



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

RABBI ARIEL BURGER: FINDING THE TEACHER WITHIN

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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. Welcome to this episode of the college Commons podcast where we will have the pleasure of speaking with Rabbi Ariel Burger. Ariel Burger is the author of *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*, which won the 2019 National Jewish Book Award in biography. He is also an artist and teacher integrating education, spirituality and the arts. An orthodox rabbi and Covenant Foundation grantee, Ariel develops cutting-edge arts and educational programming for adults, facilitates workshops for educators and consults to nonprofits. He's currently working to establish the Witness Institute to train leaders in Elie Wiesel's approach to moral education. Ariel Rabbi Burger, thank you for joining us on the Commons podcast.

Ariel Burger: Pleasure to be with you.

JH: I think most of us can imagine how powerful and inspiring it can be for a student to learn from the proverbial great man, I say proverbial because it could be a woman, but what are the ways that studying at the feet of a great master can actually impede the student?

AB: Wonderful question. Well, the tension is always that a great teacher wants the student to become her or himself, rather than imitate the teacher. So the question is, how do we as educators empower the students to seek and find themselves even in those places where they might disagree with us, where they might move in a direction that we haven't explored or that we don't feel fully comfortable with. In my relationship with Professor Wiesel he was very, very clear always that he believed in me and that he trusted me to find my own voice. And he never gave me any cause to succumb to the temptation to imitate him. And so I was always very aware of that in moments when I asked him advice and I wanted an answer, and he didn't answer. And this is true of great teachers. I think mediocre teachers want the students to be like them and great teachers want students to be like themselves.

JH: Themselves.

AB: And he really did that for me and for many other students.

JH: That answers the question on the positive, was there in fact a way in which he could impede not by virtue of personality necessarily, but by the virtue of the category of his stature.

AB: Well, celebrity was a barrier I had to overcome at certain points, especially early on before I really knew him well. I was intimidated by that, I was a teenager. So I was aware of that, I was intimidated by that. I think he was doing everything he could to put me at ease from the very first meeting where he held his hand out and said his name as if I didn't know who he was, to the modesty and generosity with which he greeted me at the door when I came to see him. I think that I brought my own projections to him along the way at various moments, and not only to him, but to other teachers and other great personalities from our tradition. And one of the amazing things that I've experienced over and over again is there's an inclination to worship a teacher. And again, the great teacher says, "Don't worship me. You have that in you and it's between you and God the infinite." Whatever language we use for that.

And so the teacher recalls you over and over again to that. And that was my experience of, there was moments when I was dipping into that temptation a little bit and being swayed a little bit in one way or another. I've had the repeated experience of those great teachers and particularly Professor Wiesel insisting that it's a detour, it's a dead end, it's not gonna lead you to the kind of growth that you're imagining. The hardest thing for me was projecting on to myself and sort of imagining an ideal version of myself and then trying to force myself to become that. That was a big part of my journey that it took me a long time to let go of.

JH: When you describe yourself on your website and the like, you describe among other things your Jewish journey. And you write the following, "I questioned everything in search of an answer, but it wasn't until I met Professor Wiesel that I realized that questioning is the answer." I suppose that you know that in the liberal Jewish world we don't merely celebrate, we actually sell Judaism to ourselves and to the world as quintessentially embodying the very notion that questioning is the answer. This is our currency. Why was it a revelation for you?

AB: Well first coming from a deeply orthodox background, at least as far as my schooling went and elements of my family history, that's not always the assumption and it's not taken for granted. We question the text, that's what we're trained to do from an early age is to poke holes in the text and question assumptions and challenge any statement that we hear. But it's not necessarily applied to theology or questions of personal growth or finding one's path as a unique human being. And there's some degree of conformity in parts of that community or those communities where I spent time.

JH: I'm gonna interrupt you and ask you, when you say some degree, the stereotype would be that to interpret your some degree as an understatement with respect to conformity is, are you in fact being polite or?

AB: No, it depends where... I'm sort of trying to encapsulate the range of experiences that I've had in orthodoxy because there are a lot of places where... And sometimes in very surprising places where conformity is just not really a present value or of course at all. First of all, we have all these assumptions and projections about one another, and the communities we're not a part of.

JH: Yes, yes.

AB: And we know enough to know that usually they're wrong and that when we get close to people in those communities, whether we're talking about other denominations or other religious communities or people in general, our projections and assumptions are often challenged in great ways. But that happened for me also, I grew up going to a black hat Orthodox day school where...

JH: Were you in a block at home?

AB: No. Growing up, my mother was Modern Orthodox and still is. My father, growing up, was Conservadox. Neither one of them was ultra orthodox by any stretch. So that made for some interesting tension already at a young age and a pretty early exposure to some degree of pluralism. My grandfather, on my mother's side was a very serious Modern Orthodox scholar, a lawyer by day and same as a scholar by night and chill at afternoon and was all about learning and the rigor and discipline of learning and growth and learning. And my father's father was a conservative hasid who was just filled with a sense of beauty and humor. So there was a lot going on in my childhood religiously, Jewishly, culturally, which was great but also sometimes confusing.

Later, I discovered that in places where I would imagine the most conformity to be, for example, in the one particular Hasidic community in Jerusalem where I spent a lot of times, the Breslov Hasidic community, I'm sure there are issues around conformity but my experience, my personal experience there was that people were just really chill. People were just... Really welcome you, come as you are, bring your questions and partly that's a function of the teachings...

JH: Of Nachman.

AB: Of Rebbe Nachman. Right. Which are very, very deep and very open and related to what we were talking about earlier. When people came to Rebbe Nachman for advice, he wouldn't give advice. And he wanted his people to be autonomous. And so you don't think of autonomy in the hasidic community but in that...

JH: Right, right.

AB: In that sect, at least, which is the group that I'm most connected to and the path that I am closest to in my life there's a lot of non-conformity and there's a lot of a sense that the hardest questions are things that you need to figure out between yourself and God and your own heart.

JH: And you were exposed to this before your tutelage under Professor Wiesel or after?

AB: Both. It was along the way. Because I had a lot of contact with Professor Wiesel from age 15 until my early 20s. I was in Israel for a long time and stayed in touch with him and then after those years in Israel, I came back and became his teaching assistant. That's when we had the most intensive regular time with some formality around it because I was studying... I was doing a doctorate with him and from then until the end of his life, close to the end of his life we had more regular contact. But he was very much a presence in my life from much earlier on.

So for example, one of those years I was in Israel and I was studying in Yeshiva. I met him in Jerusalem in the lobby of the King David Hotel and I asked him a question that had been on my mind constantly for months which was, "Can you create a religious identity based entirely on doubt?" That was where I was living. Even though I came from an orthodox background, in part, I couldn't find a kind of bedrock philosophical, theological statement upon which to build the whole edifice. And that was the kind of thing we talked about, where other teachers might have said God is dangerous, you have to hold on to faith, in spite of your rational self or the questions that are coming up for you, you have to sacrifice your rational self on the altar of faith and religious life, he said, "No, you have to... The best thing you can do is integrate faith and doubt. They're not opposites." If it's only doubt, then it's dangerous. In other words, if it veers into cynicism, I think it's very dangerous.

JH: Right.

AB: But if you have a relationship between faith and doubt, then the faith makes you safe from cynicism and the doubt ensures that you don't fall into fanaticism. And if we approach these kinds of questions from a purely intellectual place, we will sometimes mistakenly believe that we have... There's a contradiction between faith and doubt so the world has given me a box called faith and another box called doubt and I have to pick one. I'm a believer or I'm not. I'm religious or I'm secular. We have these categories here in North America, Israel and around the world and it ain't necessarily so and for Elie Wiesel, it just wasn't the case that you had to make those kinds of false choices.

JH: I must say, in my world, Jewishly, there is no feeling painted into a box by that false dichotomy. The vast majority of the Jews in the pews and the professors and rabbis with whom I deal all the time have long, long ago jettisoned any sense of being beholden to box A and box B, emotionally and intellectually.

AB: Yeah.

JH: That mixture is entirely comfortable to them.

AB: Well, that's a wonderful thing and William James talks about a first naivete and a second naivete, you know, you have certain beliefs that are then shattered and then you come to a sort of more sophisticated version of the same thing. So what was a challenge for me was that I was trying to arrive at the place you're describing without letting go of a sense of some place for submission and obedience and even a sense of self sacrifice in the sense that I'm beholden to and obligated to mitzvot not just

because I'm choosing from an autonomous place but because there's some kind of burden that I bear, obligation that I bear that raises me up.

JH: The yoke of the kingdom of heaven.

AB: Exactly.

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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.

AB: So that's the... That's the bigger challenge in my life was, I could have made that move to say, "I'm no longer Orthodox, I'm no longer Halachically bound. And that would have resolved the question, I also could have said, "I am only Orthodox, and only Halachically bound, and anything that doesn't fit into that I'm going to let go of." What I was trying to do was say, "I'm bound to Halakha because I believe in that. I believe in the divinity of Halakha, and I believe in the power of that obligation to liberate me from myself. I see that as a spiritual path, and I also don't wanna live it in a way that betrays my sense of self or the reality or authenticity of who I am." One of the best things to read about this in my experience is reading Leonard Cohen talking about sittings and meditation.

Because for him, that was not a process of looking for any sort of liberation except the liberation from the kind of freedom that was so burdensome, and led him to depression and things like that, having that discipline of waking up at 3:00 in the morning sittings as in was liberating because it was the opposite of liberating. So there's... There's a lot to say here, I also wanna tell you that, the first time I came to a biennial, I came home, and I said to my wife, "I think we should be reformed Jews, and do everything the same way we're doing it now, not change our practice at all, but have the perspective of, in the language of the Talmud, "Great is the one who's not commanded and chooses to do it anyway." Let's let go of that sense of obligation for a while and just see what it feels like to act and observe Halakha and all of that from a place of love."

And recently I found a source in the Talmud, in the commentaries in the Talmud, that talks about how, even though the Talmud says it's better to be commanded, it's greater to be commanded because then maybe you're overcoming the inner resistance, and you're working for it. There's a... There is a commentator that says, "I just found this a month ago." There's a commentator who says, That's true in one dimension, but there's another dimension in which not being commanded is a greater sign of love." So, I think one of the things that we all deal with wherever our personal practice is, is how do we

bridge the sense of the positive aspects of being obligated, and the power in that, and the richness of that, because we need some element of that I think if we're gonna have continuity and transmissions in our generation.

JH: Right. And I think people who reject obligation actually if you drill down, you will find foci of obligation.

AB: Somewhere... Right. Right. And Elie Wiesel often said when communities profess denial of God, very often what they're doing is replacing God with something else. So the communists did that and they replaced God with history with a capital H and so on.

JH: I always tell my students that negation is as much an affirmation as is affirmation. It's the show you don't go to which is... It's...

AB: Yeah. Right. So the God you don't worship, so which God are you worshipping? And I'm not obligated to this, so what am I obligated to? Even if it's my own instincts or my own sense of myself. And... And for me it's really, if we're looking for some kind of spiritual liberation, not just the kind of liberation that comes when you're able to sleep late, but the real kind... That's good too, but the real kind of spiritual liberation from myself, from the parts of myself that don't allow me to experience full presence in the world, full mindfulness in the world and full joy. It turns out that discipline and obligation are an ingredient of that, and the other ingredient that's really important is spontaneous overflow of love and... And so, how do you have both? That's one of the core questions I think in spiritual life today.

JH: A review of your book by Zlati Meyer, cites Wiesel as saying, "I believe in a wounded faith." And, the reason I wanted to pick up on this question is because to me it echoes Nachman of Breslov's notion that, in order for her to be full, it first has to be broken, and full meaning complete. And now that I know you're connected with the Breslovers, I wonder if this is... If this is explicitly part of your connection to Wiesel.

AB: Very much so. He was very connected to Rebbe Nachman also. He had... He had a love affair with Rebbe Nachman of Breslov as a storyteller.

JH: Yeah, sure. Sure.

AB: And he loved the biography of Rebbe Nachman also there're all kinds of stories and adventures of his travels to Israel and encounters with pirates and plague and all kinds of stories that sound like fiction but really happened. And, the themes of madness and laughter, and the limits of language appear in Rebbe Nachman's writings a lot. So we shared that, we shared that love, and at a certain point I started traveling to Uman for Rosh Hashanah, for the Breslover pilgrimage and gathering for the Jewish New Year, Breslover hasidim from around the world go to a little town in Ukraine where Rebbe Nachman of Breslov is buried. And, that was a big part of my conversations with Professor Wiesel in those years, was about that journey. And, there was a certain point in my development where I realized through the influence of Rebbe Nachman and Elie Wiesel and Leonard Cohen, that was the trifecta. And Ursula Le Guin was in more of a fictional kind of setting in her writings in the Earthsea series especially. And she's

drawing on Daoism primarily in that series.

I realized at a certain point that there's something really profound and central for me in terms of my spiritual makeup and who I am about encountering brokenness and being whole with the brokenness, brokenness of self, brokenness of the world. That became a really central theme. And in my conversations with Professor Wiesel that showed up in places where I was struggling with things, and I was looking to him to kind of give me the perfect band-aid. And he never did. Instead, he just stayed with it and helped me to inquire into these places of brokenness as if I were talking to a good friend, without fear, without drama, just with a sense of listening. And that was kind of life-changing for me.

And then I discovered, of course, in Rebbe Nachman's writings, and especially in his tales, that the theme of the beggar is very central, the person who is broken and doesn't have anything. And the way it's expressed in one text is whatever you give him, he feels like entitled to half of it, and so whatever he has he's astonished and grateful to have so much, to have double what he expects, and so he's always filled to the joy. And so he's really wealthy because he always has more than he needs. And that's a kind of... And he's talking not just about physical wealth...

JH: Of course.

AB: But spiritual wealth. I think one of the challenges we face, one of the things we have to work on, is we don't value with enough awe and reverence and joy the little things that we are somehow given to do: The fact that we're alive, the fact that we're able to pray without any kavanah whatsoever, without any intention whatsoever, but we're showing up. Just the fact that we're showing up, the fact that we can have encounters like this and conversations like this, there's great joy and really there's astonishment in that. So that's a feeling that we have to cultivate, it's not always natural for us because we get desensitized, we take things for granted, but I think that's very much at the center of Jewish life. It's why we start the day with a thank you, a thank you prayer, which is also kind of an admission 'cause the words in Hebrew are the same.

JH: Yeah, that's right. "Acknowledge," right, I recognize. Yes.

AB: And I'm acknowledging in spite of the whatever resistance I have to acknowledging that I'm not in control of everything and that I can't take these things for granted that I have another day. And in theological language of that prayer, we're saying God believes in me enough to give me another day to be here, to do good work. That's pretty amazing. Those kinds of feelings have become more and more central for me just as a person, just to not only get through tough times, but to over time feel like I'm really ascending a ladder of some sort, that there's a direction, there's a purpose. And more than anything else, when I read my life as if it's a page of Talmud, as if it's a sacred text, I look for the patterns, I apply those kinds of methods of reading to my life.

This is one of the things that stands out as a repeating, recurring motif, that there's no use in pretending or professing things that we haven't really earned, that we haven't really integrated into ourselves, and that it's okay to be broken, it's okay to be struggling,

that we're way too hard on ourselves, that acceptance and self-acceptance is the beginning of growth. And so I've been drawn more and more to those kinds of sources and texts in our tradition and elsewhere that really unpack that and show specific practical ways of working with that.

JH: Well, on that note then let me thank you for taking the time and the pleasure of your company. I've really enjoyed our conversation.

AB: Thank you. Me too.

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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 collegetcommons.huc.edu.

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