RITA FRUMAN AND HERNÁN RUSTEIN:
THE REMARKABLE DYNAMISM OF GLOBAL REFORM 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 2019.

JH: Welcome to this edition of the College Commons Podcast where I'm very excited to introduce you to two leaders of Reform Judaism from around the world. First, I'd like to introduce Hernán Rustein, who currently resides in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he serves as the CEO, student rabbi and chazzan at Templo Libertad, Argentina's oldest congregation. He's currently an advanced rabbinical student at The Ibero-American Institute for Reform Rabbinical Education, previously trained in Jerusalem at The Conservative Yeshiva and the Seminario in the field of chazzanut, and he has sung in the Vatican to Pope Francis. And second, we have Rita Fruman who was raised in the reform movement in Belarus, ultimately becoming the director of the Minsk Netzer club, where she oversaw the training of the next generation of leaders in Jewish summer camps. In 2003, she made aliyah and she began to work for the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and today she serves as the director of WUPJ operations and programs in the former Soviet Union. Welcome to both of you, and thank you for joining me.

Rita Fruman: Thank you.

Hernán Rusteing: Thank you.

JH: Rita, I'd like to start with you and get some sense of what it means to be a Jew today in Belarus, where you continue to work and, of course, where you grew up, as we learned in your introduction. Start with some of the basic facts. How many Jews are there in Belarus today?

RF: I don't know exactly how many Jews are living now because for these last 20 years, I think maybe a lot of people left for Israel and other countries. But there are thousands of Jews, I think, still living there and having all kinds of different experiences from the orthodox to secular one. But it's a pleasure and an honor to say that the Reform Movement, it's a very strong movement in Belarus now. We have a very big, strong community in Minsk, Simha, Sheket and Tamar. Three communities are gathering together in Center for Progressive Judaism that we bought together with World Union

donors and sponsorship. It's maybe a central place where not just only Jews are coming together, but people from all kinds of different interfaith dialogue groups, United Nation groups of people that are representing their social justice activities in Belarus...

JH: As partners with this association.

RF: As partners with this association, yes. And also the center is a unique place that are gathered together three communities. The Simha one, this is a community is for all kinds of different ages; the Sheket community, this is the deaf community; and the Tamar, this is the youth and young adult community.

JH: One of the questions I have with respect to Belarus, it's a separate country from Russia, but its culture is very connected to Russian culture. I assume the languages are mutually intelligible. And is it the case that the Jewish community in particular tends to speak Russian?

RF: The Jewish community tends to speak Russian, Hebrew, and a little bit of English. The common language between Belarus and Russia is Russian. But there are a lot of space and events that Belarusian is also the part of the speaking language in the community.

JH: And what's the primary motivation for the aliyah you spoke about, where it seems to be a regular stream of people are leaving?

RF: I can say from my personal example, my reason for aliyah was very Zionist reasons. I grew up in the Zionist youth movement. So the love to Israel was a part of our thoughts about life.

JH: Was the Zionist youth movement in Belarus trans-denominational or was it specifically Reform Zionist?

RF: It was specifically Reform Zionist.

JH: You spoke of the vibrancy of Reform Judaism, in particular, today in Minsk, in Belarus. Can you articulate what is it about Reform Judaism in particular that's so compelling to the Belarusian community?

RF: Reform communities have their unique possibility to give space for everybody: For Jews who are religious or less religious, for those who are also non-Jews but want to be part of the Jewish experience and Jewish lives. Actually, we have a very, very strong group of people who are interested to be a part of the community just by coming and praying together, or coming and learning together about Judaism as a historical unique story, and some of them have decided to go through the conversion process. So this is very, very unique for Belarus specifically, and for all of the former Soviet Union now, that we have a lot of people who maybe have some roots but have no documents, because during the World War II, all their things were just gone. They feel their connection, they can't bring any document that's saying that father, or brother, or

grandma or grandpa was Jewish. This is the opportunity for them to come to the open and pluralistic community, and to try to learn, "What does it mean to be a modern Jew in modern life?"

JH: That's a beautiful story, that's really powerful. Hernán, Argentina is the largest Jewish community in Latin America with an amazing history of incredible institutions and Zionist passion. I speak now with complete envy as an American Jew who sent both of his children to Jewish school, kindergarten all the way through 12th grade. I went to day school. The thing that is most powerful to me about Argentinian Judaism is Hebrew. Argentine Jews have a deep and really successful tradition of learning and teaching Hebrew. And I wanna ask if that tradition is still alive. Are you the product of that tradition? Is it still that way that your average Argentine Jew can converse in Hebrew off the street?

HR: So, first of all, thank you for your pronunciation, since we're speaking about language, of my name. Well, the thing is, the Jewish education in Argentina has never been one of Sunday school, but going to a Jewish school the entire day long from morning to evening.

JH: Day school.

HR: Yeah, day school. And those are schools that belong to the communities.

JH: They're not free. You have to pay for them.

HR: You have to pay for them. Yes, they're not state related.

JH: No state subsidies.

HR: There are state subsidies for every private school.

JH: I see.

HR: But still, they have to pay and they're not inexpensive.

JH: Yes, indeed.

HR: And so, since you're the entire day there, Zionism and Hebrew become a part of the curricula, your regular way of studying, and so Hebrew has been always strong. You were asking if that tradition remains. In some cases it remains, in some others it doesn't. It depended on several items. One, English has been considered a more useful language. So, it started to go into English. And on the other hand, these community schools have been shrinking. Jewish people have begun sending their kids to either public schools, which are free, or to some other Jewish organizations that want to be more pluralistic and universal like ORT. ORT opened an elementary school and a lot of children are going there. So, we see that that culture of Hebrew is slowly decaying. I'm not the product of that because I went to a different sort of school. I went to another private school that was not Jewish-related. So, I'm still learning my Hebrew every day.

JH: One of the great things about Brazilian Judaism is that it's almost 50% Sephardi and 50% Ashkenazi. It's a much more balanced mix than we're used to in the United States. The United States is overwhelming Ashkenazi. What are the proportions in Argentina?

HR: Yes, it's more Ashkenazi. And the Sephardi, of course, it's a fluid community, but Sephardi congregations tend to be more on its own. They have their own congregations, they're more orthodox, and so the people who leave those congregations tend to not go back.

JH: Around the world, American Jews tend to understand the rest of diaspora as passively Orthodox or default Orthodox, where the Orthodox institutions dominate and Jews may or may not be orthodox or they may or may not be orthopractic, but they recognize orthodoxy in a default way. That's the way American Jews often imagine the diaspora. In Argentina at least, we'll talk about Belarus in a minute, in Argentina, that's not the case. In Argentina, conservative Judaism has been the strongest form of Judaism because, now for over half a century, there's been a seminary which you attended, the Seminario in Argentina, that has really placed conservative Judaism at the center of mainstream Argentine Judaism. In that context, can you articulate what reform Judaism in particular teaches Argentine Judaism that's so important and so urgent?

HR: The thing is that conservative Judaism was able to take over all of the liberal positions that were existing up until 1960s in Argentina because of the charisma and excellent work done by Marshall Meyer, a US rabbi that came to my synagogue, which is the oldest one, and he started preaching there about the goods of conservative Judaism. And he was such an important figure in our region, that all of the liberal Judaism became Masorti or conservative. And now we want to claim back that spot. Because what happened is that since everyone started to think about liberal Judaism as conservative, most people who are either secular or would be reform in their ideologies pretend they want to make conservative Judaism something like reform, which it's not. And so, conservative rabbis are fighting to create conservative institutions with people that live their lives more closely to either secular or reform Judaism.

HR: So, an institutionalized and clear and coherent reform world is able to give to the people what they are actually living right now without making them say, "Well, what you're doing is not right. You should be more Halachic, but okay, we'll work on it." No. "What you're doing is Jewish. It's okay. And we're here for you. Let's build a community." So, I think reform Judaism, what can bring to the region is a more satisfying way of living your Jewish life in community, and to educate and to marry and to love and to eat and to pray in a way that's more similar to how you feel that your Judaism belongs to.

JH: I know that for the reform movement, it's a tremendous honor and source of satisfaction through the World Union to be supporting these models of reform Judaism in your world, this openness that you spoke of in Belarus and this ideological realization of the life you're living in Argentina and any number of other things going on around the

world. I wanna ask you what we American Jews can learn from your experiences. What is it about Argentine Judaism that can inspire American Reform Judaism in ways that maybe we don't expect or we're not even aware of?

HR: Well, not taking for granted that Jews are progressive and Reform, and that needs to be built, and that you all the time need to go to the roots and see what makes you a Jew, and that you need to fight for identity to make it coherent with your way of life. And a lot of effort goes into building a congregation that have not always been there. Congregations are not there forever. They start at some point and they need maintenance and hard work of a lot of people, and I think that that's something to learn, to be builders and not only consumers.

RF: I think, and I think that this is maybe a little bit related to your previous question, that the uniqueness of Reform Judaism, we are thinking about the Orthodox Judaism and Reform Judaism also in Belarus, that the Reform Judaism gives you the [inaudible] that you are coming to your roots, and you first will need to understand what is important for yourself, for your identity, for your Jewish identity, and then to start to pray or to do something at your home and at your community. But first of all, it's understanding you and your soul, you and your mind as a Jew, and then doing things, lighting the lights during the Hannukah or making the Matza on Pesach. So, first of all, understanding and then doing. Maybe in Orthodox community, it's first of all doing things and then understanding actually why.

RF: And the Reform communities in Belarus particularly and in general in former Soviet Union, I think that this is the unique place that you can be yourself, you can be proud of who you are, and everybody is so grateful for this opportunity to be also their Russian, Belarusian, Ukraine citizen and Jew. Sometimes Jewish first and then they are the citizen of this country that you're living in, but the feeling that you're the part of something more bigger, global. That you're a part of the Jewish history and life and roots and ideological things, giving our people feeling of being together, being a big family.

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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: So in particular with respect to Belarus, as you know, the vast, vast majority of American Jews have some roots, often all of their roots, in Eastern Europe in general. Often in Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, etcetera, Lithuania, and Russia, in overwhelming proportions, which means that almost every American Jew has an imagined memory,

not a real memory, but an imagined memory of the Shtetl, of the old world, of the Pale of Settlement, etcetera. So I wanna give you an opportunity to disabuse us of any myths that are inaccurate. What do you think Americans misunderstand about the Belarusian Jewish experience?

RF: I think that one thing is that we are so small. We are not small. Like the Shtetl, everybody thinking that, "Shtetl, it's something very, very small. It was so small before the World War II." No, it was not small. Cities, villages, country in general was full of Jews. I can say about my own Grodno, my own city, there are 75% of people who lived in Grodno before World War II were Jews.

JH: So it was a Jewish city.

RF: This was a Jewish city and then, unfortunately, it was all the tragic history. We know that people were killed and destroyed and the city actually was destroyed. But now this is some kind of renaissance of Jewish life, and I'm so proud that this is also the renaissance of Reform Jewish life in Belarus, that we can say, "We are strong. We are the majority of, in Belarus particularly, all the streams of Judaism." People are coming to us and feeling that we are a proud part of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood. And the other thing, people think the Shtetl has Orthodox stream, before World War II, that everybody was some kind of Orthodox Jews, and I think it's not true. I think that their Reform roots or some kind of Reform thinking, more than thinking...

JH: Certainly the Haskalah.

RF: Haskalah, yes, was there 70, 75 years ago and even more. And it just needed to be a little bit waken up. This is what happened now.

JH: As you know, Hernán, Americans have all kinds of stereotypes about Latin America in general. And I don't know if we differentiate between the Jewish story and the non-Jewish story in Latin America in people's minds or not, I wouldn't presume to know. Given the fact that Americans have all kinds of preconceived notions about Latin America in general, what do you think American Jews, Americans in general, need to understand about the Jewish experience in Argentina that maybe they have no way of knowing unless you tell them?

HR: Well, there are many questions that usually arise. For example, "How many members does your synagogue have?" We don't count ourselves like that. We just open our gates and people come in whenever they want. And usually for high holidays, we have full house with all of the people that usually come and that you see the faces of everyone and that they come only for that moment. And that's where we get a lot of our money from, those days, but we have some people paying monthly fees because they want to, but we don't have membership. We just go whenever we feel comfortable. And what happened, for example, with my synagogue, we used to be in the Jewish neighborhood, and now it's no longer the Jewish neighborhood. We have a big building, perhaps 60 people come for Shabbat, but most people went to a trendier neighborhood where trendier jobs were being obtained.

HR: And now you have 10 synagogues there for you to choose from. And sometimes you go to one, and sometimes you go to the other. And then you come back to my synagogue, because that's where your grandparents were married so you marry there. Or you go to a synagogue that thinks this way but you send your children to a synagogue that thinks the other way because it's close by to your house. So that sense of congregational life. It's not only Jewish here but also you have your Evangelical church in front of the synagogue where all of the people from that neighborhood go to. Those sort of life is not how Jews in our city live their Jewish lives. They relate to Jewish institutions in different ways.

JH: The second to last question, not the last question I wanna ask you, also has to do with perceptions about antisemitism. In general, American Jews, I think it's safe to say in this year at the end of 2019, feel that antisemitism is on the rise in the United States and worldwide, or at the very least that the inhibitors of antisemitism have been removed and the existing antisemitism has been allowed to express itself more. I wanna ask you how you feel about that observation. Does it apply to your respective countries and do you think it applies worldwide?

RF: From my understanding, in general, I agree. There are some big changes happening in all over the world. Maybe in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, it's still not so strong as we feel it in United States now and in Europe specifically. But I can see that something's happening, the feeling that it's cool to be Jew now in Belarus exists still. And 30 years ago, maybe 40 years ago, this was a totally different feeling because people were ashamed to be a Jew and they didn't want to say their mother's name in front of the class, because the mother's name was very Jewish, and they preferred to say, "That I don't remember what mother's name is." This is not the same feeling today, but definitely something going on, and maybe my feeling and my understanding of the situation is not just only the anti-semitic things. Antisemitism, maybe even more, xenophobia, their lack of tolerance that are going through all over the world.

RF: And people are very, very problematic situation will say, "Other, not like me person that is coming to my country, people who are refugees," and etcetra, etcetra. I feel that we have a huge change in the 21st century going with the tolerance problems. And also, I really believe that we as the Jews, we have some kind of additional responsibility to be this light, this way to show all over the world that it doesn't need to be like that. We need to respect all of the people, and from this respect can be born wonderful things, not only in the Jewish life, but in all over the world.

JH: Well said, well said. Thank you. Hernán?

HR: In Argentina, we have a history of dialog between different cultures and ethnic groups and religions. And the recent studies show that even though there's been an increase in the reports of antisemitism and violence, it mainly goes to websites and especially on news portals and Facebook, not so much on the ground. And the perception of how non-Jewish Argentines see Judaism, actually in the last 10 years, studies show that it's improved. We are being seen by the majority of the people who took part of the investigation as part of the Argentine identity, after Spain and Italy...

JH: Gallego, italiano y hebreo.

HR: Exactly, yes. So, people from Spain, people from Italy, and Jewish people are the main parts of the Argentine culture. We are not the other, but part of the native Argentine-ness.

JH: In a characteristically New World way. That's very typical of the New World.

HR: Yes, exactly. And when you see the political problems with antisemitism in the political systems in Europe, for example, you don't have that in Argentina. Our government just changed. And the last government, one of my rabbi, Sergio Bergman, he was a minister of the government for environment. On the other administration, you had two Jewish ministers, they were not rabbis like Sergio, but they were still Jewish and they were handling the education. So even now, the new president said on his inauguration speech that no discrimination must be tolerated in our country, not by religion, not by the color of the skin, nothing. So you don't have that violence, that xenophobia in our political system.

HR: In the two main parties, let's say, of Argentina, you don't see extremism in pointing to the other as the guilty party of something. So I think that our position is relatively good. I don't see antisemitism on the rise. I see it, of course, latent as it's always been in almost anywhere and that we need to take care of it and we need to see every situation and report it, and also not spreading fake news. There's been much talk about an attack on a rabbi in the streets of Buenos Aires recently. And that rabbi even said, "No, they didn't attack me. They did attack me, but it wasn't an antisemitic thing." So we need to take care of ourselves and not taking this subject so lightly so as to say, "Antisemitism is on the rise," something that's absolutely true, but that we should always take care of each point of view.

JH: I wanna close by asking you one thing about American Judaism, not necessarily Reformed Judaism, but one thing about American Judaism that inspires you, that you feel can teach your communities.

RF: For me, it's the openness for new connections and new friends. The Judaism in United States is so welcoming. It's huge. I can really feel that the United States as a country is very open for people who are Jews, giving them a lot of possibilities here. And the big synagogues, for example, they are... I live in Israel, but the biggest synagogue that I ever see, I see in New York and not in Jerusalem. So here, the Judaism is so open and welcoming that each time that I come here and it's inspired me once and once and once again, because people are very, very, very welcoming.

HR: I think, and this goes beyond just Jewish, it's about American and Argentine cultures, but the solid institutions, the long-term planning, the vision of abetting and creating institutions, and maintaining them with a coherent way of thinking and organizing, I think we should learn from that, from creating something and sustaining it with planning and long-term aspirations.

JH: Well, on behalf of the Hebrew Union College, and personally, I wanna tell you what a source of pride it is for me to work with you, our friends around the world, our brothers and sisters around the world, and with the World Union for Progressive Judaism and working with the Instituto Iberoamericano de Formación Rabinica, which is the Ibero-American Institute for Rabbinic Education, of which Hernán is a student and whom I've had the pleasure of teaching. It really is a privilege to be associated with you and here's to our continued friendship and partnership.

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RF: Thank you very much.

HR: Thank you.

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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