



MARK OPPENHEIMER: REFORM ISN'T NECESSARILY UNORTHODOX

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism 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 Scribal campus in Los Angeles and your host.

JH: Welcome to this week's edition of the college commons Podcast, and a very special guest. And I'm very excited to welcome Mark Oppenheimer. Mark Oppenheimer is a journalist and podcaster and most of all, a most engaging and engaged thinker about our culture, life and things Jewish among other things. He wrote the beliefs column in the New York Times from 2010 to 2016, and he currently hosts tablet magazine's, weekly podcast called Unorthodox. He's also in the midst of writing a book on The Tree of Life synagogue shooting titled "Squirrel Hill". Thank you so much Mark for joining me in on the College Commons podcast.

Mark Oppenheimer: Absolutely thanks for having me.

JH: I wanna start with the podcast because it's really wonderful. It's co-hosted by Stephanie Butnick and Liel Lebovitz. And it includes interviews, and a segment titled the news of the Jews and all kinds of other things. And I guess I would describe it as a dynamic witty collective rumination on contemporary Jewish identity, and I highly recommend it, and I'd rather not say that I have podcast envy, so I'll just say how much I admire it. But I do have a question as well.

JH: I think your banter on the podcast, which is so much of its energy often veers into pretty stark insider Jewish conversation, that not so long ago would have remained within the walls of the exclusive minority sensibilities or dinner with people that are only Jews, not just because of the culturally specific references but also perspectives and sensibilities, self-deprecation, et cetera, that would really have felt exposed, not too long ago. And today, it feels kind of hip. And I'm wondering if you think that this freedom is a sign that the Jews have arrived, that we're Kosher, we're American, or that American society itself is simply more kaleidoscopic and not so monochromatic and general.

MO: No, I don't. I think we arrived a long time ago. And if anything, we're probably departing again. I think the heyday of Jewish influence on American culture as well as Jewish feeling of being at home in America, probably is past its peak. I would say regrettably, though that's also the way of things. I was just reading an article somewhere, could have been in tablet, but maybe it wasn't, I don't remember, about whether we are just past peak Jewish television with Broad City and Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, both very, very Jewish TV shows, ending their runs and Marvelous Mrs. Maisel in the midst of it, but who knows how much longer it has, and I don't think, Jewishly, that's as good or significant a show anyway.

MO: But the moment may actually be past the world of non-orthodox jewelry is going to shrink pretty soon and pretty fast, I think, and certainly the era in which people thought that Jewish writers were constituted a really, really important moment, something that I still think is true, but the buy-in that we used to have from book critics, book reviewers, the book buying public that you would have had in say the 1960s and '70s, into the 1980s maybe is waning. I don't think

people think that we're as important a minority culturally as they once thought that we were. So it's a little bit tricky to say whether the Jews have finally arrived. I would say that we arrived and we may be heading out the door a little bit.

JH: We're exiting.

MO: Yeah, we're Brexiting. We're Jexiting. And so but all the more reason to... As we return to minority status, and in some cases, diminished or scorned minority status, culturally, all the more reason to feel that there's nothing to lose in speaking candidly on the air. And I also think Stephanie Leal and I are just temperamental unsuited to check ourselves and hold our tongues. We just tend to say what we wanna say. I should say, we didn't start the show with any particular agenda, except for the three of us to have a good time.

JH: That comes through. I was gonna ask a question about how much you actually thought about that, but I suspected that you didn't, and this is the three of you being yourselves.

MO: Yeah, everything that succeeds about the show succeeds because we're just being ourselves and doing a show that interests us. I think we have good interviews with our guests, when we're interested in the guests and when they speak to something in us, I think that the banter is exactly the same banter that we have off the air. We just turn the microphone on and keep going. So I think that it's...

JH: Do you agree with how I read you, that you guys really are having an insider conversation? I know that sometimes you make parenthetical comments that are specifically geared towards footnoting or explaining or parenthetically...

MO: Yeah, once in a while, we'll say something and then we'll say, "Oh that's the holiday that's coming up this week." Or we'll use a word that comes from Yiddish or Hebrew, and one of us might say, to the other, "Do you wanna explain that?" We wanna be mindful, not only that we have listeners who shockingly don't work in the Jewish media conspiracy, but also that we have lots of listeners who aren't Jewish. We don't know the exact numbers, but...

JH: Sure.

MO: I've always guessed that 10% to 20% of our listeners are not Jews. And an even higher number were not born in the community. They're Jews by choice or converts. So we are dealing with people of all different levels of inside knowledge, outside knowledge, curiosity, and I do try to be respectful of that, but 87.6% of the content could just as easily happen around the table in the Tablet magazine conference room.

JH: Yeah, yeah, I hear you. So let's leave the Jews for a minute. Do you think that America is indeed more kaleidoscopic than before or is that a...

MO: What do you mean by kaleidoscopic?

JH: I mean culturally kaleidoscopic as opposed to monochromatic. So the minority experience in mid-century America may have been demographically not so different in terms of proportions. It was different, but they were still prominent in many minorities even in mid-century America, but it was all color on a white canvas that everyone...

MO: I guess. I mean look, I'm very grateful that we're open... As somebody who's a writer and whose primary artistic commitment is to the written word I'm very, very grateful that we're now here at seeing eruptions of voice and plot coming from many different kinds of experiences,

right? South Asian-American, Native American American, or Indian-American, obviously there's a long history of black literary tradition in America that continues and is only getting more attention. These things are all to the good, because we want as much literary profusion as possible. On the other hand, there're ways in which we've become much less kaleidoscopic and much more monochromatic. So when you look on TV, it seems like almost every comedy now is about a mildly dysfunctional family. And I was thinking the other day...

MO: And they are always coastal. They're seldom religious, although you do get imports from Israel or whatever, but they seldom have old-fashioned values, for better or for worse, right they're hip, they're pro-gay. They are super interracial, all of which are things that I regard highly, but it tends to reflect a liberal cultural media value. That probably leaves a lot of the country feeling orphaned. The other thing is nothing's set in a workplace anymore. You remember the 1970s, when you had WKRP in Cincinnati was set at a radio station and Barney Miller was set in a police station and now, there's no TV about working, it's all just about mildly dysfunctional politically liberal families. So I don't know, racially speaking, things are probably more kaleidoscopic but in terms of sensibility, I'm not sure that they aren't actually more constrained than they used to be.

JH: All right I wanna jump back on your otherwise off-hand comment about the fact that you kind of in a predictive matter of fact way said that non-orthodoxy is gonna shrink in America, I suppose, I have to reiterate what is disclosed constitutionally in this podcast that I'm committed to a world view and the Reform movement, but also in non-orthodoxy in general, that questions that prediction in the first place.

MO: Okay.

JH: So I'm gonna ask you to defend it.

MO: Okay.

JH: Against a pre-supposition that it's not so obvious.

MO: Oh, I think it's crashingly obvious that I would I mean you'll have to defend it. You'll have to talk me out of it, and I should say this... I'm being descriptive here I'm not taking a side one or the other, I'm not an orthodox Jew myself. So I guess I'm speaking about my people as well, and I have a stake in this, it's nevertheless it seems to be obvious that first of all you have very high intermarriage rates, so you have fewer people who have as many Jewish relatives as they used to transmit tradition, whatever that looks like. Second of all, you have a kind of waning commitment to traditional religions in America anyway, you have more people who are making it up for themselves or as they go or looking to more and different paths. You also have more geographic mobility, which means that people don't move back to their town and say, "Sure I'll hang with these people, be they Jews, Buddhists, whatever. Because I was raised with these people and I'd like to keep up those relationships." And then you have materialism, which I think is corrosive to religion and religious community. We're a very wealthy country, even our poor people are wealthy by the standards of much of the world. So I don't see how it could be but otherwise, that...

MO: So here's how it could be but otherwise.

JH: Okay tell me. You tell me.

MO: First of all, intermarriage if we take into account the fact that a certain percentage of intermarriage is non-child-bearing almost by design, because it's second marriages, statistically

at least that changes a little bit of that. Second of all, the fact that by the number, certainly by the Pew report, the total numbers of Jews is stagnant. Not falling, it's falling as a proportion of the sector of American population, but it's not we're not crashing, and we're pretty creatively and actively reinventing all kinds of Jews and Judaism and not just on the hipster flex counter-cultural anti-institutional model, especially as they age into preschool and beyond. We're finding that conservative Judaism, certainly is statistically losing in this scenario but reformed Judaism is holding its own and reformed Judaism is the majority, not the plurality of American-Affiliated Judaism 70% to 80%. We don't know exactly of American Jews have been members of synagogues at one point or another. That's obviously only one measure, but it's a significant one, whereas it's true that 50% in any given moment, may be members. There's a lot going on, the minute you scratch the surface, that implies some surprisingly traditional continuities going on in addition to the encouragingly non-traditional modes.

JH: Okay so let me... Okay, I grant you you're expert in this and you have professional reasons to be...

MO: And I have a shtick, so I also have an axe to grind. Fair enough.

JH: Let's grant that that's all true. What is the birth rate among people who self-identify as Jewish, do you think at replacement above or below.

MO: It's I think, and I say think only because I know there are stats out there and I don't have a handle on them maybe you do and that's behind your question, but I think it's below.

MO: Yeah, it's unquestionably below. I think, again, some demographer will write in and correct us both, but I think that in America, we're barely at replacement. And immigrants to America, especially from Latin American countries tend to keep our numbers inflated which is all to the good. I'm pro-immigration and I'm also a natalist and I think childbirth and children are good things, so thank God for them. But certainly, if you look, if you look at white demography and then if you look correlate with education and wealth, which tend to militate against childbearing and think about Jews or below replacement right? So therefore, unless you're gonna tell me that we are making extraordinary numbers of converts, and I hate to talk about people as if they're cogs in a wheel. But we're talking about numbers here. I don't see how it could but be the case that the sector of American Judaism that's reproducing well below replacement is going to shrink. It seems to me it has to. And Orthodox Jews have more kids.

JH: Yeah, Orthodox Jews also have high attrition. That's the other side of the pipeline that they don't talk about.

MO: They do. They do. No, they do we don't know...

[overlapping conversation]

JH: They always talk about the birth rate, but they don't talk about the fact that it's a very tight bungee cord culturally to a center that doesn't hold for lots and lots of individuals. And when they leave, they don't usually just go into assimilated faceless non-identification, they usually come to the liberal corners, even if it's slightly disaffected.

MO: Really, like do you see Reform Temples a lot of like 30-year-old ex-orthodox people?

JH: You see a lot of ex-conservative people who themselves are ex or one generation removed, often the generation shift from one to the other, allows someone to leave the fold without actually having to leave the family.

MO: I mean I love this fight by the way, I love a good argument, and I could go on with this forever, but sure, you see, it's almost a truism that all of us had a great-great-grandparent back there somewhere who was more, let's say, Orthodox and that somebody was maybe conservative or more traditionalist and now somebody's reformed. That's a truism, right, but are today's people growing up in ultra-orthodoxy? If they're 10 kids and two of them or three of them go off the terra, stopping orthodox are they ending up at temple birth Reform Temple somewhere? I don't...

JH: Anecdotally, so this is statistical argument. So maybe I shouldn't even bring in anecdotes because it's sort of...

MO: I never met those people, I don't know anyone like that.

JH: You don't run into them in Reform synagogues, but you run into them in Jewish-ly tinged things that indicate a certain connection that's not going away, and at least it doesn't appear in their lives. And it seems to me that if we do retention of that 70% who have once been members of synagogues, of any flavor, and if we work out this relationship with orthodoxy, which is so fraught, I think there's some interesting things going on that ought to lead us not to so reflexively accept the demographic numbers necessarily, not that we should also stick our head in the sand. Because I agree with you with this as well.

MO: I think, obviously, you're right, and I'm... Look, I'm a terribly bad, I'm a famously bad prognosticator. When John Edwards was running for president, I thought he was gonna win.

[chuckle]

MO: If you want a candidate to win for anything, don't ask me to predict my personal will.

JH: Great, so let's just have you call it for Trump next time.

MO: I'll call for it Trump right now, and I guarantee Pete Buttigieg will be president. So I agree. That said, there are a number of other factors. I think you would agree, besides just affiliation, right. We're not just talking...

JH: Yes.

MO: Do people sign up, do people pay membership dues? It's important for people to support institutions financially, but that's not ultimately what either of us is most interested in, I think. So let's say, let's take for granted. And this is something we think about with the podcast, right, that lots and lots of people are tethered to connection and want to be tethered to tradition in meaningful ways that may or may not at a given point in their lives, be reflected in having joined a congregation or working out at the JCC, or being part of this institution or that. But they feel it, right? I think there's also the question of how much non-Orthodox Judaism, as a culture, as a cuisine, as a literary tradition all the other ways you could be Jewish, right, really impinges on some fifth generation Jew raised in a non-Jewish neighborhood, who doesn't know Hebrew and who doesn't have any knowledge of Ritual. 'Cause that's a lot of American Jews right now. I would argue that it's a higher portion in the most liberal traditions of Reform or Reconstructionist Judaism.

JH: Yeah, it probably is.

MO: Right? I mean, when I talk to... And by the way, I'm not, I go to a conservative shul, and we're shrinking faster than anybody, so I'm not making any claims for any... But when I talk to

Reform rabbis in particular coming out of your institution many of them are super learned and engaged. And then I say what percentage? Okay, so you get a job. You're an assistant Rabbi at some 500 family temple in suburban whatever, what percentage of 500 to 1000 family members, humans, who are in your community, know what Simchat Torah is? Like if you said, "what does this holiday celebrate?" would they know? And honestly, people shrug and say, "I don't know, like 1%, 2%... I mean, the knowledge is so crashingly low. Now, two or three generations ago, when everyone's grandma was a Bubbe from the old world, they got a lot of home-based knowledge. Then in some ways, filled in gaps in their sense of identity or belonging they had a different kind of knowledge, they knew some residual Yiddish. 30 years ago, they were immersed in book clubs that were reading Philip Roth. There's all these ways to connect, all of which I honor. I just don't know what the 13-year-old or 27-year-old with no religious knowledge, and in an entirely assimilationist culture has other than an answer on the Pew survey that says, "Yeah I'm Jewish," which is great. But what else do they have?

JH: Well, it's a fair question, and I don't think I disagree with your premises, but as you yourself sort of pointed out there's these other realms of Jewish knowledge... You ask a reformed Jew who maybe does some Sunday programming or who, who doesn't necessarily go to shul on Friday night, you look at synagogues around the country, and I go around the country, synagogues as you can well, imagine, every single shul has Torah study on a Saturday or Sunday, and without regard to their location, on the liberal scale, there's more Hebrew than ever.

JH: It's true that if the holiday falls in the summer, like Shavuot, because it's in the summer, because their lives keep them away from the synagogue in the summer, because their kids or what have you, they couldn't tell what Shavuot is, even close. But they could tell you about all kinds of connectedness of values to Scripture and maybe just a verse here and maybe it's shallow, maybe it's not, but who's to say that that's any less shallow than lighting Shavuot candles but not having any connection to rest or God knows what. I think you're open to the idea of these multiple facets of value. I see those facets all the time.

MO: Look, I think they're out there. I think to some extent it's kind of tacky to say or reductionist, but it's a question of degree, and how much people... Look... Again, I don't wanna be cynical. I love my listeners. And I love humans and I love Jews, and I'm an upbeat person, and an optimist and extrovert. I'm like... I'm not a doomsday... [chuckle] I'm not a naysayer.

JH: Yeah, I get it, I get it. Right. You're not peddling doom, I get it, I get it.

MO: No, I really am not peddling doom. I think these things are all super real and there's a multitude... And I'm enough of a mystic to say there's multitudes of meaning and value that are invisible to us and that we never see, and that every life has layers and layers of them. That said, a lot of non-Orthodox Jews will say, "Well I can't send my kid to Sunday school because it conflicts with lacrosse." And at that point, it's like, well, I don't know I throw my hands up. I think it's one item on a menu of meaning for a lot of people for which they will sacrifice nothing pay nothing, give nothing, work, not at all. I think if it's handed to them as something to do and it fits their schedule, they'll do it. But before I leave this topic, I do wanna say, to me, actually, the part of Judaism that interests me most, where my commitments lie, is in a Jewish community, my question is not, "Are they studying Scripture?"

MO: My question is not, "Are they Zionists?" My question is not "Are they learning Hebrew, or showing up for holiday observance?" My question is, "Are they caring for each other?" And the thing that I really admire about traditional or Orthodox Judaism that I see less and less of in non-religious streams, and it may just be because they don't live near each other whereas Orthodox Jews do, it may be as simple as geography and kind of questions of urbanism, is that in liberal Jewish communities, they don't show up for each other. They don't do Shiva when someone dies.

They don't show up for brises. They don't see it as incumbent on them to mark each other's milestones.

MO: They don't make meals for new mothers, new fathers. I just see a real breakdown in the sense of K'hilah, in the sense that they are necessarily invested in each other's lives. There are exceptions to this. And in Pittsburgh, where I'm doing all this research right now, there's a reconstructionist Chavurah where they show up for everything for each other, blows my mind. They have a [Hebrew] level of responsibility to each other. But that's really rare. And if that's alive in a lot of Reform communities, that would surprise me.

JH: So, I love your measure and I am nevertheless more optimistic because of what I see in Reform synagogues around the country, but your point well-taken, and as far as I'm concerned, if... It seems like it's incumbent upon you and me to do the work of getting us to always doing more of that.

[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.

[music]

JH: We're gonna move in the direction of Me Too, 'cause you've written some interesting things about it and it's very topical and of interest, I think we'd agree. But before we get there, I wanna ask you to editorialize a bit, if you would, about your experience with David Blankenhorn and the American conversation about gay marriage. I think gay marriage is a topic that many, many of us felt we've put to bed once and for all. And I think the trans conversation in America has resuscitated all kinds of questions around LGBTQ in general, and it feels topical in a way that hasn't been topical to me in a long time. And I was drawn to your thoughts about David Blankenhorn, David Blankenhorn, being a very prominent proponent of Prop 8 in California. He was against gay marriage until he reversed himself, and he reversed himself in a conversation with you. And I wanted to ask you to revisit that in light of the world today.

MO: Well, David's a great guy, and he's doing work right now with an organization called Better Angels, which is trying to help people talk across party lines, helping people on the left talk to people on the right. And I think he's really an important cultural figure who deserves a lot more attention. Yeah, he was someone who had written a couple of books on fatherhood, and as he read the evidence at the time, he felt that fathers were just so important that basically having a dad in the house was what was missing in the lives of many people who grew up disadvantaged, and it was very predictive according to the social science for a lot of things.

MO: And he saw same-sex marriage as being potentially corrosive to traditional values, especially as they pertained to whether dads would stick around. I think I'm representing him well. And ultimately... So he was one of the, you could say anti-gay marriage people in that famous Prop 8 trial in California and he was widely mocked and ridiculed by the left for that. And then it was less noticed that he reversed himself and ultimately said, "I don't think that same-sex marriage will be corrosive to having dads around in the house, or even if it might in some way, we can't predict it will... The advantages in terms of family stability and in terms of

love and care for children," which were his number one concern, "mean that we should support it." And he promptly then lost all of his friends on the right and all of his funding for his non-profit, and everyone, all the conservatives abandoned him because he had taken a position they didn't agree with anymore. And some of his funding came from conservative Catholics in particular who just threw him overboard. But he continues to be a meaningful person in the culture.

MO: He really is somebody who wants to follow the evidence to what will help children flourish and thrive most. And yeah, I don't know that I changed... I wouldn't say I changed his mind at all. I would say that I was part of conversations in which, on the radio and in print, that resulted in his coming out as having switched his position which is something that people with integrity probably do sometimes in their lives.

JH: Yeah.

MO: So it was an interesting episode.

JH: It was very interesting, and I recommend... It was an episode, but I don't think it was Unorthodox, it was another episode of your...

MO: No I did a long conversation with him that was produced by WNPR, which is the NPR affiliate in Hartford. And you can find it on my website markoppenheimer.com.

JH: Yeah, it was very thought-provoking, but I don't wanna go into it on my end only because it's with him, not with you that I have the thoughts. But I do think that there seems to be a resuscitation of questioning the legitimacy of gay marriage in society today. And it's worth looking up his work and your engagement with it. But I wanna move on to more specifically, some of Me Too issues. One caught my attention, a BuzzFeed article you wrote in 2014 titled, "Will Misogyny Bring Down the Atheist Movement?" And it was really, really right before the Me Too Movement took off. And your article describes a situation in which you sort of uncover rampant misogyny, and even Jew-baiting in particular at these atheist conferences, these places where presumably a kind of committed rationality reigns, and the traditional roots of misogyny in so far as we associate those roots with traditional religions, evangelical Christianity, a kind of religiously tinged conservatism.

JH: All those things are presumably absent, and that seemed to be a source of surprise and dismay. I wanna pick up on the apparent overlap or concurrence of Jew-baiting and pretty vicious misogyny that you report. There's a quote in it that says, "Some women say they are now harassed or mocked at conventions, the online attacks which include Jew-baiting, threats of anal rape and other pleasantries."

MO: Yeah, I mean so the big background here is that the organized atheist movement, which is a kind of loosely organized, pretty inchoate movement that draws on other movements largely organized on the web that attract rationalists and other people interested in science. So the overlap, the Venn diagram includes gamers, includes science fiction buffs, and then weirdly, for reasons I could go into, includes magicians, and all of these are communities of people interested in how the mind works, how the mind believes or doesn't believe, how the mind is deceived, the potentials of the human knowledge, artificial intelligence, human intelligence, all of these kind of neurological questions. They tend to be overwhelmingly male communities. And so when they turn their attentions toward things like, "Does God exist?", and for obvious reasons, these hyper-rationalist communities scoff at the idea that God exists. They tend to tear down God believers with this kind of aggressive trollish, clickbait way that I think we would recognize as kind of the worst of masculinity, [chuckle] although, women can play at that game too, obviously, right?

MO: Unsurprisingly, when you think about it, what happens at their conventions in places like Las Vegas or Los Angeles or New York or whatever, is that you have enormous numbers of men, many of them, dare I say, socially awkward, many of them socialize largely online, and many of them with more than a touch of authentic misogyny in them who encounter tiny minorities of women who are also in the movement, and then often are overly sexually aggressive, don't read signals or cues well, sometimes crossed really big lines into groping and, as I established, accusations of date rape. So, it's a... Yeah, it's a very odd thing. And then when the women fight back, these rationalists, atheists, skeptics, whatever they call their community, often respond with online troll campaigns that can, like so many online troll campaigns move into, obviously, misogynistic, sometimes homophobic, and then anti-Semitic as well. So it was a very weird and ugly and foul-smelling stew that I wrote about.

JH: Wow, that's [chuckle] pretty troubling. Especially because I'm so inclined to think of the atheist movement, if we can even call it a movement, as natural allies of the Jews in protecting, for example, the separation of church and state. I just have a natural affinity for it even though I'm not an atheist myself. And you've thrown a little water on that.

[laughter]

MO: Right. Well, and this gets back to my affection for what I see as meaningful and soulful religion. I tend to think movements almost always go bad unless they're grounded in mutual care and support and love. When they're grounded in ideology, they tend toward the dogmatic. And when they're grounded in politics, they can end up tending toward the fascistic. And this is a community that has not figured out how to instantiate a localist community-based ethic of care or love for its members. It's not a movement that grew up out of local meetups or scientific clubs or other ways it might have grown up, unlike, say, the chess community, a community that I was part of as a junior high student, which largely comes out of local chess tournaments and chess clubs and...

JH: School clubs, and yeah.

MO: Yeah, and people know each other. Atheism has always existed. Of course, American Atheists was a very famous, small, but significant movement, an American organization in the '60s and '70s that got a lot of attention at the time. But the real... The current movement really came out of online culture and its support of best sellers, Sam Harris's book, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett...

JH: Got it.

MO: And the enthusiasm, the kind of burst of enthusiasm for these authors, tracking them, following their Twitter accounts and so forth. So it's a very new movement that doesn't have any of the localism or Hamish-ness that might have grounded it in a better ethic.

JH: That's an interesting... It's an interesting analysis. I'll keep it in mind next time I see the stretch of the freeway in Los Angeles that has been upkept by your local atheist club.

MO: Oh yeah.

JH: We get that. Alright, I have two...

MO: And by the way, a lot of the... I should just add, a lot of them are not politically progressive. You take someone like Michael Shermer, who is in my article for allegations of misogyny and

sexual misconduct, and he can be very libertarian and sometimes very right-wing on certain things.

JH: Yeah, right.

MO: It's not a movement that's ultimately grounded, I think, in a humanist perspective.

JH: Interesting, right, right, which is counter-intuitive, I guess. So I wanna ask you two more questions. First, I wanna ask you about your new book and give you the opportunity to perhaps share with us an insight that you've gleaned at this stage in your writing. I don't know how far along you are in it, but perhaps something that we either need to know urgently, as we're still digesting the tragedy of the Tree of Life shooting or something that might surprise us.

MO: Sure. Well, I've been... Yeah, I'm writing a book to be published I hope in 2021 by Knopf called, "Squirrel Hill", and it's about how neighborhood and community help people through tragedy and grief, in this case, in the aftermath of the Tree of Life shooting on October 27th 2018. And I've been going there once a week, give or take, ever since. So I've been there a couple dozen times, I think, and interviewed dozens of people. And it seems to me that communities can either... I'll back up. People ask me, "Is this a depressing book to write?" And I say "No, actually the exact opposite. It's a really exhilarating and uplifting book to write." And that's because, first of all, Squirrel Hill is such a warm and friendly neighborhood.

MO: Everybody knows everybody, people care for each other, people say hello. Pittsburgh is a Midwestern city in terms of its street values, how people treat each other, whether people let other people come into traffic. And so that's nice. But the other thing is that this is a community that in the aftermath of great tragedy, I think collectively decided they were just going to love each other more. They were going to go to synagogue sometimes a bit more, they were going to talk more to each other, they were going to have each other over for Shabbat dinner more. They are a community that has just been hugging each other, literally and metaphorically, ever since October 27th. And so to be in the presence of people who have responded to tragedy that way is very, very moving and very inspiring.

MO: And I was interviewing someone the other day who survived, he was inside the building and survived. And I said, "Do you have any survivor's guilt?" And he said "No," he said, "I miss my friend who was killed, but I just have enormous gratitude that I'm here for my wife, that I'm still here for my children." He said, "I'm just grateful". And that is overwhelmingly what I hear from people. There were 11 people killed, all of whom had friends, and so there are people who are really still in mourning for best friends. But it's actually a very uplifting book to write.

JH: That's great. That's edifying and uplifting. That's a lovely take. I wish you well in your writing and look forward to it coming out.

MO: Thank you. Thank you.

JH: So I wanna ask you a more general question now about... I imagine that the book is foremost on your mind, but I wanna close out with the podcast, bookend podcast with podcast here and ask you for something special from the podcast that you wanna shout out to our listeners a favorite episode or a topic, one that you felt resonates with you, not necessarily the most popular one or what have you.

MO: I actually think the one that is going to be the episode of April 4th is as emblematic as any of things that we've done. It's not one of our special episodes. If you're interested in these particular topics, you can go listen to the episode we did on 100 most Jewish foods, which is a

new book that Tablet has produced. You could listen to... Oh, one of our greatest episodes ever was the conversion episode where we told a number of different stories of converts to Judaism. I think our nose job episode where we did the history and practice of rhinoplasty and...

JH: I remember that one, yeah.

MO: Oh that's [chuckle] a great episode. But I think what we're doing April 4th is just a normal episode, the three of us in the studio talking about Jewish news and events, bantering with each other, telling stories from our own lives and family lives. And then we have two great guests, one of them is Lori Gottlieb, a psychotherapist from Los Angeles who has a new book out about going through psychotherapy herself at the same time that she was treating lots of patients in her professional life, and that's really an interesting interview. And then the second interview... Usually, we have a Jew and a Gentile. We have two interviews, one Jew, one Gentile. In this case, we had two Jews. And the second interview was with a guy named, Harley Cohen, who is a guy I met in Cleveland who is a serious Deadhead, and I had always been fascinated by the number of Jews who were interested in the Grateful Dead, and he was a great talker. I met him on the airplane to Cleveland, and I said, "Could we get together while I'm in Cleveland and I'll bring my recorder and you can just tell me how you think..." This guy has two passions in life; one is Torah study, which he does through the ultra Orthodox outreach group [Hewbrew] Torah, and the other is the Grateful Dead and other jam bands. [chuckle]

MO: And he sort of breaks it all down for me, how he thinks that they're related in a Jewish life, and it's totally bizarre and fascinating and interesting. So I think the April 4th episode, if you're gonna start anywhere with Unorthodox, is a great place to start.

JH: Alright, well most of all, I wanna thank you for taking the time, it's a pleasure to meet you in person, if this counts as in-person...

MO: Sure.

JH: These days, I think it does, and wish you all good things.

MO: You too. Bye-bye.

[music]

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.

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