



## LAUREN TAUS: YOGA IN THE JEWISH SOUL

**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.

**JH:** Welcome to this edition of the College Commons Podcast, and we're in for a treat because we're gonna meet Lauren Taus, who is a vinyasa yoga teacher, with experience and education in ashtanga meditation and trauma-sensitive yoga as well. She also earned a master's degree in social work, and she practices as a clinical therapist. She teaches leading innovators and startups, the wellness industry, hedge fund, portfolio managers, and even some celebrity clients. She regularly leads transformative wellness adventures around the world from her home base here in Los Angeles. Lauren Taus, it's a real pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

**Lauren Taus:** Thank you so much for having me.

**JH:** Okay. I have heard of yoga, I've seen pictures, but I don't know the first thing about it. So the first question I have is from the beginning of your introduction, which is vinyasa yoga. I know that there are schools of yoga, but they don't mean anything to me. What is vinyasa yoga, which appears to be your primary focus?

**LT:** Let's take a quick step back. Do you know what the word "yoga" means?

**JH:** It means yoke, discipline.

**LT:** Great. So, it's about bringing together. Vinyasa is part of... Is one arm in hatha yoga, which is the physical practice of asana, of shapes.

**JH:** Shapes, meaning shapes your body takes.

**LT:** Correct. Vinyasa is a more... It's a bigger flow of shapes. It's more graceful and dynamic, whereas the traditional hatha is...

**JH:** Pose, freeze, pose, freeze?

**LT:** Yeah, exactly. So, this is a little bit more athletic. It's more demanding. For me, it's also more age-appropriate for where I am in my life. I do use yoga as my primary form of exercise, and I also get a whole lot more from it.

**JH:** What was the word that you're defining yoga as not connecting but... Is it connecting? What did you say?

**LT:** Yeah.

**JH:** Joining?

**LT:** It's a practice of bringing together.

**JH:** Bringing together, okay. So for the sake of bringing together, we'll talk about yoga and Judaism, because the word "yoga" is obviously it's Indo-European, 'cause it's... I assume it's Sanskrit or something. And it came to Hebrew, and the word is Zug and it means a pair or a couple. But there's another idea of yoga, I think, which is the idea of the yoke, like what you put on an ox. And in Judaism, there is a very dominant notion of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, which is a notion that the rules of Jewish living are a burden. There are yoke on your shoulders, but at the same time they uplift you and they guide you. And so there's a lot of yogis around, even in the Jewish world, although we don't use that language so much.

**LT:** Yeah. I sometimes get frustrated because I think that yoga is just exclusively understood from the realm of the physical, and there are a lot of very advanced yogis who know nothing of a mat practice, who know nothing of down dog, or handstand, or headstand, any of this. And I just loved hearing you talk about a Jewish interpretation also of yoga. I'm obsessed with Judaism.

**JH:** Are you Jewish?

**LT:** I am.

**JH:** Were you raised with any Jewish practice in your life or any Jewish cultural awareness?

**LT:** I call myself a Diet Coke Jew. I grew up on...

**JH:** As opposed to a bagel-and-lox Jew.

**LT:** As opposed to a Coca-Cola Jew.

**JH:** What's a Coca-Cola Jew? It's a new term. [laughter] I'm getting a Jewish education. This is great.

**LT:** Between these two. Okay, these are terrible terms.

**JH:** Those are not terrible terms, I just never heard any them.

**LT:** I've studied also a lot of Judaism. I've spent a lot of time in...

**JH:** Have you heard the term "ol malchut shamayim," the yoke of the kingdom of heaven?

**LT:** I have not.

**JH:** Good. All right. Well, now you have a new yoga term.

**LT:** Yay. I have, though, studied quite a lot in the seminaries in Jerusalem, and I learn all the time. And Jewish wisdom is always profound and relevant and beautiful.

**LT:** So what's the implication of diet in Diet Coke? Is it safe?

**LT:** It means like... Wow, this is a loaded question.

**LT:** Well, those are the best questions for a podcast. I wanna hear how you... Give me this...

**LT:** Well, again, having studied quite a lot of Judaism, I find so much richness and so much guidance, and so much beauty, and I struggle to find the community that really practices in a way that makes sense to me, in a way that's inclusive, in a way that works in my world. The "Diet Coke Jew" term means I grew up going to Hebrew school. It means I went to Israel for the first time for my brother's bar mitzvah. It means that Judaism was always a part of my world. In fact, growing up in Palos Verdes, I was teased for being Jewish, 'cause I wasn't in a Jewish community. And yet I don't think that my practice of Judaism has ever really been that deeply tapped in to the wealth of wisdom that's there.

**LT:** And that's the diet in Diet Coke?

**JH:** Yeah.

**JH:** With the implication that it's saccharine and not real?

**LT:** Yeah. I'm not a practicing Jew.

**JH:** Oh, well... That doesn't mean that... Okay. So maybe I'm more generous than you are to yourself.

**LT:** Perhaps.

**JH:** That strikes me as too hard on yourself.

**LT:** And also with the practicing Jew, there's a lot of people who are just practicing. And there's no real Kavana. There's no real...

**JH:** Right. Intention.

**LT:** Heart connection.

**JH:** Right, which is closure, by the way. In other words, there's an understanding in Jewish civilization that if you participate in the community and you live a certain life, that that's... You don't really necessarily have to delve into the spiritual to be a fully enfranchised, participating and recognized Jew. I wouldn't rush to put the diet and Diet Coke. I would think about the varieties of Cherry Coke and Vanilla Coke.

**LT:** Yeah. And I thank you for that, and I think you are right. I think I have still, on some level, work to do around softening and releasing judgment around what is and isn't okay and what counts.

**JH:** Right. And I suspect that you're pretty generous to other people but maybe not so much to...

**LT:** Immensely.

**JH:** All right. Let's get down to Israel. Everybody, we're gonna get to baseball soon. This is important because we're gonna talk about Yogi Berra. [laughter] But before we get to him, we're gonna go to the land and the state and the people of Israel, because Lauren has her own podcast called "INbodied Life." And it seems as if, if I didn't misunderstand your website, you're also doing a trip to Israel. Is that right?

**LT:** Mm-hmm.

**JH:** All right. Weave these things together for me or for all of us, and tell us what's motivating you and what are some of the major themes.

**LT:** The podcast is an invitation for everybody to go inside of themselves to explore their own Holy Land through their body. I believe that we all have disparate voices internally. We have different personalities. We have a dominant narrative and border voices. We have our own internal terrorists. We have our own internal armies. We have our own internal peacemakers. I'm not in the business of annihilating any one of them. I wanna sit together. I wanna conversate.

So, I set out into the Holy Land to talk to people, to talk to everyone. I'm scheduled to talk with someone who is a politician living in Bethlehem, who is in the Hamas Party. I've talked to so many different people, people who've been violent, people who are deeply committed to peace. People who are very religious, who are religious Christians, Jews, and Muslims. I've recorded 35 conversations with people all over the Holy Land, so that means Israel and Palestine. And I'm releasing them slowly, and I'm also continuing to have conversations with noteworthy individuals whose voices, perspectives, histories and experiences deserve to be heard.

**JH:** Has something surprised you? Some ray of hope or something grounding you in these 35 clearly kaleidoscopic, varied interviews? Something that maybe we need to hear that we couldn't hear from a less broadly varied set of voices?

**LT:** People are hungry for connection. People are hopeful. I've had conversations with people in the border of Gaza and Egypt who are not carrying guns and are committed to peaceful responses. I've talked to others who've been tortured in Israeli jails and have been nominated for Nobel Peace Prizes for their work afterwards. There are Palestinians who are opening their homes, their arms, their kitchens to Israelis, and Israelis who are doing the same with Palestinians. There are people who are very deeply respectful of the traditions of the proverbial other, while maintaining the integrity of their own. And it's brave work, it's really brave work, and it's happening. I think that it's a land that's rich with peace already, and that that needs to continuously be uplifted and shared.

**JH:** I like that, "a land that's rich with peace already." There's a lot to work with, is what you're saying.

**LT:** Oh, yeah. People are doing fierce work out there.

**JH:** Yeah.

**LT:** Real heart-headed, spiritual, religious committed people. And I wanna say as well that so much activism here in the United States and in Israel is motivated by fear, guilt and shame. And when that's the case, it's very limited, and people burn out quickly. It's so important that people stay in their hearts, that they're moved by love, by unconditional love. And now, that's very difficult in practice. It is a practice, and that's why practices like yoga are so important because it brings you back to yourself. And you can recharge your batteries so that you can go out into the world and "tikkun olam."

**JH:** With integrity to yourself. I encourage you to visit the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. We have two great programs along the lines of what you're talking about, The Teachers' Lounge and Healing Hatred. Amazing programs led by my colleagues, which I'm so proud and with which I'm so proud to be associated, that are really, really tackling some of these issues from that

place of integrity. And stupendous people, just amazing people doing great work that I will connect you with if and when you're ready to go.

**LT:** Yeah. I'm back in the end of June. And Healing Hatred—I just wanna say one thing again, I believe strongly that the personal is political, and that the personal is universal. And so if there's hatred, if you harbor hatred in your heart for anybody, it means that you harbor hatred inside of your heart for yourself. And we are all engaged in processes and practices of deep self-judgment, whether it's an obsession with looking good, being enough, smart enough, rich enough, powerful enough, whatever. And that not enough-ness problem is pervasive and it is, to me, a function of our own participation in our own oppression. And that's very common in communities of privilege. So that looks and feels like a heaviness or a slavery inside. And while we're doing that to ourselves, it's impossible for it not to spill out on to the bodies and communities of others.

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**JH:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu) for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click "sign up" at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing. Help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

[music]

**JH:** Now, we're gonna do baseball. This is Dodger-town, and it pains me to talk about the New York Yankees. However, Yogi Berra, one of the great, great players in all of baseball history, a catcher from the New York Yankees during one of the great periods of their history in the mid-20th century, '50s and '60s, '50s, '40s. Yogi Berra was... I looked this up on Wikipedia. He was an Italian-American, so Yogi is a strange... Even though it's a nickname, it's still a strange nickname. So, I looked it up and I wanted to find out if his nickname, Yogi, had anything to do with yoga or if it was just something else that happened. And it turns out that, according to Wikipedia, I'm citing my source in case it's wrong, so that no one blames me — one of his teammates or friends actually did call him Yogi because he looked like a yogi, in the Indian sense, in the yoga sense, because apparently when he was in the hole or on deck, waiting to go to up to bat, he would sit cross-legged and look like a meditating yogi, or that he had a very expressive mournful face when he would lose a game or what have you. So, Yogi Berra, the great catcher of the New York Yankees, is, in fact, named after a... Reminding someone of a yogi.

**JH:** I have a real-life yogi in front of me, so I just wanna to say that Lauren Taus does not look anything like Yogi Berra. But Yogi Berra coincidentally was famous for what we today, in English, call Yogi Berra-isms or Yogi-isms. I don't know if... Lauren here is nodding her head. I don't know if you're familiar with this or not, but Yogi Berra was famous for his self-contradictory off-hand comments that were, in fact, very deep and wise and paradoxical and thought-provoking. So we're gonna play a game. We're gonna play Yogi Berra with the yogi. And I'm gonna cite three of his famous Yogi Berra-isms and you're gonna do a yoga clinical therapy thing on them. All right?

**LT:** Okay.

**JH:** All right, here we go. "90% of baseball is mental, the other half is physical."

**LT:** Well, you have to show up. You have to get yourself there, but the mind is what gets you out of bed at 6 o'clock in the morning to go work out. The mind is what gets you out of bed to sit down and meditate. The mind is what gets you to leave the relationship, start the job, get married, take the leap, whatever. You have to do it. 10% is like, "Okay, I'm there. I'm doing it." But you have to push yourself out.

**JH:** All right. "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

[laughter]

**LT:** Similar. You know what to do. Intuition tells you what to do. You might not like the answer. In fact, many times you're not going to. But if you abide by the information that you're given, you're likely to have a positive result and the universe responds quickly. If you do your own thing, you override the intuition, the direction, you're probably gonna keep making a mess.

**JH:** All right. So, if you get to that fork in the road, you just follow it. And it could be left, it could be right, it's all good 'cause you're following your kush kush.

**LT:** Yeah.

**JH:** Your gut. All right. "It's deja vu all over again." So we have a repetition here, deja vu all over again.

**LT:** The repetition compulsion is real. Inter-generational trauma is real.

**JH:** Repetition compulsion, help me out. That's repeating bad or unhealthy behaviors?

**LT:** It could be healthy, but we are creatures... We're animals that want homeostasis. We want our patterns, we want our habits, even if they're terrible and killing us, even if they're causing us to kill other people. The discomfort of change is one that we'll neglect even if the promise is beautiful.

**JH:** He said that about... And homeruns. He was picking up on the beautiful, but I get it. I get it.

**LT:** Yeah. Both. But it's a choice.

**JH:** But we're creatures of habit.

**LT:** Yeah. We're little animals, we want homeostasis, we want the same things. It's how we have language, it's how we know how to walk. But then it goes into how we relate to people, and it's what decisions did we make, what decisions were made before us? How are we living in them? I like to say that if we don't pass it back, we pass it on.

**JH:** What does that mean?

**LT:** Our families, right? Our parents. Most of us had parents that did their very best and they still made some major mistakes.

**JH:** I'm a parent, I get it. In Brazil, they say, "You don't know how to be a child until you've been a parent. And you don't know how to be a parent until you've been a grandparent."

**LT:** Wow. So, the human experience is a little bit messy. And however perfect we try to make it,

we color outside the lines, things happen that we wished didn't happen, and as individuals, if we don't work through the stuff, and that's a lifelong process, but if we're not engaged in it, we're destined to repeat the same mistakes 'cause that's our homeostasis.

**JH:** I see.

**LT:** If we work through it, we can stand in honor and reverence for what was good and say, "Hey, this stuff, we don't need it anymore."

**JH:** Got it. Got it. All right. Now you get a parting shot. Tell us... Well, you can tell me anything as your parting shot, but something non-yogic, non-Jewish that you find profound, inspirational or, I don't know, the best thing about yoga or Judaism. I don't know, knock it out.

**LT:** Wow. Well, we are all driving our proverbial life car. And we get to choose the scenery, and we get to choose who we put in the car. And it's both wonderful news and terrible news, 'cause you're in charge. And the responsibility is yours, so make it a beautiful ride. Go somewhere fabulous, stand up in your power, turn your lights on, bring dope people along for the journey. Have fun. That's what you're here to do.

**JH:** All right, everybody, for the record, I just want you to know that on my podcast we heard the term "dope people."

**LT:** Yes!

**JH:** There you have it. We don't get that very often. All right. Lauren Taus, thank you so much for coming. It's really been a pleasure to talk to you, I've had a lot of fun. Learned a lot.

**LT:** Thanks for having me Josh, such a pleasure.

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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](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.