DALIA MARX: ISRAELI JUDAISM MEETS REFORM

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.

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JH: Welcome to this edition of the College Commons Podcast. It's my distinct pleasure to welcome my friend and colleague, Rabbi Dalia Marx, who is the Aaron Panken Professor of Liturgy and Midrash on the Jerusalem Campus of the Hebrew Union College, one of our four campuses, and we're going to talk about some of Professor Marx's innovations in reform liturgy here in Israel. Dalia, if I may call you that, thank you so much...

Dalia Marx: Of course.

JH: Thank you for joining us.

DM: Thank you.

JH: So we have a lot to talk about because you've been a part of a lot of thinking about Israeli liturgy canon in the Hebrew language, but specifically for the reform movement for liberal Judaism. And I had the pleasure during this trip to Israel to actually to actually (Hebrew) with the...

[overlapping conversation]

DM: The draft, the draft of (Hebrew). Right, right.

JH: The draft... There you go. And I wanna ask you what in your mind American Jews might not realize is so different about reform praying, not just liturgy, but reform praying in Israel as contrasted to the experience of praying in a reform context in the United States, or in the English-speaking world.

DM: Right. So I think, right from the get-go, one of the innovations of the reform movement with regard to liturgy was praying in the vernacular. People tried to translate the Siddurim, and once you understand what you pray, you realize that there are some things you can't say, and then you revise it. In Israel, the situation is different because the holy language, or the language of the prayer, the liturgy, is also the vernacular. This is the language we speak in the street. So there's no way we can really go around difficult matters and topics and ideas and concepts in the Siddurim, it's really in your face.

JH: I have to interrupt you; do you think that's why so-called secular Israeli Jews have for so long been completely resistant to any religion at all, because they understand it too well?

DM: I think this is definitely one of the reasons. And as you said, for Israelis, non-orthodox or traditionalist Jews, even entering a synagogue is a political act. It's a very marked thing you do. So one of the things we try to do here is to find a bridge between different segments of the Israeli society. Now, if you understand the Siddur, and you see that there are some things you can't really say and really, "Is this what I wanna say to God, to my community, to myself? Is this really what I wanna say?" So that's a problem. But on the other hand, I think we're much more traditionalist than our brothers and sisters in the diaspora because the larger society that we're in, which is very segmented, it's either orthodox or very traditionalist or completely secular.

DM: So the seculars are suspicious about us because we are religious, and the orthodox, they are suspicious toward us because we make all these changes. So either way you go, we're in a rare situation. There's a statement someone said, a professor, he said, "I can't pray with the people I talk with, and I can't talk with the people I pray with." So we're in a somewhat difficult situation. And the larger society is much more traditionalist. So a lot of things you experiment with in North America, gendered language of prayer, is much more demanded here because we see the patriarchal or the sexist, if you will, nature of Jewish prayer, but on the other hand, we operate in a much more traditionalist society, and Hebrew is a very gendered language. There's nothing you can say that can go around the gender language.

JH: Right, right, right. So it's in your face.

DM: It's really in your face. But on the other hand, the nice thing is that people can read the language, can enjoy the wealth of sources from the Biblical times, Second Temple, medieval time, modern texts that are in Hebrew. So you can really understand the profound meaning and quality of a lot of texts, and that's a big advantage for us.

JH: Right. It's a way in that we... It just bores us in America if we don't understand it, and so we have to create bridges, but you have them already.

DM: In a way, yes.

JH: Including to the poetic beauty of the (Hebrew).

DM: Yes. And I think one of the great achievement of the Israeli literature in the last few generations is that it's very religiosity... I mean there's a profound religiosity in it. Not religious in the orthodox way, but there's a profound religiosity even in what you would call secular poetry. Leah Goldberg was a secular woman, socially speaking, but if you read her poetry, it's very spiritual. She's really in a search for holiness in her life, and people can react to it.

JH: And when your sources, your national, cultural, literary sources are also the sources of our religious civilization, you get secular poets who quote the great sources, Tanakh and Midrashim and references to those things, so that there's a power there, a doubling...

DM: Yes, and educated people can really identify it.

JH: Right, 'cause they remember it and they know.

DM: Yes.

JH: So, continuing on this idea of the fact that you have this opportunity and this challenge, on the one hand, everything that the liturgy challenges, almost any liberal person, it challenges Israelis directly in their face. On the other hand, the entire richness of the Jewish experience,

historically and liturgically and canonically is at your disposal in ways that it's not as readily at our disposal. It's at our disposal, too, but we have to mediate it much more. On page two of the draft of the regular morning service as opposed to Shabbat, you have descriptors of God, and it seems to me that you've made a choice here to put the gendered challenge first and foremost... To put the gender challenge front and center rather than to go the traditional route when you refer to the ways that you can describe whom you're thanking when you thank God in the morning.

JH: The traditional prayer says, "I thank you, the everlasting and living King who has restored my soul to me with grace, and your reliability is great," more or less. And then instead of saying just that, which is, "I give my thanks to you the King, everlasting and alive or living," you have all these other... So why don't you walk us through some of these other descriptors of God and the way that they're gendered?

DM: Right. First, we need to acknowledge this is not our innovation, we borrowed some of these ideas from Siddur Kol Haneshamah, which is the American Reconstruction Siddur that was established already in the '90s, so it's not a completely new idea. But we realize that the first thing you liturgically say in the morning, and for me this is a very important prayer, because when I wake up in the morning and I'm sometimes a little bit disoriented...

JH: Groggy, yeah.

DM: I say these 12 words and it kind of focuses me on the new day, and there's something very soothing about Modeh or Modeh Ani.

JH: Yeah.

DM: So for a lot of people, the imagery of king, God as a king, as a ruler, is something that doesn't really work. It's not something that operates in our world.

JH: Even if you understand that it's metaphorical.

DM: Exactly. So we... In all of the Brachot, all the Baruch Ata, the formula of blessings, we did not change it because we feel that there's a great value and volume in using this traditional language that our ancestors used. So we have Baruch Ata.

JH: As opposed to (Hebrew), blessed art thou in feminine.

DM: Sometimes we have that, but mostly, mostly we have the traditional language.

JH: Okay.

DM: But here in this Modeh Ani, which does not have the formula of blessing, doesn't have Baruch Ata, and therefore, according to (Hebrew) you can even say it before washing of the hands, 'cause from the Geonic era, from the medieval times, Rabbis were concerned with the purity of hands. This is the...

JH: Yes, that's right.

DM: Talmudic Rabbis were not concerned about it, but later in the Geonic era, you have to wash your hands first and say the blessing over the washing of the hand, and only then you can say, Baruch Ata Adonai. So in the Geonic era, we see that the Rabbis were concerned about saying, uttering the name of God, Adonai, when your hands are impure, 'cause the hands get impure in the night. So you have to wash your hands, say the Brachot, and only then you can say Baruch

Ata. Now, Modeh Ani is something that is traditionally recited while you're still in bed, maybe even when your eyes are closed, when you just wake up, and it is so because... And it doesn't include the name of God. So here we thought this leaves us a wide opportunity to relate to God or to the divine in different ways, in different metaphors, that some of them work for different people, and this is the text...

JH: And you felt that even within the bounds of tradition, you had flexibility?

DM: Yes, yes, and you can see in front of you, the page, the traditional text is in a bigger font in black.

JH: Right, the standard, yeah.

DM: That's the standard text, and the revised text or their modern interpretations...

JH: Supplemental, yeah.

DM: Are in smaller font and in blue.

JH: By the way, it's very beautiful on the page.

DM: Oh, thank you.

JH: It's very effective.

DM: Thank you. It was important to us to show the hierarchy between the different texts.

JH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DM: And here we had a big discussion in the Siddur Committee, because some people say (Hebrew) equals (Hebrew).

JH: Right, right, right.

DM: And I said, "Excuse me, I don't think so. I mean maybe in 200 years, it would be so." But a poem that I wrote last night does not equal what my ancestors prayed for 15 centuries.

JH: Right, it hasn't been tested by the generations and the...

DM: Exactly. So we wanted to show this difference between supplementary, additional, interpretational texts that are in blue and smaller font, and the normative, as I can call it, text which is also changed according to our reform guideline. So here in this Modeh Ani, you have different imageries, so...(Hebrew) mother of every living and existing being, or the well of every living and existing thing, or the spirit of everything. So we have different images of what God is so people can relate to the divine in different ways.

JH: And now, so I just wanna clarify, there's two... There's another reason why one might have done this, which is to illustrate, not to make it easier for you or me to connect with God, but to point out to you and me that God cannot be...

DM: Described.

JH: Described or boxed in to... And what you've done is you've reminded me that Melekh is a metaphor, because even though if you ask me, is Melekh a metaphor, obviously, I would say king, I would say, "Yes, it's a metaphor." But when you're in the middle of it, you're groggy, you're waking up in the morning, your eyes aren't even open, you say Melekh, you don't necessarily force yourself to think about it.

DM: Right, that's true. We have to admit. We always, in the reform movement, we talk about the Kavanah, the importance of Kavanah, but when you pray, when you're in a routine of prayer, you don't really own... I mean, at least I don't have a Kavanah for each and every word I say, but if I repeat a certain text again and again and again, in a way, it becomes my inner language. Yes, this...

JH: Yeah.

DM: This is the glasses through which I look at the world.

JH: Right.

DM: And this is what we try to do with this Siddur. I just wanna tell you a little bit about the process of creating it.

JH: Please, please, please.

DM: So we're two editors, it's me, and my co-editor is Rabbi Dr. Alona Lisitsa, who also teaches here at HUC Liturgy and Rabbinics, and we work together. She's hired by the IMPJ and Malam. Malam is the equivalent of the CCAR, this is the rabbinic organization. And I do it voluntarily. So she gets to do all the hard work, I just do the fun stuff. Anyway, and we work with a committee. Israel is not so big, but we realize that dragging people from the north and from the south, it's difficult. So we have Zoom meetings regularly, and then we meet in Malam, in the plenary meeting, we have... We are luckier than the CCAR 'cause we get to meet every six weeks or so.

JH: Oh right, yeah.

DM: It's a small country. So we always have a timeframe where we can discuss issues with the Siddur, get the idea, the feedback of the rabbis. We keep sending them drafts and they respond. We send drafts to the communities and we get the feedback from the communities in the IMPJ, the Israeli Reform Movement bi-annual, we expose it to people. My co-editor Alona goes to communities again and again and again in order to teach them, to hear from them...

JH: In a much shorter timeframe, you're able to respond and get data very quickly.

DM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So in a way, we emulate the process of what you have in North America, with (Hebrew), which is something that I know that was very important to get feedback from the ground, from communities. It's very different from what you hear in Germany. [chuckle] In Germany, the Siddurs operate in a very different way; two rabbis in a closed room, not sending draft, nothing. They just send it to the printing press and that's it. So it's a very different kind of process, what you do here. So democracy is great and diversity is even greater. Pluralism is wonderful. It's very painful sometimes, because what you see in front of you is not the Siddur that I would create for myself, right?

JH: Of course.

DM: So everyone has to give it up a little bit. So, for my older colleagues, we are very radical, extremely radical. And for my younger colleagues, especially for my female colleagues, they think that I'm very traditionalist when it comes to gender and everything. 'Cause some rabbis say, "Every time you have Baruch Ata, blessed are you, we need to have (Hebrew). And we try to make it a little bit more nuanced, because the Siddur, in and of itself, by definition is a conservative, small case c thing. What you have in special prayer groups, what we experienced this morning...

JH: It's not a prayer sheet that you can print up the morning before.

DM: Exactly. That's the process. So, it summarizes what happened in the last decade or two or whatever, and it, in a way, predict what's gonna be in the future, but it's not a cutting edge innovation liturgy. And the nice thing that we hear about reformed Siddur is that every reformed Siddur is a draft for the next one. And I try to remind to myself this, because one day someone's gonna do to me what we did to our very, very beloved and cherished Ha-Avodah sheba-Lev, which is a previous Siddur that was printed in 1982. So it's already 40 years since they began working on it.

JH: Yeah, I think that could be said of American Siddurim as well, but it's good to keep in mind, I see the wisdom there.

[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. Rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now back to our podcast.

JH: So I wanna talk about, as we see in America, the Kaddish, as you say here, the Kaddish, because it holds a very, very distinctive place in the liturgy because of the way people rely on it and respond to it and recite it and relate to it. It is not just the prayer for mourners, it is also the prayer that is the gate between the sections of (Hebrew). But I'm going to ask us to relate to it as the mourner's Kaddish, because that's the one that in America, almost any Jew knows, one way or the other, certainly is familiar with it, and it becomes a touchstone for the powerful moment of life when you're thinking of someone you love who's dead. And so, the Kaddish has almost talismanic power in, I think American Judaism at large, and I think it has that power for a number of reasons, one of which is that we don't understand it, and it's in Aramaic as opposed to Hebrew, which for many Americans doesn't matter, but for many other Americans, it's even a step further removed in their ability to decode some of it.

JH: And I think that, first of all, many Siddurim don't translate it. Some of them summarize it, and some translate it. But I think that what the siddurim are admitting is the fact that it's not about the content, it's about the rhythm (Hebrew), it's about the context, and it's about its power to be a comfort for you. For you and, let's go back to the language, it's true that it's in Aramaic and it's not in Hebrew, but surely an Israeli on the street could understand, I don't know, 85% of the words in the Kaddish.

DM: Don't put your money on it. No, no, on the contrary, I would argue that for us, the Kaddish is one of the only texts that puts us in the same place as American Jews, because people don't understand it. Yes, if you go grammatically, okay, the (Hebrew) is the same as (Hebrew), but it

looks foreign, it looks strange. And a lot of people are like, "(Hebrew) is like a trolley." "What trolley? What is the trolley we're talking about here?" So people don't really understand it, and that's part of the magic, that's part what you call the talismanic, the mantra-like nature of the Kaddish. So we did include it in Aramaic. Interestingly enough, in previous Siddur, in Ha-Avodah sheba-Lev, they translated it, and it was like one column in Aramaic, one column in Hebrew, and it didn't work. [chuckle] It didn't work. People tried to read it in many communities in Hebrew, didn't hold water, no, because people longed for, yearned for this...

JH: The same reason, yeah.

DM: Yes, exactly, the same reason. What we did here, and I don't think you have in North America, is we included two mourner's Kaddishim. We have an Ashkenazic one, that's the standard in reformed liturgy as we know, the reform movement as well as the conservative reconstructionist is an Ashkenazi phenomena. There's no way around it. [chuckle] It's an Ashkenazic European-based phenomena. Even things that happened, started in the United States basically come from Ashkenazic people. But in Israel, we are in a very different situation where about half of the Jewish population here is not Ashkenazi, either mixed or Sephardi, Mizrahi, oriental. So this is one of the places where people find it very strange, especially... It's exactly because of the reasons that you put out. These are the texts that people know. This is what connects me with my parents or grandparents...

JH: My grandparents, yeah, yeah.

DM: This is what connects me with the generations. And I wanna say it as I should say it, so we did include the Ashkenazic text, but also the Sephardic text. Now we have a problem because the Sephardic text, or also the (Hebrew) the Hasidic text, includes one line that is very much in disagreement with our reform theology.

JH: Yeah, the messianic line.

DM: Exactly, (Hebrew). God brings up his salvation and brings near his Messiah. Now what do we do? Do we include the Messiah here? We don't include Messiah in reformed liturgy, and we don't believe in a personal Messiah, we believe in a Messianic age. We don't include it and then it's not a Sephardic text. So what do we do? Many, many hours of arguing, and you can see in front of you how we decided to solve it. So we added one word, and that's...(Hebrew). The Messianic era, yes, but we edit it in a different color, you notice this?

JH: Yeah, it's greyed out a little bit.

DM: Exactly. So we can see that it's not part of the original text, but that was our way to mitigate or to...

JH: Soften it a bit.

DM: Soften the messianic message, but still include the traditional Sephardic text. And of course, we also have a special Kaddish on the next page. If you don't have Minyan, a lot of people like it better than the traditional Kaddish 'cause it's very nice.

JH: To recite the Kaddish, either for mourning or for any other function that it has in the Siddur, it is grouped with a number of prayers that require 10 adults, a community presence. It's not an individual. And so, if you are feeling mournful or you are indeed going to shul to remember someone in a (Hebrew), for example, but there's no Minyan or you're at home, this is an alternative for you to be able to connect.

DM: Right, yes. Yes. And this doesn't have a talismanic nature because...

JH: 'Cause it's not familiar, it's not the same.

DM: Yeah, but it contains phrases from the traditional Kaddish, and it also talks about the loss, the mourning, so it's more specific...

JH: Yeah, yeah, (Hebrew) some phrases from (Hebrew).

DM: Right, that's true. And we also have a few (Hebrew) and other texts that are replacing it.

JH: So, I wanna go back to the messianic thing, 'cause one of the innovations of reformed Judaism, going back to its roots, certainly in America in the early 20th, but maybe all the way back to the 19th century, is the resistance to the literal interpretation of a messianic age being heralded by a specific individual who would be the Messiah. And there's two reasons why reformed Jews did this; one was to distinguish ourselves from Christianity, where the Messiah is Jesus in addition to his other roles, and this was a good way to distinguish between them. But another reason that reformed Judaism did this was in order to express a resistance to a kind of personalized salvation which felt very non-rational, and a little bit out there, and replacing it with a more abstract phenomenon of a messianic age, such as you quoted, or some kind of human progress that would result in arriving at a better place. So that's... For everyone to understand a little bit of where this is all coming from...

DM: I think that the third thing, apart from the two things that you said and I agree with, there's also, I think, a notion in Judaism that the Messiah will always (Hebrew), he always will come.

JH: He's coming but never arriving.

DM: Exactly. That's the thing. You're always in a process, you always have to strive for social justice, for bettering the world, for Tikkun olam, as we always refer to it. This is our task, we are always in that direction, we're always focusing on that, but we're never gonna be there. I'll cite a person who was definitely not a reformed Jew, Professor (Hebrew) she says, "Every Messiah that comes is a false Messiah."

JH: By definition. That's right.

DM: By definition, the Messiah cannot come.

JH: The Messiah cannot arrive. The Messiah can be coming, yeah, right.

DM: In the process, exactly.

JH: It's like those pictures in those old books of Mowgli, or The Jungle Book, where you would lead an elephant by putting a carrot on the end of a stick, and the carrot will always be in front of the elephant and guiding the elephant, but the elephant would never get any closer. And it's sort of...

DM: Right. No, no, I think we can be closer, we can arrive to better the world. We're not in a very good place right now, I think both in your country and mine, but we do believe that we have a responsibility and also an ability to do something in the world. It's not just an image that...

JH: No, but the elephant moves in the right direction, but he doesn't ever actually get closer to the carrot. The carrot... That's the (Hebrew).

DM: Yes. [chuckle]

JH: That's my version of... So I wanna observe something that I find striking, that you and your editorial team felt the need to soften the very specific Messianic phrase in the Sephardic version, doing exactly what the reform movement did, which was to remove it a little bit from the figure of the individual Messiah towards the idea of a Messianic age. Now, what strikes me about this is so curious because the entire Kaddish is nothing but messianic. And so a phrase here, or phrase there, it's... I'm struggling to understand why it matters. The whole first paragraph is that the world to come should come now, which is an aggressively messianic position...

DM: Request, yes.

JH: Yeah, prayer. Yeah.

DM: Prayer, yeah. I think if you look in the old day, even already in Germany, the older reform and prayers and also sermons, they were very, very messianic.

JH: Yes, you're... Yeah, yeah.

DM: They were very positive and Messianic. And so I think it's wrong to say that the reform movement is not about the Messianic age, it's just...

JH: It's Messianic, but not Messiah-oriented.

DM: Yes, yes. By the way, this (Hebrew) Messianic age, this word of two letters that we added here is not our invention. It appears in (Hebrew). So we took a version that is already there, not in all the Sephardic Siddurim, but it's something that we connect with text that is already there. So you can... This is a good example of how you negotiate different powers when you came to create liturgy for a movement.

JH: I wanna say, go back to something you said, you credited the Modeh Ani, the reconstructionist movement, which is very important for us to do because we have to recognize that the reconstructionist movement in American Judaism has really been at the forefront of this liturgical work and conscious, careful translation and word choice in Hebrew for the sake of their Siddurim, they've been really leading the way amongst all of the American movements and they deserve a lot of credit for that.

DM: That's right, yeah. Yeah, there are many sources in the Siddur. We took a lot from our North American brothers and sisters, we took a lot from Israeli culture. It was important for us to be as inclusive as possible, so we took from the Cairo Genizah texts that reflects the old Palestinian writing. All the (Hebrew) writing disappeared somewhere in the 12th century with the Crusaders Invasion to the land of Israel, and also the Qumran sect text. So it was very, very important for us to be as inclusive as possible, also toward the people of color and LGBTQ people. That was one of our messages, that everyone is welcome.

JH: Everyone is represented in our...

DM: Yes, that's our... And of course, a lot of people think there's not enough of this, and not enough of that...

[laughter]

JH: Shocked, I'm shocked. But I'm curious about you. I wanna know what happened to you as a Jew, as a person who's taking the time to connect with God. How did this work... I mean, you're in the middle of it, but up 'til now, how has this work changed you and your Judaism?

DM: Wow, that's a big one. You know what, I'm not sure how should I answer you, 'cause I feel like you're talking with three people. I don't know if you realize it, you're sitting in front of one person but you're actually talking with three people.

JH: Uh-oh.

DM: I'm the reformed Rabbi, I'm the professor of liturgy, and I'm a worshipper. I'm a Jew that worships sometimes. So I'm not sure which one... [chuckle]

JH: The worshipper.

DM: The worshipper. Yeah. So for me, I realized that I need the fixed prayer more than I thought. So I thought of myself as a very creative person, (Hebrew).

JH: Spontaneous.

DM: Spontaneous, (Hebrew). I realized that in order to get to Kavanah, to innermost intentionality and connection with myself and with God and with the community and with the entirety of Israel, I need the flow. Don't surprise me with...

JH: The rhythms of...

DM: I need the rhythm, I need the... I need to know what comes after. Not so much in terms of music, but in terms of text.

JH: Yeah, yeah.

DM: I need to understand the structure. I need to sort of lose myself to the process. And sometimes for us... And I keep saying to my students, you attended the wonderful services this morning, they wanna be very innovative, they wanna be very interesting, they wanna show how smart... Not in a bad way, but they wanna show who they are and bring themselves...

JH: Bring themselves to the table, yeah.

DM: Yeah, and sometimes it feels like, well, where God is in this story? Where is the history of the Jewish people? What kind of respect do we have for the way Jews prayed throughout the generations? So I'm not saying there's no room for innovation or for creativity, definitely there is, but I think innovation and creativity functions and works if you know the traditional text. And, of course, when I say the traditional text, it's not something as that traditional.

JH: As we violated the traditional text, yeah.

DM: Right, yes.

JH: There's a deep philosophical thing you're picking up on, which is... And this is true of art and liturgy, anything in the world that purports to convey meaning and is inherited from one

generation to the other. There are those of us who are conservative with a lower case "c", who love these things, and to whom they speak as they are. And part of us, even if we're spontaneous and innovative and creative and liberal leaders and changing and not afraid to... Part of us wants everybody to know it the way we know it. Not because to clone ourselves, but because we want the world to know that this amazing, beautiful, time-tested thing of value and meaning, stands on its own. It doesn't need to be constantly mediated. It doesn't need to be...

JH: What is the feel of the prayer? What is the...

[overlapping conversation]

JH: Right, right. Just pray. Just read it. And I think you see this also with museums all the time, great works of art, and museum people, they suffer a lot over how much should the tag, the signage, yeah, how much should be date, artist and country, or should it be a paragraph? And some people think it doesn't need a paragraph, it speaks for itself, it's in the museum because it's already achieved that.

DM: But some people need that.

JH: Some people need it. The question is who... And so I think that some of the tension that you're experiencing with...

DM: That's true, that's true. I think there's something that is inherently embarrassing about standing in prayer.

JH: Yes, I agree, I agree.

DM: There's something... You put yourself in a very vulnerable place. You say things that are not...

JH: Unless you were raised in a very, very, very patently religious community all the time.

DM: Right. But if you didn't or you were not, or you have this reflective thing, you have this reflective little monkey on your shoulder all the time that's... "What am I doing? How do I look?" And you see where we pray now, our (Hebrew) synagogue is being renovated, so we pray in the (Hebrew). People go by and look through the window, and it looks strange and it's embarrassing. There's something that is inherently embarrassing about the situation of prayer.

JH: I agree, I agree.

DM: And I keep saying to my students, "Okay, this is embarrassing, but let's be there for a second. Let's allow ourselves to be there and not to talk about it all the time."

JH: Right, right.

DM: So some of the things our students do, they give this lectures and the teacher stuff, and some of this is great. Talk to me about it in lunch time. Let me pray when I pray. Let's be there for a second, just a second. Just... Let's immerse ourselves in this experience. This is not so obvious, I think.

JH: I agree, it's not obvious at all. It's not easy either.

DM: It's not easy, but let's do this. How can we really see if it's working for us or not if we

always try to go around it and find ways to mitigate it and to bridge over this embarrassment? Let's be there for a minute. It's like love, right? It's like a relationship between... An intimate relationship between people. You have to be there for a minute and allow yourself to be exposed, be vulnerable.

JH: To be vulnerable, exposed, that's right.

DM: And yeah, and I think we don't do that. That's why...

JH: I couldn't agree more.

DM: Prayer doesn't touch us because it's so cognitive and intellectual.

JH: I think, frankly, the reform movement in its historical roots actually was embarrassed and played to the embarrassment as much as it played to the solutions. It did both like any movement. But part of it was embarrassment about that raw spiritual vulnerability. It had to be rationalized effectively, which is one of the reasons they got rid of the personal Messiah. Well, I wanna ask you one more question before we wrap up. I want you to tell me who resisted this product, this Siddur, and surprised you with their resistance, and who welcomed it and surprised you with their welcoming it?

DM: So I don't know if I was surprised, but I was... Well, to some extent I was; some of the older Rabbis in our movement here in this country who, especially people who were involved with the previous Siddur Ha-Avodah sheba-Lev that's already out there, as I said, for 40 years, they were not very happy about a lot of things, and every time we asked for feedback, they kept saying, "Oh, it should be like Ha-Avodah sheba-Lev. It should be like that." "Alright, let's re-print Ha-Avodah sheba-Lev and that's it." And the mothers and the matriarchs (Hebrew), let's just do it. But that was not the feeling from the ground. We felt like there is a need to rethink Jewish liturgy, Jewish reform Israeli liturgy.

DM: So I think people are coming onboard now, but it took a while and a lot of heartaches and... What I found a very pleasant surprise is my younger colleagues and the students who are completely onboard. At the beginning of the year, Talia, who was the head of our (Hebrew), the Israeli Rabbinic Program, gave it to the people and said, "We're gonna use this unless you wanna use something else." And that's it. (Hebrew), blessed is she who spoke and the world came to be. So she brought the Siddur, and since then we're using it. And by using it, you see all the problems that you have in here, graphically, or little mistakes that we have, or things that we need to revise. But that's the best way to try something, to reuse it again and again and again. So our students were great companion. Another interesting group is of modern orthodox people who are true partners in that.

JH: Wow.

DM: And that was surprising. People who come to our services occasionally, or people who we meet on a friendly basis. So there are a lot of really interesting things that are happening in Israel.

JH: Well, thank you for the work, and it was such a pleasure for me to participate.

DM: Thank you for coming. Come again.

[music]

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast, available wherever

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