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RORY MICHELLE SULLIVAN: MUSIC IS THE MUSE

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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. You're listening to a special episode recorded at the URJ Biennial in December of 2020.

JH: Welcome to this edition of the College Commons Podcast, and it's my great pleasure to welcome my new friend, Rory Michelle Sullivan, who is a singer, songwriter, composer, musician and Jewish educator, who has recorded four studio albums and performed internationally. Her album titled *The God Album* includes fun folk, funk, rock, and swing music with songs infused, inspired, and informed by Jewish text. She's currently working on a musical called *Rising In Love*. Rory Michelle, thank you for joining me.

Rory Michelle Sullivan: Thank you so much, Josh. I'm so excited to be here and talk with you.

JH: I wanna talk about your song about Rabban Gamliel, which is on your website. And we were talking before about calling it a story song and as I was listening to it and preparing for this interview, what I was struck by is its didactic nature, which calls on your Jewish educator side of your professional personality. And so I wanna ask you about that, but not just that, 'cause other songs as well, like *Al Shlosa D'varim*, they have this didactic quality. And I wanna ask you in general, what is it about music that lends itself to learning? Is it the fact that music rhyme and melody promote memorizing? Is it about its inviting people to join? What is it about music and learning?

RS: My theory is that music goes deep. And when you hear a melody, you hear lyrics, there's something about the subconscious that goes into your subconscious, and I think it's one of the most powerful tools to get a message in. I've certainly been impacted by a lot of positive messages from songs, and I think it's a way to bypass our rational minds and get to our hearts and our subconscious.

JH: I see. So it's not a neuronal thing, the way I was just...

RS: It can be, but I think it mostly gets underneath there.

JH: I get it. Right, right, music is a form of communication all on its own, and it...

RS: Yes, I would also love to share one more thing about Rabban Gamliel. I just wanna

also give credit about that song to Levi Cooper at Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies, who, in a class on Midrash, told that story, and he is such an incredible educator himself, an actor, and just so passionately told us this story and the message of the dance between innovation and preservation, and Levi Cooper helped me really go through my original drafts, and make sure it was in line with the Talmudic tale, to make sure that it was... I still took some artistic liberties, but you know, you can go ahead and check out the...

JH: Check out the full story and the song.

RS: Yeah, check out the full story and see what you think.

JH: Exactly, which is, by the way, on your website, which is...

RS: Which is www.rorymichelle.com.

JH: So, I wanna ask a slightly more business side question which I've asked other Jewish musicians before, because it's... It strikes me as a difficult business. And, specifically, I wondered if there's a risk that children or youth-oriented music or Jewish music might typecast you or in general, that it might box Jewish musicians in, because Jewish musicians often make their living on the circuit between camps and schools, and their music, of course, gets a lot of play in those contexts, as well. So, I can see the opportunities, but are there risks associated?

RS: I have heard and spoken with colleagues about these risks, about the sort of positioning ourselves as one way or the other, and I think that there's some really brilliant educators and musicians out there, who have done a really amazing job going into that niche, and I think there's many of us who have a breath and can work with all ages I've worked with, and literally, infants to adults. There's a lot of work in the kids' world, because it's very needed, it's where people are, and synagogues are willing to spend money, because that is such a priority for so many places. And so, it's easier to make a living doing... I have found doing kids' stuff, because there's more available for musicians. And so, if you wanna break out into doing more of the adult full congregational stuff, it really is a bigger jump. Although, being at Biennial that put together a lovely artist track about helping...

JH: Particularly this one, they have a lot... It's a very thick track.

RS: Oh, yeah, it's wonderful. And it's really exciting, I'm excited to go to a few of the sessions. And there's some for congregations, as well, on both sides, about how to really build a meaningful artist and residency program. And I'm excited to be doing a few more of those, especially I've been doing the songwriting and musical prayer writing workshops, and that's been really neat, too.

JH: Right, that's also an opportunity to teach about prayer at all.

RS: Yes, and I listen to your podcast with Rabbi Amy Eilberg. And at the end, you were speaking with her about how the Christian traditions tend to have a more fluid

relationship with spontaneous prayer and how davening can sometimes feel very rote. And I've been fortunate, through a few different influences. One, a family friend growing up Baptist saying when I was a little kid, "Tell God what you're grateful for. And just say your blessings every night before you go to bed." And so, my first person that talked to me about God, it was all about gratitude. And so that, as a first thing, developed a stronger relationship. And then, the prayers themselves are the second big piece that taught me how to pray, because if you really read the liturgy, it's, "Bend my will to your own, that I may eagerly do your will. Let me be your servant. Let me be an instrument. Let me serve." And so, the... It's there in the liturgy. And there are some beautiful English readings in the Silverman Prayer Book, that I grew up, in the conservative movement.

JH: Yeah, in the conservative movement. That's right.

RS: Both the translations and some of the additional commentary on the side and some others that I really love are, "Fulfill the worthy wishes of my heart for good." And I love that, because it's not just the genie, where it's just granting wishes, but it's... What are those deepest desires? And this is the month... We're recording this in the month of Kislev, and I just went to a wonderful Rosh Chodesh group, where we talked about the month of Kislev meaning, "Kis," pocket, "Lev," hearts. And so what are the pockets of our heart? And being the darkest month, what are those dreams that are buried deep inside of us? And for me, the third really instructive thing, in terms of prayer and relationship with the divine, or something bigger than ourselves, higher power, or God, whatever you wanna call it. Also, Lavish [unintelligible] once told me, this sort of a reconstructionist thing, instead of ruler of the universe, the rules of the universe. I love that.

RS: But the third thing was *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron, and it's a book on the spiritual path to creativity, totally transformed my life and put me on this path of being a creative person and really owning that. And I'm really grateful for that instruction and how to have a spiritual connection, 'cause there's a lot about it and creativity what...

JH: And you're very explicit about that in your music. I've noticed your lyrics that you get right into it. Often, there's no metaphor, nothing. You jump right into God, and love, and... Which feels prayerful, very directly.

RS: Yeah, yeah, thank you. And so Kislev, you know, the pockets of our heart, those desires, I think are from a spiritual source, and I think that's a holy thing. And in doing these workshops, it's been an easier sell, because people want to learn the prayers, and to... We're gonna rewrite a new whatever, but I would love to going forward, and my intention would be to really create a space where we can give an opportunity for a spiritual exploration, and connection. And it's been noted to me that that can be also hard and risky, because of the trauma that some people have around the idea of God, and it's very real trauma. And when there's... I have a lot of books that I really like, and so there's another one, *What Color is Your Parachute?* Many people might know it, it's pretty famous. It's about changing careers. But it was written by a pastor, and so in the back are the pink pages, he calls them, and he says the rest of this book... Whatever

percent of the country that isn't gonna wanna read these pages, but there's also a big percentage of the country that is going to be open to this. And he has a chart of healthy and unhealthy religion.

RS: I encourage you to look for that chart, 'cause it's very instructive. And what's fascinating to me is that a lot of the things in the healthy side is pretty lined up with Judaism, which is really cool. Just to focus on gratitude, for instance, or Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah and that whole period of love, the idea of reconciling with somebody is a process we really have to take responsibility, rather than just say, "I'm sorry," and be on with it. So there's a whole bunch of things, but I think... And one of the pieces, which I love, is that unhealthy religion doesn't even dream that it could be unhealthy. Healthy religion has a sense, as some of this might be a little unhealthy. And of course, there's that in Judaism, too. But when you've been exposed to... Or somebody said and that really doesn't jive with your inner knowing, it's traumatic. And God is such a personal intimate concept that when there's trauma around that, of course, when you hear the word God or anything like that, it's gonna be... And I've had a lot of conversations with friends and family about how it sort of... I know somebody who prays to God, but doesn't believe in God, and will talk to God, but doesn't... God, I'm sorry, I don't believe in you.

JH: Right.

RS: Right? Or a friend who just said to me, "I think having a connection and belief in God would make my life easier. I think it would be more comfortable, but I just can't do it. And when I go into a service to Daven, I feel less connected which to me is so sad, because the thing which is potentially the most connecting can be so distancing.

JH: In my experience with Jews and some of the spiritual prayerful stuff you're describing isn't just trauma. It's also a deeper sociological positioning of Jews as a minority in a Christian world, or anything that's redolent of Christian prayer is off-putting. Not because any of us had any stones thrown at us by Christians, or had bad experiences in churches, or anything. But simply because we feel like we're being unfaithful to Judaism when we smack of Christian locutions, and phrases and so that's another risk.

RS: It's wanting to hold on to the identity and...

JH: And yeah, and its difference, yes.

RS: Yeah, and I think I've been grateful and fortunate that the more I've become confident in my Jewish identity, and coming from an interfaith family that wasn't immediately apparent, but being more in the Jewish world and working to be more on the Jewish calendar and all that has been a process. And the more I've become centered in an accepting of, "Okay, I'm Jewish. I can relax now, I don't have to prove it anymore," the more I've been able to feel comfortable. I don't wanna say stepping in, or borrowing the language from other faith traditions, but I sort of see it as a translation, where when I say God or the Divine, or a higher power, or source, right? [Hebrew] blessing, I can hear somebody say, Jesus now and I can just say 'oh that's their way of

saying, God. And now I can get behind that because it's just their way of connecting, and of course, it's not just their way of connecting, it's much deeper than that, but that's the way that helps me understand and connect and relate to people of other faiths and their language for their connection to spirituality.

[music]

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

JH: I wanna move on to your musical, which is again, available on your website. So I got... I watched the trailer and it looks kind of fun. And it also has a specifically generational feel, and two of your actors, when they're interviewed in the trailer, they actually cite this. They say what the musical is about. It's called Rising in Love. It's a love story, primarily, with Jewish overtones or Jewish setting or something. It's not clear from the trailer, by the way, how and exactly, what is Jewish about it. We can get there, but I wanna ask you, before we get to the Jewish part, about the millennial part, because one of the actors says it's... She distinctly refers to it as a millennial experience, which in a vacuum, me not having seen the musical or read the book of the musical, I have no idea what that even means. I still don't even know what millennial means, in general. So help me out, is that a fair description, that one millennial comment? And if so, what about the story is millennial?

RS: Sure, and I will also say that it's not a love story, it's a coming of age story.

JH: Coming of... Thank you for the correction. I stand corrected.

RS: No, and it's not you. It's something that my dramaturgy writing partner and I, really we... 'cause we were gonna call it a love story. We were like, "But it's not really a love story." And this is getting at your question of the millennial, it's how to grow up and it relates to all this healthy self-actualization things that I'm interested in. It's...

JH: Hence the title Rising in Love...

RS: Hence the title Rising in Love.

JH: As opposed to falling in love.

RS: As opposed to falling in love. And that is a phrase that I got on Birthright Israel when somebody said "Oh, in Hebrew, you say rising in love." Nobody's heard of that. I maybe heard it one other time. I don't even know if it's true. But it stuck with me. And I wrote a song in college. I'm rising in love with you. And so falling is easy, falling... And there's

only so far you can go when you fall. And when you fall, it hurts. It hurts. You literally fall on the ground, right? So rising is a sense of, it's hard work to do the work of being in a relationship and to navigate conflict. It's something that I am for sure learning to address conflict directly, I've been learning that. It's healthy and kind and loving to address an issue directly rather than avoid it. And so doing that work in relationships with romantic partners, or family, or friends, or colleagues, co-workers. It's hard work, but it also has a sense of lightness and fun and bringing it up and...

JH: And in so far as millennials are entering that stage of life now, perhaps, or fully delving into that complicated stage of life maybe, or maybe your actors feel that way. Maybe that's why she pegged it as a millennial story.

RS: It's rooted in the ethos of what we, I guess, in our generation are dealing with growing up, but it's, I think, relatable to anybody who's been a human talking to another human, as I've heard before.

JH: Right, right, yeah, it's eternal, yeah, yeah, right.

RS: In two minutes, if you're talking with another human, you'll hit a conflict.

JH: So I noticed that you make a point of describing the variety of genres when you describe your God Album. You said, as I said in the intro, that includes funk, swing, folk, and other genres. So I wanna ask you purely, just as a person who happens to be a musician, what your favorite genre of music is these days, perhaps and/or a favorite song, a song you just love, that you grew up with, or just one of your favorite songs.

RS: Totally. When I turn on iHeartRadio, it is funk or Billy Joel.

JH: Alright, so who do you like in the funk... What are some songs you love?

RS: I love the classic ones, like Car Wash, just classic good time funk.

JH: Got it, got it, alright. That's probably gonna be hard to sing without some percussion and stuff or base.

RS: No, but I can see the title song from Rising in Love.

JH: All right, there we go.

RS: Alright, so it goes, "Too many say I've fallen, it's you I've fallen for, but falling hurts and once you fall, you can't fall anymore. I mean saying that you're falling means love's got nowhere else to go, so why not say something that allows love room to grow. Let's say darling, I'm rising in love with you. Darling, you know it's true. I'm rising in love with you. First of all, it's deliberate to rise versus to fall. Second of all, it's a lot more fun than tripping or hitting the wall. Thirdly, love's a lot more grand seen from in the air. Fourthly, it implies that it's a vantage point you share. So let's say darling, I'm rising in love with you. Please, people, take my cue. Say I'm rising in love with you.

JH: Alright.

RS: Thank you.

JH: Perfect, what a great way to go out in on the interview. Thank you, Rory Michelle Sullivan.

RS: Thank you so much, Josh. It's been a pleasure.

JH: For joining, it's been a pleasure to talk to you.

RS: Oh, it's so great to meet you.

JH: Here's to our paths crossing soon again.

RS: Amen, amen.

JH: You've been listening to the College Commons podcast produced and edited by Jennifer Howd and brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion. For this URJ Biennial series, special thanks to Mark Pelavin, the URJ Chief Program Officer and Biennial Director, and Liz Grumbacher, Director of North American events. We hope you've enjoyed this episode and please join us again at collegecommons.huc.edu.

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