



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

EVIE LITWOK: JEWISH IN JAIL, AND JAIL IN JUDAISM

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: It is my great pleasure to welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, Evie Litwok. Evie Litwok is the Founder and Executive Director of Witness to Mass Incarceration, which is dedicated to ending mass incarceration by placing formerly incarcerated women and LGBTQIA experiences at the center of the fight for alternatives to mass incarceration. Litwok was herself incarcerated twice, including time in solitary confinement. She began her organization after leaving prison, jobless, penniless, and homeless. Evie Litwok, it's really a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining me.

Evie Litwok: And thank you for inviting me.

JH: I recently had the experience, a very powerful one, of co-meeting services in Men's Central Jail here in LA, and the Jewish component of their experience appeared to me both to exacerbate their suffering and to offer a window of comfort. It was exacerbating because as Jews, they had a very, very particular and specific layer of shame. And as a window for comfort, because they felt ownership of their Jewish prayer, remarkably, no matter how uneducated they were, Jewishly I mean, they saw in their Jewish prayer tremendous solace. Much of the reason you're here is because of your own personal story. So I wanna ask you to reflect on my question or my observation about the Jews, in light of your own experience, about how Judaism may have affected you and your experience, if it's okay to get into your personal story.

EL: Absolutely. I come from a family with two Holocaust survivors well after the Germans came into Poland. It was... Jews were not allowed to carry any prayer items; no tallis, no tefillin, no siddur, not the pouch. And that was death if you were caught with any of those items. So I don't know why my father decided to take the velvet pouch, which included his tallis, tefillin, and siddur to work one day. And a Nazi on horseback stopped him and called over other Jewish people to watch, and he said, "This is what happens to a Jew who doesn't obey the rules," and he beat my father within an inch of his life. And after he left, a man slightly older than my father who was a doctor worked on him and he said, "I've done all I can. The rest is in God's hands." And when everybody left, my father looked up and said, "If you save my life, I will honor you every day."

EL: I remember as a three-year-old watching my father, following my father into the corners he would go into to make his prayers and I would watch him put on his tallis. And as he was lacing up the leather strap, I'd put my arm out so that he would put the strap together or on me too. And I saw his absolute joy of praying, and that he always smiled when he prayed, and it's an image I can't forget. Now, I didn't know about this story till about 1988, and I tell you this because I

bought my parents an apartment in Boca Raton in the late 1980s at a time where survivors were starting to make a little money and be able to afford not only a house but vacations or second homes. And so I went down to Florida with them, gave them my... We shared an apartment. And for New Year's Eve, they went to an event with other Holocaust survivors. It was like 200 of them, two rooms. And a woman walked over to my parents' table and said, "My name is Mrs. Shindale, and my husband, Dr. Shindale, is in the other room." Few minutes later, there's a lot of crying and screaming and nobody knows what's going on. And my mother looks, she doesn't see my father there, but knowing my dad, he probably ran to the other room to find out what was going on.

EL: So when they go to the other room, they see my father hugging a partially paralyzed man, and both of them were crying hysterically and nobody knew what it was about. My father recognized the name, and it was the same name, as it was, in fact, the Jewish doctor who 45 years earlier had said to him, "I've done all I can, the rest is in God's hands." So they cried because they were so happy that the other was alive and they got to see each other.

EL: How do I explain how that impacts me? When people say to me, "Where does your faith come from?" These are the kinds of stories that my faith comes from. As soon as I went into prison, I had gone in at age 60, and from the time of my brother's Bar Mitzvah 'til the time I went to prison, I had no interest in organized religion, I had no interest in going to services, and in fact, I avoided them as much as possible, but I went on the High Holidays 'cause my dad wanted me to. But when I walked into prison on day one, I wanted a siddur, and I think it came from that story, from the story about my father. And I found myself saying [Hebrew] all day, every day, and I started going to services. And since that moment, I've gone to services every week, and willingly wanting to go, wanting to participate, and giving it a chance to be something that I didn't think it could be, which is community. I was unknowledgeable of the gift of being part of a synagogue, and it took prison to make me realize the value and to respect the value in a way I had never done it before. And I think that happens to a lot of people when they...

JH: Of all religions, yes, I think?

EL: Tragedy brings out good instincts. Tragedy probably brings out your best instincts. And my instincts was to participate, and I did and I love it. And the reason that I choose to do my activism within the Jewish community is because I do believe that the values of "never again", the values of "take care of this, welcome the stranger", the values of "everybody's the same in God's image", are more powerful to me, and I understand them in a way that I didn't understand them growing up.

JH: I think many of our listeners know that solitary confinement is subject to severe criticism as cruel and unusual punishment. How long did you spend in solitary? What were the stretches of time that you absolutely had no human contact whatsoever? And do you feel that solitary confinement has any place in the penal system at all or not?

EL: First response is, if I ask you to visualize your house or your apartment, wherever you live, and ask you to sit in your bathroom; you have a toilet where your bath is, where your shower is, is your metal bed; there's no window, there's no mirror, there's a tiny sink; and I tell you you can either sit on the toilet, sit on the bed, or stand, all in your bathroom, no cell phone, no reading material, no crossword puzzles, no sewing, no letter writing, no nothing.

JH: They don't give you an instrument to write with or...

EL: I'm just asking you a question at this point. How long do you think you could sit in your toilet? Do you think you could sit in your toilet for 24 hours doing absolutely nothing?

JH: I was thinking more like 24 minutes.

EL: That's probably...

JH: That's as long... If I'm being exceptionally luxurious and my kids are at camp, whatever, and I'm taking time for myself to take a bath, which is luxurious, and you're...

EL: No, no, no, there's no bath. [chuckle]

JH: No, I get it. No, that's my point. I'm saying I close the door and I'm alone and there's nothing going on, and I'm doing what I wanna do in my bath, that's all I can do is 24 minutes. After that, I gotta get out of there.

EL: So now I'm asking you, how long can you sit on your toilet?

JH: Well, I...

EL: Literally sit on your...

JH: I try not to, and so...

EL: But I'm punishing you, and you've agreed to this exercise.

JH: Oh my gosh.

EL: The question is, how long...

JH: How long...

EL: How long?

JH: I guess, 15 minutes or something, I don't know.

EL: 15 to a half-hour. So when you ask the question, "How many days are you in solitary?", what I'll say to you is not even one day is okay, because no human being can be locked in a room with no stimulation. Take any person under 30 and imagine trying to be without your telephone for an hour. You can't do it.

JH: No, I can do that. I can be without my telephone for days, but I'm not...

EL: Under 30, under 30.

JH: Under 30s, I'm training them to do it. [chuckle]

EL: Okay, but you know what I'm saying.

JH: I do, I'm just kidding. I just...

EL: Okay, so the question is not... The question or the statement, is solitary confinement, being locked in a room, whether you're with somebody or not... And solitary confinement is a physical space where other people are housed. So you're in a cell, you could be in a cell with another

person, and you could be in... And you're locked in a room and you can't get out and you have to get along with that person or you can end up in worse shape. And you're in a unit, you can hear everything that's going on and there are 60 women and they're screaming, "Get me out of here," and they're not screaming it simultaneously, they're screaming it for 24 hours a day. And the noise is enough to make you go out of your mind.

EL: And for me, I was put in solitary and I was 63 years old. You're strip searched, you're given a t-shirt, shorts, a jumpsuit and one blanket, no pillow, one thin blanket. They keep the temperature down at 55 degrees, and I'm 64, somewhat anemic, and I was freezing. And when you ask for a second blanket, they just say no. And also, in prison, every ceiling has fluorescent lights everywhere, and fluorescent lights give you a headache. So if they're on and you have a predisposition to migraines, you have a migraine immediately. So within a very short period of time, I was very, very sick, within one day, with... I knew my blood pressure was off. 'Cause your medications don't necessarily follow you right away and easily. I knew that I had vertigo, which I never experienced, but the whole room was spinning.

EL: And theoretically, you're supposed to be able to see a doctor in solitary every day, but you have to stand up at 6:30 in the morning and be ready for the doctor, and when they fly by you, you have to try to grab them even though they don't wanna talk to you. So, when I... It took me two weeks to get somebody to measure my blood pressure. How hard is it to take a cuff and come over? And after two weeks of being in solitary, I was 200/100. And I have a history of death on both sides of my family of heart disease. They know it, it's in my medical record, I have heart disease, and I said, "Well, I'm 200/100. Are you gonna take me to the hospital?" And the guy's answer was, "No. If you die, we get 75,000 for your insurance," and he left. And it was at that... And it was a frightening experience.

EL: You're in solitary confinement and you're given one roll of toilet paper, and when you go to ask for the second roll, the guard laughs, looks right at you and says, "Wipe yourself." And you know in that instant that you're not gonna move a muscle in your face even though you wanna kill him. And you know you're not gonna let him know that this is deeply upsetting, that you're a 63-year-old woman who's had stomach... Who's had intestinal, gall bladder surgery, and all sorts of issues and you need toilet paper. And this bastard isn't gonna give you a second roll of toilet paper because he doesn't have to. Because solitary is a prison within a prison, answerable to no one, get to do whatever they want. Solitary is a place where you're allowed three showers a week, but all in handcuffs, handcuffs in, handcuffs out. And if you wanna wash yourself, it's in the open with a window where guards walking by can see you naked. We allow torture in America.

JH: I'm gonna assume that your answer is you feel it has no place in the penal system.

EL: It has... No. How dare we?

JH: Yeah.

EL: I was in solitary for the following reason: We had a physician's assistant, not a doctor, responsible for seeing 1,300 women during the course of the day or the year, and no matter whether you had cancer, a broken leg, or a cyst, he said the same thing to each woman, "You're fat, walk on the track, drink water." So one woman named Miriam Hernandez came in and she looked white as a ghost, and he gave her the fat speech, and within two weeks, her gall bladder burst and she was dead. Now, I'm a writer. I was constantly writing people's cases and sending them snail mail to my friend who would post them on my blog. On this day, when this woman... When I heard the story, I was so angry at the medical care that I wrote a blog and I sent it email instead of sending it snail mail. And they have dedicated officers, imagine this, dedicated officers

in a prison reading emails, whose whole job is to find you doing something wrong so that they can take away your visits, take away your commissary, take away your good days. So prison is meant to further punish you while you're inside. And they have officers dedicated to listening to your phone calls so they can find you doing something wrong.

EL: So with regard to solitary confinement, what stuns me that as much as has been written, has been input in media, has been made movies about, the American people are not moved to stop solitary confinement. And I have to ask myself, "What is it going to take for you to say, "This is not what I want my country to be"? What is it gonna take?" So when I speak to a Jewish audience, and I say to them that I believe what Martin Luther King said in his letter from the jail from Birmingham to his white moderate friends, there are four steps to get you to change: Identify it, prove it, negotiate for it, go to jail for it, and then do a non-violent direct action. And from... My feeling is that we check the box that we've done enough if we've marched, if we call the senator, if we've written a check. And when I'm talking to particularly Jewish audience 'cause I care, not 'cause I'm trying to say something to them, but I particularly care about my own community, you must go further, you cannot repair the world by checking a box, because you've written a check.

EL: We are sitting in a place where we're allowing solitary confinement, sexual violence, physical violence in our backyard. Are we gonna let happen what happened to the Jewish community in 1944 to '45, where four million people get wiped out and we didn't go far enough, or are we gonna understand that tikkun olam must be a further step that we take? We must go out of our comfort zone to fix things in America.

[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.

JH: In some of your writing, you describe being targeted for being a lesbian. Tell us about that and tell me if you think the situation's changed in the time since you were tried, convicted, imprisoned and since become an activist.

EL: Okay, so let's start part one, my arrest. The prosecutor's case, and in front of the judge, they kept referring to me as a lesbian, because that would inflame a jury in Long Island. In other words, I could be convicted because I was a lesbian, not whether or not I did the crime. So immediately in the charging document, this guy wanted to use the fact that I was a lesbian. Now, if he tried to do that today, in Suffolk County, he could still do it, but in New York City, he can't do it, 'cause the judge would veer him away. But as long as they can get away with calling you a Jew or a lesbian or something that's gonna turn off that audience, they're gonna do it.

EL: So that was at the arrest. When I came into prison, it wasn't the incarcerated people that had a problem with my lifestyle, it was never the incarcerated people. Well, I'll take it back, there's some, but very few. It was the officers and the people running it that were horrific. So within 10 days of me being in prison the first time, I was called up to the unit manager's office, and I had come out on my first day in prison. The first day you're in prison, people are saying, "Are you married? Do you have a kid?" "No, I'm not married, I don't have a kid." And after about the fourth person, I said, "No, this is ridiculous. I came out to my mother 40 years ago, and I've been

out for 40 years and I'm not going back in the closet." So the very next person who walked over to me and said, "Are you married? Do you have a kid?" I said, "I'm not married, I don't have a kid, and I'm a lesbian." She said, "Can I see your pictures?" You're allowed to bring 25 pictures into prison. So I brought 25 pictures of Allie, my Maltese. So this young black woman screams to the entire sleeping unit, "This old white lesbian brought in 25 pictures of her dog."

EL: So the entire compound, within one hour of me being in prison knew, not only was I a lesbian, but I had no pictures of anybody but my dog. And of course, that meant the officers knew. So I was never under the radar. So about 10 days into being in prison, I got called up by this very racist unit manager, and I say racist because I was in what's called the orientation unit, where you're supposed to be when you come the first two weeks, and it was entirely white. And the people that were coming into prison were not entirely white. So what she'd do is if you were white, she kept you in the unit for two weeks. And if you are a person of color, she sent you to another unit right away, 'cause she didn't wanna see people of color in her unit.

EL: So she called me in and I sat down, I couldn't imagine what I could have done in 10 days. And she said, "I understand that you're an open lesbian." And I said, "Yes, I'm also an open Jew and an open feminist." No reaction. She said, "It has also come to my attention that you've been touching women's buttocks." And I went berserk. First of all, I knew what a tuchas was; it took me a second to figure buttocks out. So I went crazy. I said, "I haven't been with anybody for 10 years. You think I'm gonna walk in prison and be with somebody? That's not gonna happen." I said, "I want those women here right now. I want my accusers in this room." I thought I was in a court of law when I was in prison, I'm yelling at an officer, and of course she sent me away. And by the time I walk to my bed, which is not very far from her, my bed had been moved to a unit called the ghetto. And I was placed in an area called the bus stop, which was a punishment area, to sleep.

EL: Just so you get it... And this was day 10 of being in prison. So use your imagination and know that 150 women go to sleep when they turn off the lights, only the lights in the sleeping unit go off. But for the 20 women who are on the bus stop, those lights, which are on the ceiling, stay on all night. So if you're on the top bunk bed, you're maybe three to five feet from fluorescent lights staring you in the face. And even if you're on the lower bed, you're still under those fluorescent lights. And right behind you is an ice machine that comes down crashing every 20 minutes. And on either side of you are bathrooms where 150 women are flushing toilets or taking showers or just going to hang out in the middle of the night. Either way, the bus stop was put there so that you wouldn't sleep and so that it was more torture. So I never slept a day while I was in prison. And I was told I would be punished the entire time I was there because I was lesbian.

EL: So you have to work when you're in prison. And women who are over 60, they usually give them a job on an indoor facility where you can mop a floor and then sit down and read a book. Not me. Me, they put me in landscaping, which meant that in 100 degree weather, which we had quite a bit in the mountains of West Virginia, they wanted me to sweep the streets with large rocks. And I'm 64 years old, I'm in 100 degree temperature, I have high blood pressure, vertigo in general. I'm not a well person. To put me in there is to hope that I'm gonna die. And just to go on a little aside, when I was sweeping for the first day, I remembered a story my mother told me about my grandfather who I never met, which was in 1939 in Lodge when the Germans came in, they took the religious men, the businessmen out for about three weeks. The last time she had seen her father, he had jet black hair, black beard, stood up straight. Three weeks later when they brought the men home, he had completely grey hair. He was permanently bent over and she barely... She was so upset by how he looked. She did not wanna remember him in that way. But to make them even more ashamed in front of their family, the Nazis asked the women and children to come out, and they made the men sweep the streets. So as I was sweeping the streets

in prison, I imagined my grandfather who I had never met sweeping alongside me.

JH: So the Jewish thing, you've spoken very eloquently about how Judaism was a source of inspiration for you. And though you articulated that you did not encounter the Jewish guilt when you were in prison, did the process of being arrested and being prosecuted and convicted, what was the Jewish dynamic in your life as you experienced it? Not necessarily internally in your heart, but around you with your family and friends? And how was it... Was there a Jewish element to that process or not?

EL: Not guilt.

JH: Okay.

EL: Not at all. Anger. And it was nothing to do with Judaism. But what I will tell you is that I had spent a lifetime with survivors and their children as my family. I had spent a lifetime building up a network of friends around the country. I was 45 years old, I had worked 30 years. Everybody disappeared at my arrest, not my conviction, the moment that I was arrested. And they did not, nobody gave me the benefit of the doubt. I was disappointed to see how quickly people can turn on other people. I was disappointed that my mother said to me, "You know, some of our friends feel that you're hiding money in my basement." It's craziness. I don't feel any of the Jewish guilt stuff though. I don't, and I never...

JH: I didn't mean Jewish guilt... If you're claiming you're innocent, you're not gonna feel guilty if you're innocent. But if... I mean that people have been guilted you. When I say Jewish guilt, I mean that shame, regardless of innocence. That people are ashamed of them or make them feel ashamed because of the expectations of a nice Jewish boy, nice Jewish girl type stuff.

EL: My mother was embarrassed. I wasn't embarrassed, I was angry.

JH: Yeah.

EL: Whether you commit a crime or you don't, whether you're innocent or not innocent, if you're arrested, what you want is something fair. My mother was always embarrassed. My father, not so much, because he knew it was wrong and he just wanted to support me in every way he could, even when I ran out of money, and so did my mother, to win the case. He wanted me to win the case, not realizing that I was gonna lose no matter what, 'cause unless you have unlimited resources, you're gonna lose.

JH: You're the executive director and founder of Witness to Mass Incarceration. So I wanna give you an opportunity to tell us what's the most important thing that our audience know about your organization.

EL: The most important thing that I'd like the audience to not only know but listen to are the voices of the people that I'm trying to get out in the open. So just as I think that I have a powerful voice, I think almost anybody who's been formally incarcerated has a story that needs to be told. So I try to empower formally incarcerated women and LGBTQIA people to, I interview them, to get their story about life before, during, and after, and by interviewing them, they feel empowered to tell their story. And I have never met an audience who wasn't disturbed by the stories that they heard. But disturbed, as I said, is not enough. Witness to Mass Incarceration wants to take it one step further.

EL: And if I may, in addition to creating a digital library of tapes, I'm empowering people and creating opportunities for people to speak; because I came home penniless and homeless, I was

released penniless and homeless, and because I spent 16 months sleeping in shelters, on people's couches, just living in a horrible manner, at age 66, I started the Suitcase Project. My thinking was that synagogues have social action programs and they care about what happens to other people. I'm not saying churches or mosques don't. I'm just saying what I'm familiar with is that synagogues have social committees, social action, or social justice committees. So I thought if I can get a synagogue to raise \$2000 to buy a newly released person a phone with minutes for a year or a laptop computer, these are things that help them to restart their life, to communicate with other people, to look for a job, and \$700 so they can have one month of Metro cards, maybe one month of food and some clothes. And this is just a beginning, but I also want them to meet the person coming out of prison, so that five or six members of a synagogue would serve as a community that that person who's coming out doesn't have.

EL: Two synagogues and I have given suitcases to two people. And I was crying at the outcome because as soon as they met the newly released person, it was like a love affair. It was as if it was a long lost cousin coming home. They just couldn't get enough of Chastity, who was the first person, or Sarah, the second person. They couldn't do enough. And I think what I realized is people expect the murderers and the rapists, so when they get a real person, who grew up with her parents selling drugs, and their only business was knowing how to sell drugs, as opposed to ours, which was getting an education, that the humanity comes out. And so the Suitcase Project is something I'm very proud of. It's a mission that I just started that I hope to do with synagogues across the United States.

JH: Well, Evie, I wanna thank you for taking the time. It's been such a pleasure to talk to you. I've learned a lot, as I'm sure our audience will. And thank you for sharing your stories.

EL: Thank you for inviting me.

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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.