



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

AMANDA BERMAN: THE ZIONESS MOVEMENT

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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 2019.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, it's my delight to introduce Amanda Berman. Amanda Berman is the founder and executive director of the Zioness Movement, a new initiative empowering and activating Zionists on the progressive left. Until recently, Amanda was also a civil rights attorney fighting anti-Semitism legally, such as the dual cases against San Francisco state for its constitutional and civil rights violations against Jewish and Israeli students and community members. Amanda Berman, thank you for joining me on the podcast.

Amanda Berman: My pleasure, thanks for having me.

JH: In one of your blog posts, I think it was, you had a very pithy description of what Zioness is about, and you said it's about pushing anti-Semitism out of progressive spaces. So I wanna ask you, first and foremost, what are the progressive spaces that most urgently you feel the need to push anti-Semitism out of?

AB: I wish it was a short list. I think basically, every progressive movement in America right now, and really, all over the world, holds anti-Semitic views. They're manifesting often as anti-Zionist views and it's being legitimized. The suggestion that Jewish peoplehood shouldn't result in a sovereign Jewish state, the suggestion that there's something inherently evil or wrong or imperialist about Jews having a sovereign state in our indigenous homeland, this is really part of the conversation in a lot of progressive spaces. It's really overtaken a lot of the women's movement, it's become central to Black Lives Matter, the BDS movement being adopted as a formal position of the Black Lives Matter platform, in LGBT spaces.

AB: There's so much conversation about... In demonizing Israel and anyone who supports it, which, of course, is the very vast majority of American Jews. Any time

anyone talks about the good of... In Israel, it's pinkwashing in LGBT spaces, so... I could go on and on. Everyone in the Standing Rock protest standing in support of the Sioux drive was waving Palestinian flags and talking about indigenous people, as if the Jews are not indigenous to the land of Israel, so it's a really pervasive problem in our progressive spaces and also a dangerous problem, not just for Jews, but for the integrity of our political left.

JH: I wanna pick up, for the moment, on this phrase you've used, which really resonates with me, which is the articulation of the Jewish people as indigenous to the land of Israel. A, factually, as an historian, not as a liberal Jew, not as a Zionist, not as a person in the world, but as an historian, I have radical, radical agreement with you that that is exactly the right qualifier to articulate what I call our umbilical relationship to the land of Israel.

AB: I like that.

JH: What do we do, how do we engage with a, not an anti-Semitic, but a position of conscience that believes that the Jews are not indigenous, which is just another way of saying that Zionism is colonialism? For the sake of argument, at least, let's agree that the colonial argument and the denial of indigenouness are the same argument.

AB: Okay.

JH: And let's ask, what would it mean if that person had that position and was not anti-Semitic, had no sense of Judaism being inferiority, or Jews be in any way negative, in and of themselves, etcetera, but simply said, "I don't buy the argument of indigenouness." Tell me how you engage with that, what your own thinking is. I'm curious.

AB: Yeah, it's very simple. Someone who holds that point of view is ill-informed, so you engage with them as if they are ill-informed, and you say, "I wanna tell you about Jewish history, I wanna tell you about the First and Second Temples, I wanna tell you about Jews being persecuted in the diaspora for thousands of years, because we were pushed out of our home in the land of Israel, and that Jews in the diaspora were united by one thing, and that was the drive to Zion. The only thing that we shared, in cultures all over the world, was that we pray toward Jerusalem, that we were the children of Zion, from Mount Zion, we are the people of Zion, and the drive to Zion, to reclaim our home in the land of Israel, was the thing that united the Jews."

AB: It's something that I think is so inherent to the Jewish identity, that we believe in Zionism, not just in terms of the re-establishment of Israel in 1948, but as our peoplehood. Zionism, to me, is our narrative, it's our story, it's our history, it is Jewish peoplehood, and it's not political, it's not about Bibi, it's not about the conflict, Zionism in no way negates the possibility of Palestinian statehood, Zionism is about the Jews, and the Jews have a right to declare it as ours, to own it as ours, to tell our own story and what Zionism means to us as a people, and also to separate it from the contemporary politics and policies of the state. And I think it's super important that we reclaim that

narrative, because it is ours and because it's been weaponized against us, because we haven't defined it in our language, and we have every right to define its weaponization against us as anti-Semitic, because we perceive it as anti-Semitic. If a gay friend tells me, "Someone spoke to me in a way that I perceived as homophobic," I would stand in solidarity with my gay friend against that homophobia, because they get to tell me what someone says to them that hurts them.

JH: They get to define their own...

AB: They get to define...

JH: Offense, or victimhood, or...

AB: Their own offense and victimhood, and what discrimination against their community looks and feels like, and same with us. And so, when I am demonized as a Zionist, or when I show up in a progressive space, because I care so much about social justice activism in America, when I wanna fight for my own bodily integrity as a member of the American Women's Movement, and I am held accountable for Israel's ostensible wrongdoing, or I face a litmus test on settlement policy, or I'm told that I have to choose, I have to make a false choice between my identity as a Zionist, which is inherent and my identity as an American progressive, which is also inherent, I refuse to make that choice. And so Zioness is a place, is a community for all the people like me, which is the vast majority of American Jews, who want to hold all of our values in the same place and who really refuse to qualify, let's say, Zionism, who refuse to say, "I'm gonna say what you want me to say so that I can be welcome in this progressive space."

JH: It's not only the case that... I think it's accurate that the statistical, large majority of American Jews remain on the liberal side of the spectrum.

AB: About 80%.

JH: And that we also remain loving and caring and committed, and somehow associating our own destiny with that of Israel.

AB: 95%.

JH: And there's another, even, slightly softer complicating factor, which I personally experienced and people in my cohort generationally, which is that we grew up in an America, largely urban and suburban Jewish communities, where that forced choice of which you spoke, it wasn't just that we didn't have a forced choice, it was the opposite. It was that there was an implicit marriage between American liberalism, Zionism, and even Judaism. And so we didn't realize how good we had it [chuckle], and it's...

AB: Right. The pendulum swings.

JH: Right, but it's shocking to you when you've internally... 'Cause it's so personal...

AB: Right, it's painful.

JH: Right, it's very shocking to come to terms with the fact that there's this new discourse which turns... I don't actually think statistically it turns it on its head, but it feels like it turns it on its head. So it's not 180 degrees different now, but there are moments where it feels that way, and certain sectors it is there. I wanna pick up on what I saw as really a conflation of things that you're forced to confront. For example, to be a Zionist and then to say as you did that being a Zionist does not mean the negation of Palestinian nationalism, it means that Palestinian nationalism has to exist in a context which there is also Jewish nationalism, but it doesn't negate anything. And then on the other hand, having to pass what you called a litmus test against, for example, Bibi or occupation, which are the two examples I think you referred to. But I figure, you know what? If I'm gonna call myself a Zionist, which I energetically do, then that means I'm answerable for Zionism and its consequences. That's true of America. If America does something wrong and I disagree with it, and I go abroad as I often do, then I'm the American in the room and people talk... I don't say, "Oh, Trump's not my president." I say...

AB: But you also don't say, "I no longer think America should exist."

JH: Correct. But I just wanna point out that where I sit, when I have to confront similar things, not the same, I'm sure, but similar, I'm not so bothered by the litmus tests.

AB: So it's fascinating because I would be willing to bet that the times in which you feel like you have to talk about Israeli policy in context with your personal Zionism, it's not because someone is forcing you to. It's not because you won't be welcome in a place unless you do. You're making a choice to talk about something that you care about that relates to your personal values, to your convictions, to what you wish the State of Israel would be. But I don't... I would be... Tell me if I'm wrong... I would bet that you're not doing it because you want to be accepted by someone else.

JH: Overwhelmingly, you are correct.

AB: What I know is happening in a lot of progressive spaces... I'm not as young as I used to be, but I'm still on the younger side.

[chuckle]

JH: None of us is as young as we used to be.

AB: And I understand this space so well because I'm sincerely from it, born of it, and I often talk about how when I was in college, I was such a bleeding heart activist my whole life and always involved in progressive issues and human rights issues, and if someone had approached me, I think, when I was on campus and said, "Oh, you wanna be involved in this immigrants' and refugees' clinic? Well, if you tell me that you care about human rights, I need to see you stand up where it's hardest, and that's against your own people and your own community. You need to prove to me that you will stand up and tell your people that their oppression of another people is the primary problem, and that's how I'll know for sure that you really do care."

AB: And I think if I had been approached with that, I would not have been prepared to negate it, and I would have wanted to know more about what our people are doing that is so evil, and I think I could have been convinced that the whole Zionist enterprise is colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, genocide, that it's truly evil, and that the Jewish people are responsible for the world's worst human rights violations. Now, my mom totally disagrees, says she raised me better than that [chuckle], and I never could have been turned against our community, but honestly, thank God I was never approached with that narrative.

AB: And now that I know what I know and I am as passionate as I am, I understand why our vulnerable young people on college campuses, who truly are committed to a better world, to tikkun olam, who wanna stand with the most marginalized among us, why they are taught that they need to stand against Jewish liberation in order to stand for the liberation of others. So the way the litmus test is imposed in these spaces, it's done in a way that forces people to often reject our own identities in order to show up for other people. And so it's a question of anti-Zionism, not criticism of Israeli policy.

AB: And you started this question talking about the conflation of issues. For me, Zionism is not about settlements, because Zionism is not about borders. Zionism is about Jewish liberation. It's our movement for self-determination, it's our movement for civil rights. The contemporary state is a whole different debate. The security questions of the contemporary state... I, as an American Jew, should not be held accountable for Israel's wrongdoing or ostensible wrongdoing, and I often find that the people who are imposing the litmus test... I overwhelmingly find that the people who are imposing the litmus test don't even understand the questions that they're asking us.

AB: The fact is that when the test is imposed, I reject it, because nobody would say to a Chinese-American woman in the Women's March, "What is your position on China's occupation of Tibet, or imprisonment of a million Uyghurs? And if you don't answer that the way I want you to, you're not welcome to be here and fight for reproductive justice and healthcare and equal pay and family leave." That would never happen, and if it did, I would be the first person to call it out as explicitly racist. So the fact that the Jewish people are held accountable for Israel, or Israel's ostensible wrongdoing, as I said, it's racist, it's anti-Semitic to put a test on us. That does not suggest that we don't have every right to criticize, or that we shouldn't, because I think we should and I do. But institutionally, Zionists exist to fight the anti-Semitism that manifests as anti-Zionism, which is the litmus test.

JH: I was with you until you got to the part about the racism, and here's my thinking. I have to qualify this by never having been within even earshot, much less the object of such a litmus test, but it's not such a stretch for me to imagine that people who are prone to imposing such a litmus test on either a Chinese person which is a very apt example because it could easily be done to a Chinese person because it's such an obvious and widely known case of occupation etcetera, and Jews because of Israel, also widely known. But also in America, some white, cisgendered hetero guy comes to one of these, as you called them bleeding heart movement things, and I wouldn't be shocked if they were imposed with the litmus test about American colonialism, of the

overthrow of Latin American democracies or I don't know, whatever, a million sins America has done, and say, "You've gotta own that, man."

AB: If that happens, I think it's probably not right to hold this one person accountable for the wrongdoing of the past [chuckle] I think it's probably not quite fair.

JH: Yeah, but it wouldn't be racist.

AB: Right, but it's not institutionalized. It's not part of the space. It's not part of the menu of like when I'm talking about LGBT equality and women's advancement and climate change, gun control, racial justice and anti-Zionism.

JH: Palestine, right, right.

AB: It's not even Palestine. I wish it was Palestine because that would be something to fight for as opposed to something to fight against.

JH: Right, right.

AB: And fighting against Israel's existence is not progressive.

JH: Right. But we've done some conflating now because we see the Palestinian flag with Native Americans or whatever the case you gave. Who knows? Maybe they're just being positive and saying Palestinian rights, not...

AB: But they're not, they're not. They're telling Jews, "You have to be anti-Zionists to be welcome here. You're not welcome here unless you disavow Israel's existence." And it's interesting. I hate the term pro-Israel. I won't use that.

JH: I hate it. I'm with you.

AB: I think it is so problematic, so dangerous, and we've set up these two binaries in our community where being pro-Israel means we're automatically anti-Palestinian, which is so not true, so not true. And really, the inverse is true, at least quite often. If not overwhelmingly, the people who identify as pro-Palestinian are exclusively anti-Israel. I don't see them doing anything to actually advance Palestinian society. I wish they would. That's why I'm saying if these were truly pro-Palestinian, we would be talking about how to advance Palestinian people and build an infrastructure and education and without corruption and help them self-determine in their own prosperous land. I would love to have that conversation in a progressive space. But to be honest, because that's not what the conversation is, I think that we need to be focusing on the domestic issues that these movements are about because I have the power to actually effectuate change there and they actually affect my life on a regular basis. The fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become part of the progressive left conversation in America is so bad for the advancement of all the movements that I care about in America. And when you look at the Women's March right now, we're proudly Zionists, proudly participates in the Women's March because we care so much about the advancement of the women's agenda, and we can't let this critical space with millions of women

marching in...

AB: And men and allies, people who wanna see women's rights advanced, we can't let this space be divided and destroyed by the anti-Semitism that was part of its founding. We have to overcome that and protect it by talking about the issues that this event is actually about. And I think that's what we should be focusing on. And we can show up with all of our authentic selves as American women, as feminists, as progressives, as activists for social change, as proud Zionists because we're Jews, but proud Zionists who really don't wanna talk about Israeli policy or American policy vis-a-vis Israel because it has nothing to do with reproductive rights or my access to abortion care. And there's another point about the binary that I wanna go back to, which is there's the one binary is that if you're pro-Israel, you're automatically anti-Palestinian. But the other one is that by legitimizing the term pro-Israel, we, the Jewish community, have also legitimized the term anti-Israel...

JH: Talma.

AB: Which in my mind is totally illegitimate. There is no anti-Spain movement. There is no anti-Russia movement or Syria, for God's sakes. I don't think that Syria should cease to exist. I wish that its genocidal dictator leader would not be in charge anymore, but I would like to see Syria where Syrian people are protected and safe and living in a prosperous Syria. So there's one movement in the world that is anti the existence of a member of the community of nations, and it's the anti-Israel community, and it is only legitimate because we call ourselves the pro-Israel community.

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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.

JH: I'm familiar with you... I don't think anyone involved in Jewish community and Jewish conversations is familiar with your argument about this singling out of Israel's right to exist in a way that no other nation is singled out. I'm not sure it's entirely accurate. When new nations are born like South Sudan, East Timor, when they are born, usually not out of nothing. Like us, they're usually born because they're...

AB: Conflict.

JH: No, not just conflict, but more affirmatively, they're born because there's a difference between them and the country they're a part of.

AB: Oh yeah, but I'm saying there's always a conflict when a new state is, comes into into existence.

JH: But there is also always the negation of the legitimacy of the proposal itself, the proposition itself. And so it's not just Israel. Any time something is born like this, someone says, "You have no way to do that." The American Civil War is a version of that, where we would say to the South, "You can't just be a country."

AB: Do you think 70 years later, people still questioned whether America should be as a country?

JH: They would have questioned the South if the South had won. And yes, I do believe that. I think that when you have a brand new nation, everyone who is in conflict with the nation says, "You have no right to exist as a nation." And there's another component here, which is that we want our cake and we wanna eat it too. On the one hand, we wanna be this unique story of redemption, and this magical romanticized thing where the Jewish people returned home after 2,000 years, etcetera, etcetera. And we play to the uniqueness, and then when we are cornered for our uniqueness, all of a sudden it's like, well, you're treating us differently... Now, here was where I really differ with you. I say bring it on. I say, challenge my right to exist to your heart's delight, as long as you have the self-respect and the intellectual honesty to hear my side of the argument. 'Cause here's what I believe, I believe that it is an umbilical connection.

JH: I believe we are indigenous. I think we have an incredible story. I think it's a compelling story. I think it is a religious, ethnic, territorial, historical Torah base, I think it's literary on every level. It is so thick. It is so rich, it is... And it is precisely because it is not just about the fact that the land of Israel was our focal point, the only thing we all shared, it's because it is part of a nexus of five or six other major components of Jewish civilization that we all shared, we all acknowledged. You see a Jew from across the globe who looks nothing like you, and maybe only knows a few words of Hebrew and therefore has no language in common with you, there is no doubting of the fundamental solidarity and more than solidarity.

AB: Goosebumps.

JH: Not only solidarity, but fraternity or sorority of destiny.

AB: Yeah. Yes, yes.

JH: And... And that nexus is the warp and the weft of a fabric that is so multi-colored and complicated and strong. That's the story of Zionism. And I will tell that to anybody, and, give me an opening, and I'll tell that.

AB: Yes. I love that.

JH: So, I don't mind. And I do mind the intellectual dishonesty of calling as colonists. Now, it's a problem. Why is it a problem? Because, they pick up on this coincidence of colloquialism, that the early Zionists referred to settling the land as a colony. And

that's... That's...

AB: They still in France, they still call settlements Israeli colonies.

JH: I know. Now, like you, I'm much more susceptible to the argument of the Palestinians saying, "Great, be as indigenous as you want but, this round of history, in this century, we were here, and we've been displaced, and okay, well, then we'll negotiate." And we either negotiate or we don't, but, at least I get the intellectual honesty of that. And so, I come at of a slightly different angle from you, but, I really take your admonition to heart, which is that...

AB: Wait, you've said so many things, I have to respond. [laughter]

JH: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I apologize. I apologize. But I spoke too much, you're the one-

AB: -No, no, no, no. No. I just don't... I'm trying to keep in my head all the things I need to respond to. Okay, the first one is that you're saying that every time a state is created, there are questions as to its legitimacy, and I just negate... I fundamentally disagree that that's a thing, because Israel... I have to really memorize these numbers. I think Israel was number 45 in the states, the member states of the United Nations that were internationally recognized as legitimate sovereign states, and there are a 192 now, which means there were... What? A hundred and fifty something... A hundred and forty nine states that were established and recognized by the international community after Israel and I...

JH: No, they weren't established after they were recognized.

AB: Recognized. Recognized.

JH: But not established.

AB: Many of them have been established in the last 20 years. When you're talking about the community of nations, the international community, what we see in the United Nations as the member states, the states that are on the face of the planet, I don't know an international movement to delegitimize any of them, to deny the legitimate existence of any other state. And it doesn't matter whether they existed before Israel or were recognized before Israel. Nobody past a few years after, has an ongoing conversation in terms of trying to actually deny the legitimacy in order to have the international community unrecognize the state or recognize and supplant the state with another state. That's not a thing that happens anywhere else.

JH: So the hyper-organized and persistent and global vilification and persistence on a given state's birth and subsequent legitimacy for decades and decades, we agree. I acknowledge that there's nothing so... So...

AB: There's nothing remotely close to that.

JH: But there... But in quality fundamentally is all I was making was a narrow point and

you've... You've... You've distinguished it.

AB: Yeah. I just think the broader point is that it's... It's just there's nothing like this.

JH: But I assure you that China expends tremendous time, energy and money in internationalizing as much as it can, the de-legitimacy of Tibet.

AB: But no one... No one else cares. [laughter]

JH: Right. So I'm... I'm acknowledging... I'm acknowledging that difference. I'm acknowledging that difference.

AB: Yeah, there's no international movement to delegitimize Tibet. In fact, there is an international movement to support Tibet. [laughter]

JH: Yes, as far... As far as that goes, I think we agree.

AB: Yeah, but then... But then beyond that, the way that you just described Zionism, I said I had goosebumps, I was... I really meant it. And when people who I respect who have this passion and this ability to talk about our history and our story and where Zion the land of Israel fits into it, that is so powerful for me to listen to. And I think I can articulate it pretty well, but, the way you just did it was so incredible. The thing is, not a lot of people can talk about Israel the way that you can, not a lot of people can talk about the Jewish people the way that you can.

AB: And so young American Jews just as one example... This is something people, adults, people older than me, people who come to me to talk about Zionists feel so unable to have this conversation. And so, when somebody says to you, "I don't think Israel is legitimate," and you say, "I welcome that. Bring it on, and I will tell you why it is." That's because you are very well equipped and you work at HUC. [laughter] You have an ability to have this argument that most American Jews don't.

AB: And so, one of the problems with the litmus test for me is that it demands that Jews know things, have complex opinions on history, policy, context, the Middle East, national security, international security, [laughter] borders, flotillas, checkpoints, for God's sakes. So, you have to understand all these things, but then even beyond understanding them as a Jew, you have to declare your opinion on them. And until you declare an opinion that XYZ leader of XYZ movement agrees with, you're simply not welcome to participate. That's the problem.

AB: Right. You're talking about this rigorous ideological litmus test that is imposed in a relatively broad swath of... In this case, progressive organizations. And that is impressive for its systematized.

AB: Yeah.

JH: Picking of...

AB: It is outright discrimination. And if you and I went together to a March, it would be really fun because people would come to us and we would have this whole debate and no one would ever ask us another question again, but everybody else says, "What do you mean? I have to tell you about settlement policy? I don't know anything about settlement policy. Oh, if you want me to be the good Jew, I will tell you, settlements are the obstacle to peace. Can I play the progressive game now? Can I talk about my bodily integrity in America under Donald Trump? Have I done enough to prove to you that I care about this issue?"

AB: That is heart-breaking to me, that we feel like we have to say that, not because settlements are not one of the obstacles to peace, they're not the exclusive obstacle to peace, but much more importantly than that, the fact that a Jew has to say X to be welcomed is a problem, it is a real problem. And I don't want people to feel like they have to either reject Zionism entirely or qualify their Zionism. I want them to understand Zionism is not about Israeli policy, they could be proud Zionists without talking about Israeli policy. And you know what's fascinating, I mentioned earlier that I feel like the people who ask these questions are not at all informed on the questions themselves. So I always use this example of how, no matter where I go, whenever I speak, if it's at an event or a rally or something, or if I'm speaking on a stage somewhere, somebody always wants to know what is the Zionist position on settlement policy. It's like the first question, every time.

AB: And I say we don't take institutional positions, we have lots of debates within Zionist communities, people are interested, they wanna learn, we partner with policy organizations so that Zionist activists can talk about Israeli issues, but we are a domestic social justice activist space, we're focused on American issues. Okay, no one's ever satisfied with that. What about settlement policy? I need to know what you think about settlement policy?

JH: I can hear the conversation in me head.

AB: You can, of course. It's just... But you have... And how can you be a progressive, if you won't talk about settlement policy? So I say "Okay, are you talking about Amona or Modi'in Illit? Silence, crickets. No matter whether I am talking to a B'nai B'rith Leadership Forum of a 150 Jewish leaders or whether I'm talking to Rabbis, or Hillel students or activists on XYZ issue, nobody can tell me the difference between Amona and Modi'in Illit. And the reason that I ask this question always is just to demonstrate how ridiculous the question is, it's not because I expect anyone to know the difference between Amona and Modi'in Illit, but the point is, these are very complicated topics, and when you ask an American Jew, to take a position, a very simple one-line position on settlement policy, in order to be welcomed to fight for racial justice in America, this is not just exclusionary to Jews, it is bad for the fight against police brutality, the fight against mass incarceration, there are real things that American Jews want to be active on and committed to and fighting for, as allies, as progressives, as people who want America to be stronger. And when we are faced with these kinds of questions, we end up staying home and it's bad for the progressive left.

JH: Thank you very much for your work at Zionist and for taking the time to join me in this great conversation.

AB: My pleasure.

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JH: You've been listening to the College Commons Podcast. Produced and edited by Jennifer Houd 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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