



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

RICHARD ADDRESS: JEWISH SACRED AGING

(Begin audio)

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 2019.

JH: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and this episode with my esteemed colleague, Rabbi Richard Address. Rabbi Address was ordained at HUC-JIR in 1972 and currently serves as the Director of Jewish Sacred Aging and the host of a weekly podcast called Seekers of Meaning. He served on staff of the Union for Reform Judaism for over three decades as Regional Director and Director of Jewish Family Concerns and currently serves as Dean of the Gamliel Institute, and he teaches classes associated with Jewish Sacred Aging at HUC and Yeshiva University among other institutions. Rabbi Address, Richie, thank you for joining me. It's a pleasure.

Richard Address: Hi, Josh. It's nice to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

JH: Aging is on people's minds. As you have written about and spoken about, it's increasingly salient as people age longer, more vigorous lives. What are the two or three salient concerns about aging today that are unique to this age that we live in?

RA: Part of this is a result of this expansion of life stage, the longevity revolution, as many authors have called it. The fact that we're living longer, living better, our Generation, Baby Boom generation, which is where much of my focus is has really pushed the envelope, thanks to our parents' generation who are the first really to begin to live longer. Now we expect to live into our 80s and 90s or beyond. And so it's changed the dynamic of work, it's changed the dynamic of worship, it's changed the dynamic, in many ways, of the Jewish community. According to the stats that we crunched actually when I ran the department, 25% of the American Jewish community are over the age of 65 and they are reshaping congregational life. There's a lot of movement out of congregational life. There's really not much in many congregations that deal with the things that we need to talk about. So some of those things, as you asked, are dealing with change. Changes in my lifestyle, changes in my body, changes into my sexuality, changes in my relationships. Health and wellness. How do I stay healthy, how do I maintain health?

RA: Significant numbers of our generation are at gyms. They're working out, they're doing things to keep their body and their mind active because one of the lingering fear is just this explosion of dementia and Alzheimer's. The Alzheimer's Association who I do work with back in the Philadelphia region, we're being told by Alzheimer's right now that there's about 5 million people identified dealing with Alzheimer's disease in the United States of America. That figure is supposed to jump, expected to jump, as Baby Boomers age out over the next 15 years, to approximately 15 million. There just physically are not enough people to take care of us.

RA: So the caregiving conundrum, which is one of the other major issues, and it's the most requested workshop that I get to do with congregations as I go around because so many people are, have been, or will go into this new life stage. And it is a new life stage. And I'm sure you know people 'cause I certainly know people who are caregivers, who become caregivers, and it's not something that lasts a week or a month or a year, but it can last years. And in some cases, such as with Parkinson's or Alzheimer's, over a decade. So this whole caregiving challenge is a real challenge. And now, the first stage Baby Boomers, most of the Baby Boomers in this country now are between 54, 55 and 73, 74, 75. Some of the first stage Baby Boomers are themselves starting to need care.

RA: Caregiving is a multi-generational challenge. And according to the AARP, right now, about 20% of people who are engaged in part-time or full-time caregivers are millennials, people between 18 and 30. This is why I go on the road so much and challenge congregations is you gotta talk about this stuff because this is happening in your synagogue. So the caregiving thing, the longevity thing, the health and wellness thing, the end of life issues, especially dealing with pain and suffering, palliative care. In New Jersey, where I live, I just did a major program at a congregation last Shabbat on the Medical Aid in Dying bill which is now a law in New Jersey, California, how to approach it from a Jewish perspective, telling the congregation, "Look, this is a law here. You have an obligation to teach your congregants how a Jewish approach would be to this law because they're gonna... You, Rabbi, are gonna have people in your office who are gonna ask you about it." And lastly, the gift of time which has been given now through longevity, and thanks to medical technology, which there should be a blessing for in every prayer book, has allowed us to begin to contemplate our own sense of meaning.

RA: The underlying spiritual question of all of this is how do we deal with the time that we have left knowing that we cannot control time, which is the real wild card. So that gets to the sense of meaning, it gets to the sense of, "If I leave full-time work at, let's just say, 68 or 70, God willing, I may have two and half, three decades more of life. What am I gonna do with it?" And underlying all of that with the spiritual question of, "What do we do with the time?" With that is this fear because it all revolves around our own mortality of, as we get older, we just don't wanna be alone.

RA: So there's a whole impact to what we talk about, what I call, the theology of relationships and the need to maintain relationships. And in fact, in the secular world, every article, every book that's being written, and there are tons coming out now all the time, stress the importance of social interaction, social relationships as you get older.

Without them, your life expectancy drops which is why, synagogues, you have an opportunity to engage people to keep them active socially in community and it extends their life. I tell synagogues, "Put a big billboard up. Don't say 'join temple whoopy, it's the warm, sharing, caring congregation'," which they all do. I say forget that. Just put a big build up and said, "Join the temple, you will live longer." Because all the statistics are telling us that.

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: Do you perceive in an American culture a kind of cult of happiness? And if you do, how does that intersect with some of the major themes of your work in general which revolve around the search for meaning?

RA: We have a major website, jewishsacredaging.com, and associated with that is a Facebook page, obviously Jewish Sacred Aging on Facebook, and we constantly look for literature and stuff associated with what we do. So, recently, just posted the American fascination with happiness. And it actually may have been an op-ed in one of the newspapers that I read. And this idea that there is this subliminal American expectation that happiness is a right. It's not a right. And one of the great challenges of people as they get older, I think, is to substitute the word gratitude. The Hebrew Hakarat HaTov, and that's where I think I got it from some... One of our colleagues wrote something. And the fact that if you talk to our generation, there's a greater appreciation of being grateful for the things that we have, had, and hopefully will have as opposed to "this makes me happy".

JH: Right.

RA: Because I believe that you get to a certain point in your life where you become aware, it happens to different people at different times, and it's rarely an aha moment. It's like it emerges that you come to the point where you say, "I don't need any more stuff. I don't have to collect any more things. What I really have to work on is the spiritual component," and that has to do with legacy. It has to do with an awareness of one's won mortality, and it has to be... And it has a lot to do with, "What am I really grateful for?" This explosion above older adults studying Musar. And so, one of the [Hebrew] of Musar is gratitude. And then the morning prayer, as soon as you wake up, Modeh Ani Lefanecha listen loosely translated from New Jersey, "Hey, thanks, God. I got up."

JH: Yeah, right.

RA: I'm grateful I got up. Because there's no guarantee that you do. But it's counter-cultural in a lot of America.

JH: Well, that's really... Yeah.

RA: Yeah, it really is.

JH: And I'm curious about how that intersects with your work, and the search for meaning, and you could also perhaps substitute happiness, not only for gratitude, but happiness for a purpose or happiness for any number of life enriching...

RA: Look, the tradition says you wanna find your purpose, you wanna find meaning, get out and do something in the world.

JH: Right.

RA: We're not a religious civilization that says, "Go sit on the mountain and contemplate the eternal." That's nice. Do it for an hour but, really, go out. And there are people, there are things that need to be done, and in the process of doing it, it's the... What we used to teach confirmation classes. The passage from the Torah Na'aseh ve'nishma. Go out and do something, and by doing it, you'll kind of like understand what's going on.

JH: Right, fake it till you make it.

RA: Yeah. [laughter]

JH: Alright. So on the assumption that no religious tradition has any lock or a monopoly on aging well. No silver bullet, and certainly no monopoly from any tradition. Share with us one Jewish perspective that you find particularly useful, not because it's unique, and because Judaism is so much wiser than everything else, but just because this particular nugget of wisdom is characteristically Jewish, and you have been able to deploy it to really good effect. And then, after you answer that part of the question, share with us a perspective from another tradition that you have found incredibly enriching and that you think we should learn and benefit from.

RA: One of the workshops we do is on taking a look at about six texts from Torah as a spiritual foundation for a healthy aging and positive aging. And this is where I think that the answer to your first question comes. Genesis 2:18 where it basically reminds us that it's not good for us to be alone, so you lead into the whole relationship thing. Genesis 3 which reminds us that you're gonna die. And Genesis 3 introduces to the... What I call the three why questions of existence, which stem from an understanding and my interpretation of this text. These are the three questions that most of us don't wanna deal with. But like at three o'clock in the morning, when all of the deflector shields are down, especially as you get a little older: Why was I born? Why must I die? Why am I here?

RA: And I believe that's one of the gifts of Genesis 3. I think it underscores a Jewish approach to aging because the next text I use is Genesis 12, which is the call to Abram

to go forth. And really what that means to me is we're part of a religious civilization that says, "No matter what age you are, no matter where you are, do not be afraid to go forward, do not be afraid to risk, do not be afraid to learn." The excuse of I'm too old to... Fill in the blank... Is not Jewish. The Jewish approach is Lekh-Lekha. And we have people, and you probably know some, I know some, who get to be at certain age and they have an opportunity, and they say, "I have too many other responsibilities. I'm too old. I'm too set in my ways. I don't wanna take this chance." And then Judaism says, "You're here once. Lekh-Lekha. Go for it. Don't be afraid." It requires faith, faith in what you're doing, faith in yourself, which is another interpretation of the the Lekha of Lekh-Lekha, examine your own self.

RA: And that leads to this other fantastic text, which really is, I think, the ethical foundation of Judaism, Deuteronomy 30, 19, or I think 30, whatever. I'm too tired to quote the exact text. But it's to therefore, choose life. In other words, life is full of choices, even as you get older. Sometimes, the choices are between good and bad as the text says. And sometimes, the choices... We all know families who have had to make a choice between bad and badder. But Judaism gives you that power to... Your life is in your hands. You make these choices based upon what it means to be holy, what it means to be sacred, what it means to go forward in your life. It means, sometimes, you have to live with this tension, which is real palpable as we get older. The tension of holding on and letting go. The tension of what do we hold on to as we get older? What do I have to get rid of? So these choices, how we make choices depends upon the type of person we are. And even at the end of life, even at the end of life. So I think these are some of the spiritual approaches to provide a philosophical or theological approach to healthy aging or sacred aging.

RA: And many of the religious traditions also venerate the Zakenine, the elders, which is common. Not, interestingly, in the American culture. It's a little bit more ageist than some of the traditional... Moses consulted the Zaken, the elders in the wilderness, "What that heck do I do now?" But then depending upon the religious civilization that you're talking about, there's variations on the choice theme and there's variations upon how much you trust, or accept, or surrender to the will of God. And within our tradition, depending upon where you stand on the theological framework, there's differences of opinion in that. So it's very fluid. But within our tradition, those are some of the theological positions that I think underscore where we are. And it has to do with autonomy, and some of it is very American. We, in the liberal Jewish community, pray at the altar of personal autonomy. And that factors into decision-making, especially, at the end of life.

JH: I've heard a generational generalization that Baby Boomers have emerged to seek meaning, and millennials have emerged to seek community. So accepting that it's an over-simplification, is there something to it?

RA: My experience is not that. My experience in the groups that I work with is that they're very engaged in seeking meaning and worship community. Partly because of the fear of being alone. And I'll give you a perfect example. And I try this at every congregation I go out to. Because in many congregations, it's the boomer generation

and older generation that are there at Friday night services. The millennials are not. So I just had this conversation with a congregation in the last... Two congregations in the last month. And I said, "You all go to services, many of you go to services on a fairly regular basis. You open the book. How many of you believe the words when you're praying them? Who are you praying to? Do you do believe those words? Do you believe that there's a being listening to you or intervening?"

RA: Majority of the people say, "No, I don't believe the words." I said, "Well, if you don't believe the words you're praying, why the heck are you sitting in a synagogue for an hour or an hour and a half on a Friday night or whatever?" And invariably, the answer is, "This is my community. This is my community. These are my friends. We started in preschool together with our children, and they were there for their wedding, and the bar mitzvah and the Shiva, and that's why we're here." Community supersedes theology, at least in the liberal tradition. And I think that's really, really important. There have been a series of articles in the last month that have been sent to me, and I've also seen about this... I don't know who's starting this cultural war between the millennials and the boomers.

JH: Right. "Okay, Boomer"?

RA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay Boomer, right. It's silly in one sense, but our generation is not going gently into anything. We've tried to control everything since the '60s. We're even now trying to control our own death, which is these medical aid in dying bills. They're not coming from millennials, they're coming from our generation.

JH: Well, Rabbi Richard Address. Thank you so much for taking the time.

RA: Thank you again for the invitation.

[music]

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, 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.

(End of audio)