



MICHAEL S. ROTH: "SAFE" SPACES?

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by 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 episode of the College Commons Podcast, it's my great pleasure to welcome President Michael S Roth. Michael Roth is the 16th president of Wesleyan University. Professor, author and curator, Roth's scholarly interests center on how people make sense of the past. His most recent book is *Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist's Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech and Political Correctness on College Campuses*, which came out this year 2019, from Yale University Press. He continues to teach undergraduate courses and through Coursera, and he regularly publishes essays, book reviews, and commentaries in the national media and scholarly journals.

President Roth, Michael, it's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

Michael Roth: I'm glad to be here Josh.

JH: Speaking of some of the national media in which you have been publishing opinion pieces and articles, I wanna refer to your relatively recent article from September of this year in *The Atlantic*, in which you discuss religion in the classroom on college campuses, and you write, "Some may say that students should check their faith at the door, perhaps alongside with their privilege, before they enter the seminar room. But that's not the way I teach. In my classes, I want students to bring their complex, changing identities into our efforts to wrestle with enduring questions of love and judgment, justice and violence, grace and forgiveness."

Granting that you don't in your classroom, ask students to as you say, check their faith at the door, it seems to be the case that as a colleague and as the president of the university, you do accept that many other professors do ask their students to, as you say check their faith at the door. So I wanna ask you, what do you think is going on pedagogically or ideologically when professors adopt that position?

MR: Well, I think there are a couple of things Josh. In some cases, it just may seem to the faculty member or teacher irrelevant to what's going on in the class. So I guess if you're teaching math or physics where the questions of identity and faith or values perhaps even don't come to the fore, that you're not really that interested in what the person's religious orientation is. And that seems to me reasonable. I think that there are

other cases though where students especially at highly selective colleges and universities like Wesleyan where students feel like if they showed the teacher that they were religious in some respects, or thought of themselves as students of faith as some of the students call themselves here, that the professor would think less of them intellectually, would be biased against them because of their religiosity.

JH: That somehow being religious is credulous.

MR: Yeah, and that they would be less likely engaged in critical thinking or...

JH: Or have an extra grind.

MR: Or have an extra grind. And so, in a predominantly secular institution that those students just may feel they'd rather not disclose that in the classroom, so that the professor doesn't think less of them. And there are other cases where the person's faith, and I use that word with some hesitation you can hear, because I think for many Jews, faith is not really the issue but let's just say their religious practice is just not... It's not something that you wanna talk about, because it's personal in a way that's different from their participation in collegian life and so they...

JH: Or for that matter, in Jewish life.

MR: Yeah, it could be. And so they just keep that part of themselves separate. And what struck me the reason I wrote about it in that Atlantic essay, in *Safe Enough Spaces*, is because it seems to me that in many cases, we actually want our students to bring the various parts of their identity into the classroom. [chuckle] If they're speaking as a gay person or if they're speaking as a Southern or if they're speaking as a person from Latin America, we want them to bring that with them into the conversation. It makes the conversation richer we think and that's why diversity is so important and people bring lots of different perspectives into the mix, but it seems to me that we have to work harder at secular institutions to encourage students to bring their religious practices, and/or beliefs into the classroom.

JH: At the end of the day, when you walk into a classroom and you do... All of us, many of us went to college and we have these experiences. Is there a problem fundamentally between our understanding of religiosity as a state of being and going through the world versus our understanding of religion, which is at least partially understood to be repressive or dogmatic.

MR: Yeah.

JH: Is there a way we can massage this in such a way that it's not one of the... Or that it is... You can be religious without bearing the, I don't know, the inhibiting components of religion into the classroom?

MR: Well, I think there are some people who certainly would say, "My beef," they might say, "is with organized religion." And what they mean by that, I guess, is the dogmatic religion. And unfortunately, there's a tremendous gap between dogmatic and organized

religion in many instances, and they're not the same thing. And people can have an organized religious life that's still not dogmatic in the sense of being closed-minded and obedience-first. So I think that massaging and that distinction only gets you so far. I think the... For me, I'm a historian, like you, and so I want my students to show that they understand what a philosopher or another writer means by feeling the love of God, let's say. I want them to actually speak about that just so that they show an effort to understand the author they're reading; and that sometimes means drawing on their own experience.

And I want them to see why the author we're reading is worth reading. [chuckle] I want them to be able to put themselves in the shoes of the author, at least to some extent. And that requires them using their imagination to articulate what it might mean to, let's say, feel the love of God, or be forgiven, in a religious context. And even when I'm teaching this stuff, I know there are some people in the room who have a personal experience in this regard, just relevant to the discussion, but they're very unlikely to bring it up. And what's interesting to me, since they often will bring up sexuality, or race, or prejudice, or trauma, or things that are extremely personal sometimes, and painful. But it was as if there were a religious taboo, or at least, a filter against religious experience.

JH: I have a two-part question to follow up on that. I'm wondering if you have a story of your own Jewishness and your own relationship with belief or disbelief that shapes your intellectual engagement and your humanistic appreciation of these texts, which you referred to before, and that's one question. And then the second part of the question is; do you ever bring that story into class to open up to students or to open up a space for the students?

MR: Yeah, it's a great question. Of course, I have a story. [chuckle] And in my case, it's odd in a way that... I've written about this a few times. And the first time, many years ago, I was asked by an editor if I would write a little autobiographical essay; and so I wrote an essay called, "Shoah Yeshiva," which was both a reading of the Claude Lanzmann film, Shoah, which I used to teach regularly, but intertwined with the reading of the film and its place in films about historical trauma, intertwined with that was my own story, was why I thought I had gotten interested in teaching this kind of stuff. And that, in my case, had to do with the fact that before I was born, my older brother, the firstborn of my parents, died. And even saying this out loud to you now is challenging for me, because in my household, this was something never to be mentioned; there was a Yahrzeit candle, there was going to shul and doing the Yahrzeit and watching my parents cry and things like this, but we would never talk about it.

And so I wrote this piece about how this loss, which was a loss as removed, because I was, as I said, I wasn't born, I was the replacement child, in a way, for my brother Neal. I have another brother, Rick, another older brother, who felt this, I think certainly more acutely, but he and I never spoke about it until we were adults. And then I get a bar [chuckle] for a minute. Anyway, so I wrote about how my... All the things I'd ever written about were about how people deal with a loss in their past that they can't make whole. And I thought to myself, "This is probably not an accident." [chuckle] And Lanzmann's

film, as you would probably know, is really about the impossibility, among other things, it's about the impossibility of representing the Shoah. There's no image, there's no... There's only images or reports about, always at a distance, always at... Removed, there's never a making whole in Lanzmann's... What it is it? Nine-plus hours of the film.

And so I wrote in there about how I was always attracted to thinkers who left a gap between loss and redemption. And then many years later, probably 18 years ago, now, my father died, and I was trying to find a place to say Kaddish. And I was, at the time, living in Berkeley, I had no religious practice, I had been raised as a reformed Jew on Long Island. I had my little... My crisis of faith through existentialism in high school, and I kind of just got away from any organized practice of religion, and I went to High Holy Days, that's about it. But when my father died, I wanted to say Kaddish. And so I found a Minyan in Berkeley, and went every week, just not every day, but every week. And...

My wife was like, "What's going on? What, are you gonna come home with payots one day?" [chuckle] And I was very... And then this group was... They were just fantastic, they were just beautiful Berkeley people who led a lay-minion. And you had to take a... You had to take your turns leading. And then, Marion who's the wonderful figure in this group came to me one day and said, "Why don't you stay for Torah study?" And, "I don't do that. I'm an atheist." And then she's like, "Yeah, who cares? Why don't you stay for Torah study? You'll find it interesting. The dean of the law school's gonna be there. This artist is gonna be..." And again, it was a lay group, the rabbi came for pedantry I think. [laughter] They would ask him questions about details, but it was a lay group, and so I went, and I thought it was fantastic, really interesting and dynamic, and I love old texts, so I told myself. And so I would go regularly. Now my wife was getting really worried 'cause I didn't wanna miss Torah study. After the dominion, which I... I didn't need to say, Kaddish but I still went to dominion. Not because I believed in anything but because I liked the company. And finally, the rabbi says to me, "We'd like you..." at this big congregation in Berkeley, a kind of reformadox thing, some lots of ritual, but it's still reform, I guess in name, "We'd like you to tell the congregation on Rosh Hashana why you go to Torah study."

And this, this is like... Torah study, maybe 40 people, Rosh Hashana, I don't know 4000 it seemed. So I said, "No rabbi. You don't want me to do that. I'm an Atheist, I don't believe in anything. I go to Torah study, I like old books." He puts his hand up, he says, "Listen, God doesn't care what you believe. You go every week. That's what I care about." And so I talked to the congregation about why I go to Torah study. So my own personal experience of this has been not an experience of faith. That's why I always hesitate a little bit around that word, but an experience of practice. And I think very superficial, truth be... I don't wanna make it sound like I'm a better Jew than I am. But at the same time, it was very meaningful to me at that point in one's life when you lose your father, it just, it cut deep. I think my appreciation for the various ways that my students might be experiencing religious practice, religious ritual, religious faith and so on. And I think that just opened up much more than it had been when I was a young faculty member. When I would have thought a religious person is probably more closed-minded than the average person rather than thinking a religious person might actually be more open to the varieties of experiences around them, than some secular people

might be.

JH: And it seems from your self-description in that Atlantic article that it has shaped the way you run a seminar room. It seems like there's all kinds of flow from that experience.

MR: There is. It's interesting. It's, it's... Since I'm the President, I actually teach kind of large classes. So I have like 75 people in that class. It's not as if we... It is harder for people to bring their... Reveal much of themselves in that setting in like a seminar of 15 people but I work very hard to make it engaging and make possible openings for sharing personal and familial and religious experiences. And partly I think I told the story in that Atlantic article, about the student Zukino who described this, he described it as a prejudice against him, and I'm... Because he was religious and I'm very clear to the class that I'm Jewish and that I... Sometimes I say secular Jew, sometimes I say atheist Jew, but I'm teaching... Whether, last week it was Aquinas. I really tried to make clear how vitally important it seemed to people to decide, let's say a question between Aquinas and Augustine. And to make them really feel, "Oh yeah, I know I could see why that would be important." That it's not just, "Is it gonna be on the test?" But you would wanna know whether love was enough let's say. And... Or when I talk to them about, Alister McIntyre has this great description of how... He says, "Aristotle has no place for the thief on the cross."

And so I asked my class, 75 people, "Who knows what the thief on the cross is?" So a couple of, I assume not Christians in the front say, "Oh Jesus." And, "Oh no, no. That's not..." And finally somebody who's not afraid to out herself, and I really do think it's like that, she raises her hand and she says, "That person on the cross next to Jesus was a thief." And then I say, "Why does he mean there's no... Aristotle who McIntyre adores and has deep respect for has no place for this... What does that mean? So we talk about, "What does it mean to have no place for forgiveness in your way of thinking?" And suddenly, for 19-year-old people that's a real deal, really interesting issue. And what does it mean when suddenly you have a greater capacity for forgiveness and love? And I actually try to pitch that as... McIntyre's as this extraordinary intervention of Christianity. I say... Jews think, we think we have forgiveness too actually but for these purposes... [chuckle]

That kind of Christian message of forgiveness, I really try to get them to see, at least to stand in a place where they can feel how important it has been for people. And this year, it just so happens I ask them at the end of every class to send me an email with something from class that they don't wanna forget. It's a way of taking attendance and also to reinforce whatever they think they've learned. And this time I said, "Send me an email. Tell me something that's important that you've forgiven someone for or have been forgiven for." And some of them write things like, "Yeah, I took candy from my neighbor," or stuff like that, but my goodness, some of them wrote me these very intense, interesting messages about what forgiveness has meant to them. And I think they have understood, have an opening to understand Aquinas and Augustine much more deeply as a result of having thought about it in these terms, going back and forth between their own experience and the historical experience we're trying to illuminate.

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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 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.

I wanna shift the conversation a bit to move from the very deeply personal educational place of the classroom to some of the broader social trends surrounding education in America today about which you've written extensively. And I'm speaking of this idea of safe spaces. The topic of your most recent book, and also of another article you wrote, an opinion piece in the New York Times also from this year in April titled Don't Dismiss Safe Spaces. So I wanna give you an opportunity to walk us through your thinking on safe spaces, but to begin by defining safe spaces as you define the term for the purposes of your argument, and then to walk us through your proposal as it were for safe enough spaces.

MR: Yeah, so basically safe space is a space where you're protected from retaliation or harassment or retribution for who you are or what you said. And the title of this book is Safe Enough Spaces. It's a little bit of a joke, I guess, on the idea of the good enough mother or the good enough parent from the '50s and '60s. The mother who wouldn't make you psychotic. You don't have to be perfect. And the notion is that we want, and especially in increasingly diverse campuses, we want people to feel included enough so that they feel safe to take risks, to accept antagonistic ideas or offensive notions, and they can speak their minds because they won't be subject to harassment or retribution. And so, I trace this idea back to Dirk Levin who's again, just after the second World War was asked to go to a factory, a manufacturing plant in the south that had moved from New England. And, he was asked to go there as an industrial psychologist because they had trouble with productivity. They were not making as much stuff as they had before. And so he was to interview the workers just to find out what was going on. And the workers, of course, didn't really wanna tell him because he was hired by the boss and they didn't wanna get in trouble.

And so he had this idea that he should create a safe space so that people could stop hiding their ideas for fear of retribution or retaliation. And it was in the service here of the enterprise or the corporation. And I have to say this reconstruction, and I borrow from historians who have done the work. I've read them about Levin and then about feminist groups I cite in LA in the '70s. I had a student, Moira Kenney in Clairmont when I was out there and she worked on my team at The Getty for a while. She traced how feminist and lesbian groups try to create spaces where they could meet together and of course argue and talk things through, but not under the threatening gaze of a patriarchal

society. And it was a place for building solidarity. But not a place of group think or orthodoxy.

And I think you can look at, let's say, gay bars, before the rise of social media, gay bars as being places where gay people could go to meet other folks and not feel like they might get beat up any second now because they're in a space that's really threatening. So what I was trying to do is de-stigmatize this notion of a safe space, which has become the fodder for pundits who think that students need puppies and bean bags. And there are examples of that to be sure, but I think that it's not that long ago that people from under-represented groups were routinely harassed on college campuses. I got trouble from one of my colleagues who actually wrote to me, "Routinely? Come on, Roth", 'cause I said routinely professors decided they would sleep with one of their students and I've gotten some flack from professors.

But I say routinely because when I was a senior in college and some of my friends, the girls I knew told me about sleeping with their professors, they made it sound like it's no big deal, what's the big deal. And I know certainly in graduate school many of the women who came to the programs at Princeton were very quickly taken out by male professors who found it easier to find sexual partners among students than among people their own age and I think that the notion that these groups, the women in that case or other under-represented groups in the other instances, if they had equal access to the resources of the school or the city, I think that's just clearly false that you don't have equal access to the resources of an environment if you have to take certain precautions to protect yourself against abasement or harassment. And I know that none of the critics of bean bags and puppies or cuddling, none of them wanna go back to those days but I think we shouldn't forget that it's not that long ago and in some places I'm sure it still goes on, that many students have those stress. And so I tried to describe spaces on college campuses that are safe enough for speaking your mind and hearing other people speak their mind in a way that you would find surprising and sometimes offensive but not so safe that you have your mind closed to new ideas.

MR: adventurous in your education and those people who tell me, well, when I was at the University of Chicago in 1972, I didn't need any protection at all, I was a gladiator. I think they too had a safe space, it was all men and it was all white or it was mostly men and it was all white. And those were safe spaces and today, I think making campuses more equitable by making them more inclusive is an important task. I do recognize that at some schools especially fancy ones that there is a consumer mentality and a corporate mentality on campus where the students should get everything they want because they pay so much money and rich students...

JH: And there is competition that occur among other colleges.

MR: Yeah, and that's pernicious but that is not because the students are spoiled or fragile, it's because the universities are fragile and not competing for the dollars of students they wanna please, that is a problem. It's not a problem in Wesleyan so much, but it definitely is a problem when campuses compete with each other by trying to give students more and more amenities, that's a problem but that has very little to do with the

critique of students today as being snowflakes or being fragile.

JH: So I'd like to inject another dimension to the conversation which has to do with the notion of free speech and to pick up on the idea of safe spaces because the critique of safe spaces that you described been bag chairs and puppies is part of this impatience with the perceived generational fragility and which you've just addressed, but there's another component which is the accusation of hypocrisy and at the risk of over-simplification I'm gonna say left right that is to say liberal conservative. And the conservative critique of safe spaces is, in this line of thinking, is that safe spaces are safe for liberals but not for conservatives. So what they're really saying is safe for whom, whom do you disinvite, whom do you shut down, whom do you not allow or what have you. In the cases that they offer which may be convenient cases, they may be unrepresentative or they may be representative but that's the argument and when they make that argument they often invoke free speech and so I want to inject the perspective on free speech and have you comment on it.

Robert Post a constitutional scholar and former Dean of the Yale Law School argues that campus speech even at public universities is not really an exercise of free speech in the constitutionally protected sense. To him, university or educational speech is actually intended to be curbed by selection and curation on the basis of expertise and educational value judgements. And so it's really a different take on this critique against safe spaces from a point of view of free speech, he gets to the root of questioning the idea of free speech in this context in the first place. So I wanted to hear your take on this.

MR: Well, thank you. And Robert Post is a very thoughtful person about these issues and I think he's in this case, of course he knows so much more about the legal dimensions of this than I ever will but I do agree and make this point in the safe enough spaces that we're constantly curating expression on college and university campuses and a good thing too because we... Our job is not to be an aggregator of everything said but it's to actually find ways of educating students through discourse and images and music and so on. Stanley Fischer made a similar point for years that speech in university is always curated or filtered for executive purposes, that said, you have to be very careful to ensure and we do this on the faculty that we are making legitimate voices heard.

And reveals the how, who makes the decision where it's legitimate. It usually turns out to be the faculty sometimes with student input depending on the institution and one has to be very careful to think, "Am I limiting this speech because I happen not to like it. I'm just exercising bias or am I exercising my professional judgement?" I think that's a question we ask ourselves, we should ask ourselves all the time. And so I think that the marketplace of ideas is a notion that everything can be said on a university campus and the best ideas arise to the top. I think it's just not an accurate picture of how universities and colleges work. And it's also an idea, this notion of the marketplace of ideas one that students today in some faculty greet with great suspicion because we have seen the appropriation of free speech talk by right-wing ideologues to advance their own particular policies. And when you can amplify some speech through power and money

so it drowns out all other speech, then calling just for unregulated speeches is like just going for people who can amplify the most to dominate all discourse. And it's like to say I want an unregulated economy so there are no rules against pollution.

I mean free enterprises are very important in my view, but some regulations are also very important. And I think the same is true on a campus. Many regulations are really important. And we have to understand, are those regulations self-serving, that they're only to protect orthodoxy of the moment? Or are the regulations actually in the service of a process of education? And I often tell the story that when I was a young professor in Claremont and I heard a story about the president of Pomona College at the time, which I've always assumed this is true, I've never verified it, David Alexander was his name, that he found out that this group of Nazis, Neo-nazis from Orange County who had an innocuous title to their organization Revisionist History of some kind, that they had rented space on Pomona college campus to have a little conference on why the Holocaust was a hoax perpetuated by Jews, etcetera etcetera. And he got up from the street, walked over and said, "You are to leave this campus immediately." And lawyers were upset, "Oh, they have a contract." And they said, "We'll sue you." And he said, "Yes, you'll sue me, but you will not use my campus, you Nazis." [chuckle] "You will not."

We have to make judgments. We do it all the time. And somebody draws the line. And I think as a University President, my job is to help faculty and students, but mostly faculty draw the line with education in mind. And that often means making sure people aren't the target of intimidation and harassment. At the same time I think it's been my job to promote the active encouragement of conservative and religious ideas on campus. Since I don't think the free market approach is good enough for thinking about speech on campus, I've called for an affirmative action program for conservative-thinking. I did that at first in the Wall Street Journal and now I extend the argument a bit in safe enough spaces. If we recognize, we at colleges universities have a leftie bias, which I think we do, then we have to work harder to bring serious ideas about the study of conservative thinking and religious thinking, libertarian thinking to campus. And that means being very proactive about it and not just saying, "We're open to it."

'Cause sometimes, if you have do that, you have prejudice, prejudice, prejudice, and then you'll have a Milo or some other provocateur come to campus under the guise of bringing conservative ideas but they're really just there to provoke either a free speech crisis or some other kind of incident. And I just think that's a terrible cycle to be in that encouraging the study of these various traditions seems to be quite important. And it's hard to... Some of my colleagues at Wesleyan certainly don't agree with me here. And someone said to me, "Well, the right-wing controls everything else in the country. We control the campus." I just think that's politically... I'm trying to think of a word other than dumb, but I can't. I think it's dumb politically. And I think it's anti-intellectual in the extreme that we control the campus. We should actually be opening our students and ourselves up to ideas that we at first glance don't find congenial, but are worth studying. That's not to say we should study Trump's theory of tariffs. He doesn't have a theory of tariffs. But if we wanna look at different views of mercantilism or whatever I mean that's a subject of historical and economic thought and historical thought.

JH: Proactively you're asking the faculty to do what they ask of the students?

MR: Yes. And I should be clear. It doesn't mean you have to hire a conservative. I teach Aquinas, I'm not in danger of converting to Catholicism. But I really need to work at teaching it from the sympathetic perspective I teach everything else. And so that you don't have to hire someone who wears the colors of the team but you do need to hire thoughtful people about such things. And I haven't convinced everybody but the fact that we're having these conversations on campus that people are debating it, that people are asking, "What is intellectual diversity anyway?" And as a President, some people are just gonna reject my idea because it comes with authority and that's fine. That's the kind of intellectual diversity. But I'm very pleased that people are talking about it. I think the heterodox academy is doing good work in this regard too, trying to get people to not just think otherwise in the Foucauldian sense, that's become a cliché. I was a student of Foucault in France. And it pains me to see the Foucauldian energetic irreverent paradigm become a new kind of dogma. Some of my colleagues just repeat these Foucauldian phrases as a Catechism but don't actually bring into the mix surprising ideas and notions that really go against the grain of the campus today. And I think we need to do that. And I'm in a position where I can help make that happen.

JH: Well President Michael Roth, it's really been a pleasure to talk to you.

MR: Josh it's been a pleasure for me. And thank you for your good questions and for all the work you're doing.

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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.

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