PETER BERG: POLITICAL DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN JUDAISM

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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 episode of the College Commons Podcast and we are joined by Rabbi Peter S. Berg. Rabbi Berg is the Senior Rabbi of The Temple: The Hebrew Benevolent Congregation. The Temple is Atlanta's oldest synagogue founded in 1867. Rabbi Berg was named by Newsweek and The Daily Beast as one of the most influential rabbis in the United States; by Georgia Trend as one of the 100 most influential Georgians; and by Atlanta Magazine as one of Atlanta's most powerful leaders. And I think we're gonna get a sense of Rabbi Berg's civic presence that has resulted in these accolades. It's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining.

Peter Berg: Thank you, Joshua, great to be here.

JH: So I wanna start by talking to you about something that you've written about, namely making sure that when we say that, Reform Judaism is a big tent, that we really mean it. And that we include not only liberal voices with which we are statistically more comfortable, shall we say, but also conservative voices. And so I wanna ask you, to kick off the conversation, what's the temperature now in Reform Judaism viz a viz satisfaction and comfort of Jews who are members of our family, but who are, what we might call, politically conservative?

PB: It's a great question and a question we ask a lot at The Temple. In the south, we have a congregation that is comprised both of liberals and conservatives and a lot of people that are somewhere in between. And we ask the question because we're so good as Reform congregations about talking about how inclusive we are to inter-faith families, how inclusive we are to Jews of color, and there are also Jews who are politically conservative who sit in our pews and wonder why they don't feel so comfortable. So our mission and vision statement states so clearly that diversity matters to us and that's included in people's political views and perspectives. So we really work hard to reach out to them.

JH: And how do you think you're doing? Well, I wanna hear how you're doing at The Temple, and I wanna hear how you think not only Reform Judaism is doing writ large, but I would say non-orthodox Judaism writ large, because statistically American Jews,

even when you calculate Orthodox, still skew very heavily to the Democratic Party and to liberal causes. So today's polarized moment forces us to take your mission statement seriously, but also to ask it about our movement in American Judaism. So I wanna hear your side.

PB: I think it's a great question because it's true, most of our congregations, including ours definitely skew more towards liberal politics. But the question is, "What do we do with many members of our congregation who are not?" And what I've done in the last couple of months is actually a series of individual meetings, anyone who reached out to me. What happened was, there was one day where someone said to me, "You and The Temple are too conservative." And someone said, "You and The Temple are to liberal." And I said, "Wait a minute." And so I started to have these meetings and what I learned when I outlined what it is that we do as a congregation, the social justice work that we do, almost everybody agrees. So once we take out the political part and how it relates to political parties and focus on what our Jewish tradition has to say, all of a sudden, we're roughly on the same page. We're talking about fighting sex trafficking, getting rid of sex trafficking, which in Atlanta is a big problem. We're talking about ending homelessness, we're talking about taking care of the world in which we live, the environment. We're talking about racial justice.

JH: I gotta stop you right there. The environment, in my world... I'm not a rabbi, but because of my role as Dean of the campus, people approach me on these issues as you can imagine. And often social justice frustrates the conservatives I speak to really pointedly because they feel that it's code for "liberal agenda". And so from my perspective, you listed some things that intuitively cross the aisle. So, sex trafficking. We know that the rhetoric of the right and the rhetoric of the left abhor, as any self-respecting human being would, the sex traffic. Great. I get that. Climate change and social justice, however, I find to be much more... And you also said racial justice, and I know you're doing work in racial justice. I want you to tell me what that project is, but I also want you to tell me how it plays with this particular issue.

PB: We've had no controversy at all with the racial justice work that we're doing because The Temple historically... You have to think about The Temple in Atlanta. In 1958, The Temple was bombed by white supremacists. Rabbi Jacob Rothschild of Blessed Memory was giving sermons, sermon after sermon about racial justice and integration. White supremacists didn't like it, they bombed The Temple. Thankfully nobody was hurt. But that has been our mission and our vision is to carry on Rabbi Rothschild and Dr. King's legacy. So the work that we do in racial justice... Now we have to ask ourselves a question, "What do we do in this year, in this time to carry that legacy forward?" Because some of the issues have changed, but they're all related to racial justice. We're working specifically right now on an issue that relates to mass incarceration. The US puts more people in jail than any other country in the entire world. Think about the worst countries out there...

JH: China?

PB: Worse than China. More people in jail than China. And it happens that my state,

which I'm very proud of, Georgia unfortunately though, puts more people in jail than any other state in the country. So we have to ask ourselves, "What's going on here?" And of course, it turns out to be a racial injustice. And so what we're trying to do is to work on that issue by looking at people in Fulton County where the temple is housed, the largest county in Georgia, and people who have criminal records that go back a number of years, perhaps 20 years ago they were shoplifting. It's never been prosecuted and it never will be. Maybe the police officer never showed up or for whatever reason they don't care about it, but when you have that record, you can't get a job or a house.

JH: Just to clarify, we're not talking about a convicted criminal. We're talking about a person whose record consists simply of having been arrested?

PB: Correct.

JH: So they are from the philosophical legal perspective, they're innocent.

PB: Correct. We're not talking about someone who had a horrific violent crime, of course. And so they have this record, but you know you're stuck in the system. You can't get a job or a house or anything.

JH: And they're disproportionately African-American?

PB: Disproportionate by extraordinary numbers. So then we ask ourselves, "What happens if the judges come to temple, and in one day, we restrict some of those records?" So we put ads all over the radio, we've done it twice now, we've had three judges come and people come to the temple at 10:00 AM, and by 11 o'clock, they walk out free and clear. We have restricted their records, and they can now get a job and a house. It's Teshuva in its greatest greatest form. An opportunity to start over.

JH: It must be quite something to see. It must be...

PB: It is extraordinary. There's tears of joy and happiness, people who are reclaiming their lives. And what's so interesting about it and it relates to the issue you suggested at the beginning, there is bipartisan support for this. It's championed by the Republican governor and by the Democratic mayor of Atlanta. Both people understand this and see this as making a difference in the world and everyone can put their politics aside to do the right thing.

JH: Your strategy on this issue, which is a serious issue, of making conservative Jews feel at home in our communities where they belong, you feel that one of the strategies that you're best able to deploy is common ground, issues that we can raise up together that are in fact good for everyone.

PB: One strategy is definitely common ground. A second strategy is relationships. And I said earlier, I meet with anyone who doesn't like a sermon, doesn't like another rabbi's sermon, doesn't like an issue. And when we talk, and we look at the sermon, and when we look at the issue, it turns out we almost always have more in common than we don't. And so I've created these incredible relationships with members of the congregation that

are either more conservative or more liberal than the majority of the congregation. And from there we can start a dialogue. There also has to be a little bit of humility here. Rabbis have to be able to listen and learn from other people. Sometimes we don't get it right. Sometimes we give a sermon and someone comes in to offer feedback and we can actually learn something. And I have changed publicly changed my mind and opinion when I'm able to learn from someone else.

JH: Has it made you a better sermonizer?

PB: I think so. Certainly a better rabbi, a better human being, and certainly a better sermonizer. Congregants give me articles and books all the time and I actually read them. I think it's really important. It sometimes takes a while... [chuckle]

JH: [chuckle] Right, right. You don't sleep much.

PB: But I think it's really important to learn and to change and to grow. And because I've been able to demonstrate that, I think that I have some... People understand that it's a genuine place where I'm coming from, even when we disagree. But the other part of that is that you have to speak truth to power, you really have to... And people understand. I do a lot of work on gun violence prevention and there's no scenario in which I'm letting people bring machine guns into the synagogue. I feel very strongly about it. I can acknowledge people's Second Amendment rights, but there are some limits to who can have a gun and where, and you have to take a strong position on that.

JH: So speaking of strong positions and cleaving for the moment to the theme of conservative and liberal, you chose to boycott President Trump's 2016 address at APAC. And in an op-ed to The Washington Post, you cited all the things that liberals typically cite in your objection. You cited his bigoted comments against Mexicans, Muslims, and others, his refusal to disavow remarks suggesting a religious test for office. I loved that you brought that into your op-ed because that's a really important thing that people don't focus on quite as much because it's not as blustery when he talks, it's not as a tweet-worthy. So I wanna ask you what you think... I want you to channel, I don't know your politics, but I want you to channel for the moment, a reasonably strong conservative member in your congregation just in your mind, and tell me what you think the conservatives' strongest critique of Trump is.

PB: First of all, I wrote that piece when he was a candidate, one of many Republican candidates.

JH: Oh, he wasn't President. Thank you. Thank you for the correction.

PB: Yeah, he was a candidate. The only reason why it's important to say is I would not have done it so strongly for someone who's the sitting President of the United States. No one thought that he was ever gonna be President then. And I think most Jews wanted someone else to be the candidate at the time. And I was arguing that he was on a different moral plane than all the other Republican candidates based on what he was saying. But the question that you raised, what Republican candidates, sorry, Republican members of the congregation might say, I think a lot of people are concerned with the

language that's used. You hear over and again, "Please just put the Twitter down and stop tweeting and stop shooting at the hip." And I think it's sort of the language that's used.

JH: The coarseness.

PB: The coarseness that I think seems to be troubling to a lot of people, even Hisba supporter.

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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.

JH: Now, back to our podcast.

JH: According to a very recent, less than a year old now, study of Jewish LA County, it turns out that proportions of liberalism that you and I, our generation, typically remember American Jews to be, which is roughly 70%-80% Democratic, it turns out that at least in LA County those proportions appear to remain constant. That Jews are still very preponderantly liberal on the spectrum of liberalism that we apply in the United States. Let's assume that this LA County study is statistically representative of American Jewry writ large. Nevertheless, I think there's a perception out there that the Jews in America have moved to the right, despite the data that I'm putting out there now. At least somewhat, but I think some people think more than somewhat. So I wanna ask you, do you think that American Jews have moved to the right, either on Israel or on the US? And independent of what you think American Jews have or haven't moved to, what do you make of the perception that we've moved to the right?

PB: Yeah, I think that perception is definitely out there. I hear it all the time. And people say to me, "You should keep in mind that we have more and more Jews who are politically conservative. And there certainly are more Jews right now that identify, and not everybody identifies, as politically conservative than I remember, but I don't think it's a lot, I don't think it's a huge number. Where I think the shift is is towards the middle, and I think it's from both sides. I see more members of the community on the left who are going more towards the center, and on the right who are going more towards the center. And what I think is that people see a lot of these issues as not being black and white. There's not one side to the gun issue. There's a Second Amendment and a right for some people to have guns, but there's also certain guns that should never be out there and certain people who should never have them. So I think on a lot of these

issues, there's a center point and a common ground, and that's the direction that I see on a lot of these issues. And if we can stop looking at them as there's only one way. Judaism doesn't teach that there's only one way to anything.

PB: We have a 70 faces of the Torah, we say. We have a Talmud that records the majority and minority opinions. And a United States Supreme Court that essentially comes from the Talmud that says, "We value everybody's opinion and perspective." So I think that's an important change, it's not a monolithic view anymore.

JH: We focused on this particular divide, but if it's not this particular divide, which I suspect at the end of the day is not your biggest worry, what is your biggest worry? What keeps you up?

PB: I think what really keeps me up is the inability of so many members of the Jewish community to find that center common ground. To even acknowledge that there might be another viewpoint. There might be another way. And that when we get so stuck in our political ideologies, whatever they are, we're not willing to hear the other side, we're not willing to learn and to grow. And if we could just get people to come to the table... And I actually think synagogues are a place where people could come together. Synagogues could be the place that bridges this massive gap in the conversation in America where people feel so stuck. They can't sit at their Thanksgiving table and talk because they're coming from two totally different places. What would it look like if the synagogue was the place that actually brought people together?

JH: As the word means, which means "to lead together".

PB: Yeah.

JH: You are the her to a legacy rabbinate and a legacy synagogue and clearly The Temple and your predecessors, and you personally, clearly as I introduced you with, have held an important civic place in the life of Atlanta. Tell me how Atlanta understands the Jewish community and The Temple. What's the dynamic here?

PB: Atlanta is a community that I think works really well together. We see ourselves as the birthplace of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. So those ideas stayed with us and the interfaith cooperation is so apparent in everything that we are, and everything that we do. The Temple is 152 years old this year. And when we were founded, we were founded as the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation. Everyone says "The Temple" now because that's our nickname because that was the only synagogue and everyone just said "The Temple". And if you watch "Driving Miss Daisy", which is filmed partially at The Temple and about a member of the congregation, Jessica Tandy says to Morgan Freeman, "Hoke, take me to The Temple." because there's really nowhere else to go.

JH: That's The Temple.

PB: No other temple. But I think that because The Temple has been around for so long,

we have become in many ways a leading voice on issues of justice and on bringing the community together. I spend a lot of my rabbinate in the civic community and the interfaith community...

JH: Is that expected of you by the congregation?

PB: I don't know that it's expected as much as it is something that I love to do. It's really one of my favorite parts of the job. I sit on more than 40 boards, I'm not active in them all, believe me. But to be a presence and to be a part of...

JH: Wow, that's daunting.

PB: Yeah, to be a part of these committees and these conversations that are taking place is really important. And sometimes the civic leaders come to us. There was a street that was going to be named after someone a couple of years ago that has an anti-Semitic horrible past. And the mayor called and said, "Can we use this name?" And I said, "Absolutely not. There's no way you can name... " I won't say the name. You can't say it. And they immediately moved away from it. So we have those relationships. And again, back to a earlier conversation, I have relationships with the Republican governor and the Democratic mayor. And it's really important even when I disagree sometimes on some issues, on some major issues, there are some major issues that I don't agree with, but you have to have those relationships and so that we can get something done. You can either stand on the street and scream or you can get in on the inside and make a difference.

JH: So in the course of your career, have you noticed meaningful shift in Jewish attitudes about Israel and the Jewish community's internal conversation about Israel? And if so, what does it mean for you as the senior rabbi of a major synagogue?

PB: The Temple is a Zionist congregation and we take 250 people to Israel every other year. So it's a huge part of who we are and what we do. We take teens every year. We take families, multiple buses of families. And we take adults, empty-nesters, also on a separate bus. So we have even in the 11 or so years that I've been there, we have an alumni class of over 1,000 people that we've taken to Israel in that period of time. But there is a shift in the conversation and part of what we try to do is focus on two things. We want the congregation to engage in both a pro-US-Israel relationship conversation, to care about the relationship that America and Israel has and to advocate for it, and to care about progressive causes in Israel.

PB: Reform congregations, pluralism in Israel, praying at the Kotel. So we're trying to get people to care about both of those issues, to say, "When you belong to The Temple, we want you to care about the US-Israel relationship, and progressive Zionism in Israel." And that's gonna take more time. It's a lot harder conversation. There's also some challenges with younger generation and their connection to Israel. I think this is something we have to pay more attention to, but we're doing it by taking people. So we're taking, for example, a funded trip to Israel for young adult interfaith couples at

almost no expense to them because we want them to be able to experience Israel and learn about Israel and to be able to participate in a nuanced conversation based on knowledge.

JH: And is it working? How many times have you done that particular trip?

PB: We're doing our first one this summer, so this will be our first of that cohort going to Israel this summer. Amd I'll let you know the next time we do this.

JH: We in the professional Jewish world spend a lot of time worrying about institutions not serving the Jewish community and/or failing to promise continuity of our civilization and our culture. And there's a lot to worry about, but we also make all kinds of progress and do amazing things and amazing things are happening in the Jewish world. When you look at the entire spectrum of American Judaism, what's one of those things that most excites you?

PB: I think one of the things that excites me the most is a reframe of a question that we've been asking wrong for a while. We have been, and for good reason, accustomed to asking, "Is that good for our institution?" We wanna know if something is good for a particular synagogue's bottom line or for membership. And I think the real question that we're starting to ask in a very positive way is, "Is that good for the Jewish people?" And sometimes something that's good for the Jewish people may not directly affect an institution's bottom line. It may mean that we're doing something because it's the right thing even though it may not get more members, it may not increase the income that comes in. But I think it's making a difference. I feel excitement around asking the question, "Is this good by the Jewish people?" And I want us to start asking that even more. And you have to be able to fund "Is it good for the Jewish people?" We raised a lot of money for our endowment recently, $36 million. So we can start to ask those kinds of questions. Can we just do what we know and feel is the right thing? And again, we're in the early stages of that. But I get really excited and animated when I think about Jewish institutions asking that question.

JH: So here's to doing more of what's good for the Jewish people and the world and to our partnership and doing it with you and The Temple and Hebrew Union College, it's a pleasure to speak with you.

PB: I look forward to it. I feel so blessed also to serve on the Board of Overseers of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the work that we get to do together. It's a pleasure.

PB: Always great to talk to you.

JH: Thank you.

PB: Thank you.

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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 things 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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