



RABBI DANYA RUTTENBERG: THE JEWISH NEW WAVE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, dean of HUC's, Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast where we will have the pleasure of getting to know Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg. Rabbi Ruttenberg was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2008, and she is an award-winning author. She's written seven books, earning many awards, as well as pieces for the New York Times, The Atlantic, among others. She was also named by Newsweek and The Daily Beast as one of the 10 rabbis to watch and by The Forward as one of the top 50 most influential women rabbis. And she was called a wonder kid of Jewish feminism by Publishers Weekly. Rabbi Ruttenberg, Danya, thank you for joining us. It's a pleasure to have you.

Danya Ruttenberg: Thank you for having me, it's a pleasure to be here.

JH: So I'd like to begin by approaching some of your presentations that seem perhaps the most personal about your really beautiful Heschelian, if that's an adjective we can use, approach to parenting as an opportunity to find wonder and connection. It's really a compelling view. But I was struck in listening and reading your material that there's an element that feels moment-to-moment about it. And I wonder if our capacity to find wonder requires us to resign ourselves to moments, and not to a constant state of being as if the highs of radical amazement that you refer to from Heschel kind of require the pedantry of all the space in between those moments.

DR: Yeah, we cannot live on the bliss train as a permanent state, we just don't. Even... There's a Zen saying, "before enlightenment you chop wood and carry water and after enlightenment you chop wood and carry water." And it is certainly the profound moments and the work of spiritual practice is to change you and transform you so that these moments, for a lot of reasons, a part of it so that you can be the kind of person who is more useful to the world and of healing. But part of it is that if you do your spiritual practice, and you try to plug in to bigness and wonder in an intentional regular basis, then your capacity to find this place becomes easier and easier and those muscles get stronger. And some people have a traditional prayer practice. Some people

make art. Some people meditate, whatever.

There are a lot of ways to express spiritual practice. And what I argue in *Nurture the Wow* is if these extraordinary wonderful moments with our children that showing up and trying to be fully present with them is a spiritual practice also. And just like in prayer, you don't feel that that rush, that spiritual rush every single time if you pray, if you pray regularly, but days where it feels less like a marathon and more like a walk around the park. So too with your kids, you're gonna have some days that are amazing and beautiful, and you're smelling the flowers and you're looking at the ants, and you're enjoying this exquisite now together and sometimes you're just helping with math homework, right? Sometimes you're just trying to work on your patience. You know?

JH: It seems like it's even more than that. It's that you have to commit to the pedantry and you have to keep looking in the pedantry for the moments when it does come out. It's almost a commitment to not seeing it, in order to when ready, see it.

DR: Yes, you have to be able to go looking for it in these little moments to raise the holy sparks if you will, of whether it's sweeping up a piece for the ground or cleaning the sick out of the shirt, or just waking up in the middle of the night with the child who had a nightmare. And even in those very mundane feeling moments to try to look and find how fleeting and precious it is. And it's never ever gonna be 100%. If you're not, if you're a parent and you are not feeling like you're on the bliss train most of the time, you're not doing it wrong. It's real and it's hard, and the work of trying to just show up some of the time is really hard. And if in those moments, every once in a while you can try to catch yourself, figuring out where the holy spark is in this moment, the more you can do it, the easier it is to get to that place.

JH: Have you had a moment recently to share with us?

DR: Yeah, sure. My kids were off school today and it was sort of a long day, and then there was this moment when my seven-year-old and my four-year-old were just piled on top of me and for a second we were just goofing off and then there's that moment of sort of feeling their skin on my skin and just snuggling them and kind of remembering how precious this is, these moments where you can scale back and this child has gotten so big, this child is still so little, and to kind of see it in the big picture and it can be... It's breathtaking.

JH: Yeah. I think any parent knows what you're talking about. So I'd like to pick up on your writing. I went to your website and looked at some of your recent tweets that you foregrounded and I wanna sight one of them and then talk to you about it. You recently tweeted, "PSA, Public Service Announcement because, I guess, it needs to be said? Appropriating other people's symbols, rituals, liturgy isn't interfaith work. Rather, it hinders it. Building genuine relationships out of trust and connection is interfaith work." So I wanna contextualize it a bit for our listeners because it was a part of a thread that included a bunch of comments from individuals' tweets that gave brief anecdotal illustrations of what, for the most part, appeared to be cultural appropriation or potentially cultural appropriation.

So just one example was a tweeter who walked into a public school and saw a Christmas tree and queried the Christmas tree, it being a public school. And the person at the desk said, "Oh, that's precisely why we made the Christmas tree in blue and white trim as if to connect or indicate that it was for all religions or what have you." And there were other cases along the thread and people can follow it on your account. Here's my question, though. Yes, I agree that appropriating other people's symbols, rituals, etcetera, isn't interfaith work. But it does strike me as a very, very fine line to walk when we live in a world of monotheisms that dominate certainly, they don't monopolize the religious landscape, but they do dominate it. And all monotheisms are, to some degree or another, an appropriation of Judaism, aren't they?

Yes, but there's a difference... There's a difference between, say, the Christian practice of using incense, the Catholic practice of using incense, which is clearly came from the temple. There are a lot of things are... That obviously came from Judaism, but we know what a Jewish practice is now. If somebody says, is a menorah something that's okay for a Christian to purchase and light? A, it is highly unlikely that in the time of Jesus a menorah was a... Jesus wasn't lighting the [HEBREW]. He just wasn't. That was a rabbinic innovation. That was after Jesus' time. So it's not Christian. There's no legitimacy there. And critically, this is not something that developed over however many centuries of slow evolution to become its own thing. Baptism may originally be from Mikvah, but it's been 2,000 years. They've gone... We've gone our separate paths. We know when something is Jewish just as if someone was going to say, "I wanna sprinkle you with powder, with colored powder. It would be a delightful way to celebrate Purim." It's like, "No, no, no, no. That's... Holi is an Indian practice. It's not ours, not everything gets to be ours, and not everything gets to be everybody else's, we know." There aren't a lot of fuzzy lines where it's really not clear.

But it does seem like what you're saying is, if you get away with it for long enough, then you got dibs. If you do Easter, which is really Passover, and it becomes too much inertia for us to really object about, then okay, we won't object.

DR: I don't know... Listen. The Rabbis changed our Tefillah. The 10 Commandments used to be part of the everyday worship service. And the Rabbis, at a certain point, took it out. It was said next to the Shema. And they took it out because it became a Christian practice and they wanted to differentiate a little bit, make it a little bit... A little more clarity. Traditions always change. The 10 Commandments is still a critical part of Christianity. But traditions are gonna change however, they're gonna change. But that doesn't mean that for those of us who are owners of a tradition and embedded in that tradition, that doesn't mean that we don't get to say like, "Dude, this is ours."

JH: First of all, on the emotional level, I completely identify with your position. As an ethno-religious minority, I do claim the idea of cultural ownership. But I also grapple mightily with its futility. It's absurd in its way the minute you take a step back and look at it almost academically. We look at so many things that we've appropriated as Jews from majority culture.

DR: But here's the thing, though, is the word I'm gonna keep coming back to is "organic." There are all of these ways that Judaism has changed because of feminism, for example. And we have taken this idea that was born out in dominant culture. Feminism basically, it did not come from inside Judaism. It came from outside in secular enlightenment, whatever. And we took this idea and we incorporated it into our rituals and our practices and our traditions and our ways of being. And Judaism has grown and changed and shifted as a result of that. And there are other ways that meetings of cultures like what happened... What Jewish culture looks like in Mumbai is different than what Jewish culture looks like in Fez, and it's different from what Jewish culture looks like in Istanbul or in Minsk or wherever. Historically, there's always been melding and blending in what we eat and how we celebrate and what books we read that influence our next philosophy and all of that, of course. But is there something organic about it? And it is not walking into somebody's store and saying, "Okay, this is mine now." It's a natural consequence of neighbors talking and learning from one another over hundreds of years. The natural melding of cultures that has happened over almost every human civilization, probably, since we've had people living in places is different than the colonialist, if you will, idea of, "I'm gonna waltz in somewhere. Oh, you've got a thing. Cool. I'll take it."

JH: I agree. It's different. But I think that everything that feels organic and natural started off with a colonial spark, a pure unmitigatedly appropriating colonial grab.

DR: I don't agree with that. I think there are times and places when we have learned from one another and developed relationships and fusions have emerged in a way that's not... It's not like Jews got to India and were like, "Hi, we're Jews. We eat curry now." It's... It was not...

JH: Well, part of the selectionality of the more enfranchised to the less enfranchised or vice versa. So when American music gets inflected by some relatively shameless appropriations of African-American music, you could go back to that spark of colonialism and you could make an argument. If however you talk about Jews who are relatively un-enfranchised, or at least a minority in India, adopting majority cultures. It doesn't feel so colonial, because it's that theory of racism, that racism is really unidirectional. It only happens from the more empowered to the less empowered. And so the less empowered can't really be colonial.

DR: That's why I'm saying it's not the same thing.

JH: Well, but I'm saying even if we talk about only the appropriations from the less empowered by the more empowered, we're still gonna get a whole bunch of things that you're claiming now are organic. Like Christianity itself.

DR: I maintain that rooting interfaith relationships in relationship and not in stealing other people's stuff is the right attitude. But that what we haven't talked about is the therefore, right? And I think the therefore varies depending on the case. What is the therefore for

somebody who's selling Christian Mazuzus is a little bit different from a legacy of oppression of the entire people including theft of creative resources. We need to have a longer conversation... In both of those cases there's a conversation on tshuva about repentance, about reparations, about amends, about what justice looks like moving forward. But does that mean we never listen to any jazz music ever? Maybe not, but what would repair look like? What would an honest acknowledgement of that engender?

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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.

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JH: I wanna ask you about feminism because you as I mentioned in my introduction of you, have something to say about feminism. And I wanna ask you what you think the biggest challenge facing feminism is today as opposed to just a few short years ago prior to the Me Too movement.

DR: I think the biggest challenge inside feminism is... It's not even... Let's say trans-inclusional feminists but I think they're mostly a distraction honestly. But obviously, gender expansiveness is really important. But I think the biggest problem is white supremacist patriarchy honestly. We began to move as a country towards a vision of making more room for more people to have more kinds of power and Trump's election was a big win for people who want to... For white men who wanna hold a certain kind of power over, and the implications of that are so varied. There's the absolute attack on reproductive rights. There's the family separation and the treatment of migrants in this country, which is a feminist issue. If you wanna even just look at it through a gender lens, issues around sexual assault and trafficking and family separation, is massively gendered. The ways in which budgets for SNAP, for example, for nutritional assistance have been slashed and the ways that the budget cuts are affecting people in poverty. These are all feminist issues. And our country is in a bad way right now.

JH: Do you see examples in the opposite direction, maybe an evolution of feminism that has grown to respond to these more recent challenges? You spoke of gender inclusivity. Are there counter trends that are encouraging as well?

DR: Absolutely. People... Mostly, people who don't understand intersectionality wanna talk about it a lot. It seems obvious to me. And I think more mainstream feminism is getting there finally, but you... In order to have a properly feminist lens, you need to be

making sure you're listening to A, marginalized voices, whether that's... We're talking about women of color, trans and non-binary people, disabled folks, people of color and disabled. People who are coming from various perspectives have so much to bring to the conversation, and so many profoundly important ways of understanding what's happening, and ways of addressing solutions and looking at problems. So, we need to be making sure that we're raising people up, and amplifying them, and sharing power in a way that is ultimately gonna be for everybody's good. And I think it's getting there. So it's good.

JH: So, you do see some progress? That's good.

DR: Yeah. It's two steps forward, one step back, but...

JH: Do you think that intersectionality, as appears to have happened with the women's march, and some of the Jewish participants, that at least... Not in a reductive way, that this is all it comes down to, but that it also inevitably requires conflict resolution, or conflict negotiation between the different threads that constitute any given group's, or person's intersectionality?

DR: Listen, solidarity work is hard and it's messy. And If you think everybody's always supposed to agree on everything all the time, and it's supposed to be very holding hands, and singing, and feeling inspired all the time, then you haven't done the work. The work on the ground is hard, and it's because sometimes people are coming with very different perceptions of what's happening. We've seen a number of times is Jewish feminists, and Muslim feminists say, or Arab feminists, or whoever have tried to be in coalition together, where it's sometimes is that people have very different views. Sometimes, people don't understand one another's views, which also sometimes is the case there. Sometimes, it's because somebody's not really listening, and it's usually somebody with more power isn't really listening to somebody with less power. And sometimes, there are places where we need to say we can agree on these three things and not this fourth, and that's gonna have to be okay.

I will happily join a Catholic delegation of folks going to fight the death penalty, no question. That is a shared interest. And when it comes to issues of reproductive rights, many mainstream Catholics and I are gonna agree to part ways, and I will see you on other... Opposite sides of the protest. And maybe that's okay. And we have to be able to have honest conversations about that. But it does require a lot of hard work, and a lot of willingness to be open, and listen to one another and to do... To be very challenged in your assumptions. And sometimes it just requires coming together when you can.

JH: I found very poignant and compelling your observation about deafness, and the tendency for the more empowered party to be deaf toward the less empowered party.

DR: Yes.

JH: I wonder if you've ever encountered a phenomenon that I have encountered a lot, which is a subset of that kind of deafness. The deafness of the empowered towards the relatively less empowered, that is born of goodwill, in which the goodwill itself promotes

the deafness.

DR: Yes. There can be a condescending paternalism that can happen when somebody is trying to be an ally, and trying to collect their little good ally cookies. That is extremely frustrating, because it often comes in the form of somebody being so busy trying to perform their allyship, that they do not hear the person speaking. And when they... That they do, they... It's not always comfortable. And I say this, "Listen, I'm Jewish, and I'm a woman, and I'm queer, and whatever. And I'm also white, and I'm also cisgendered, and I'm also able-bodied, but there are places where I have been the privileged person in an exchange, and struggled to really hear, and probably places where I've wanted to show what a good ally I am. And there are places when I have been on the receiving end, and the lack of humility..." You just have to have a lot of humility.

As one of the most striking examples of this, for me, happened probably the week... A week or two, and maybe the week that Me Too was exploding. So, I, like every other woman in this country was completely raw and having a lot of feelings. And I'm part of a rabbinic Facebook group, and someone in there, a guy, said, "Well, I wanna talk about this, but I don't wanna trigger anybody. So, how do I do that?" And I suggested that he look at a joke he had made a few months ago in that forum. And said, "Listen, I hear that you're trying to show what a big ally you are, but maybe you wanna acknowledge that you did something that actually harmed us." At which point, he started calling me names. And I understand the feeling. He was still full of hope in that moment, that everybody was gonna thank him for his sensitivity and all of that. And it can be really, really hard to be told to look in the mirror. And I've been... I have... It's happened to me many times, and it's not comfortable, but that's the work of trying to meet another human being where they are, is that you have to be willing to hear the person who's telling you that you didn't do well this time.

JH: Right. It recasts what it means to be an ally, as you're saying it, which is not just to show up, but also to open yourself up to change, which you may not have been bargaining for when you thought you wanted to be an ally. [chuckle]

DR: Right. In trying to work across... In trying to work with people who are different from you in any way whatsoever, which is probably most people in some way, just so much humility is required.

JH: Yeah, I do. I hope. Thank you very much. It's really been a pleasure to talk to you, and I look forward maybe, to seeing you in person one of these days.

DR: I would love that. That'd be wonderful.

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