once you sort of assimilate that... What I think is a truth, then we realize how much we are bound up one with the other, and how much we are obligated to try to be responsible for one another, to hang in there with each other even when there are moments where we feel a disconnect or we feel let down by one another. And there have been many of those moments in the past, and going way back, I think thousands of years of diaspora and Israel connections, there have been those moments.

JH: Sure, sure.

YZ: And sometimes there's a certain inevitability to it. Here we are in the diaspora just trying to make it work for ourselves as a minority in this vast nation, and so there are things we care about that we can't not care about because this is our reality day-to-day. And then you have Israelis who are in a very different context, and they wonder why we care so much about that, [chuckle] and vice versa. So it's like when you have an Israeli who says, "Well, this is the politician I like most in America because of this one issue, the Iran deal, or foreign aid package."

JH: Or moving to the embassy or what have you.

YZ: Whatever, that one issue is, and obviously the most dedicated supporter of Israel living in the American community, if you said is that the only thing you expect from your government? That's the only thing.

JH: Right.

YZ: Nothing else matters. I suppose there might be a few people who'd say, "Yes, darn it, it is," but the vast majority of Americans would say, "No, it's very important to me, but I also care about my roads, and I kind of want the police there... "

JH: Right, schools and... [chuckle]

YZ: But your average Israeli Jew, if you say, "How much do you care about this bond issue in California that's gonna provide housing for the 50,000 homeless in LA?" On some level they might say, "Well, yeah, I don't want homeless people to be wandering the streets," but they just don't care. And we just have to acknowledge that, that there are gonna be those moments and those tensions. But if we accept that and in some ways embrace the idea that bottom line, we really are connected, again, both in a historical... From the historical sense today and going

forward, then we just have to care about each other and we have to remain connected in that way.

JH: Thank you for your partnership in a million ways, and joining me with this conversation.

YZ: Thanks, Josh.

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.