



ISRAEL CRISIS ON CAMPUS? MAYBE, MAYBE NOT...

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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 the College Commons Podcast where I look forward to a conversation with Professor Karla Goldman, Tilly Shames and Kendall Coden on a the topic of campus communities and discussions in the current climate. And I would like to invite all of our guests to introduce themselves and kick off the conversation. Professor Goldman.

Karla Goldman: Thank you. My name is Karla Goldman and I teach at the University of Michigan where we're all hailing from in some fashion. I teach American Jewish history and I direct a program in Jewish Communal Leadership for students in the School of Social Work, MSW students interested in working in the Jewish community. And just to note that I taught American Jewish History at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati for nine years.

JH: A colleague.

KG: Yes. It's nice to be in this conversation.

JH: It's good to have you. Thank you for joining us.

Tilly Shames: My name is Tilly Shames. I'm the Executive Director of University of Michigan Hillel. And it's just a pleasure to be here, and it was a pleasure to really engage in an intergenerational conversation earlier today, and a pleasure be reunited with Kendall who is our former chair of our governing board.

JH: It's our pleasure to have you, thank you.

Kendall Coden: I'm Kendall Coden. As has previously been mentioned, I'm a recent graduate of University of Michigan and was the president or the chair of our Hillel governing board, my senior year of undergrad. And it's a pleasure to be here today, and to really talk about our campus, and hopefully, share a greater perspective about it than what has been presented in the media. Catching us up a little bit on what has happened, last year on our college campus, there were a numerous series of individual flash points that occurred, starting with a situation where a professor rescinded his offer to write a letter of recommendation for a student after he found out that the student wanted to go study abroad in Israel, and culminating in a presentation of protest art through a guest lecturer in the art school, which presented a slide comparing Adolf Hitler with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The series of flash points occurred, but they don't paint a complete picture of the amazing vibrant Jewish life that's happening on University of Michigan's campus.

JH: Help us flesh out the picture that you feel is important for us in order to fully grasp the dynamics that clearly kicked off a pretty heavy conversation.

TS: One of the things that we're noting is just the speed at which Jewish media and social media can immediately turn something into a national story, whether it's a post on a student's Facebook page, or like the issue that we had with a professor rescinding an offer to write a letter of reference for his students to study at Tel Aviv University, all of these issues can immediately become national incidents. And as a leader on campus, myself, Kendall and others, we feel the pressure to respond right away and to be able to address these issues. What we really need is a moment to be able to think about, whether this warrants a response, what kind of response, and most important, how we can first focus inward on our student community, and what is the support that they need in these moments in order to address whatever incidents arises. I think some of our parents and alumni are hearing about these incidents almost as immediately as we are as the leaders in responding to them. And so we just feel the pressure from the outside.

TS: And I think that the other thing that we note is that the parents and alumni community that is removed from campus, they hear about the incidents, but there's not equal weight given in reporting in social media to all of the follow-up. Let alone, all of the positive and proactive programs that are happening throughout the year. But to the follow-up where for example, with this issue of the professor rescinding the letter of reference, the reprimand by the dean's office or the seriousness with which the university addressed the issue by creating a blue ribbon panel to really explore what is the responsibility and the relationship between a faculty member and a student that resulted in policy that was put into place so that these sort of incidents wouldn't happen again. And by the way, the student had a wonderful semester at Tel Aviv University and was very supported in going there.

TS: But those are the stories that don't make it into the press. People just stay in the moment of being concerned about the incident without recognizing that the issues may be resolved, and may even have resulted in stronger policy or a positive outcome on campus. It just doesn't make it into the press.

JH: The fact that you even used the word 'press', may indeed be a conflation of what's going on and our notion of the press. The press is tasked with a certain kind of nuance and depth, and follow through, and multiple sources, and all that stuff. But clearly on social media, it's not in the DNA to even be sensitive to the things you just described. So it strikes me as a difficult situation. I wanna ask all of you also about some of the social pressures, not just structural pressures in social media lending itself to this kind of misunderstanding or exacerbation of problems, but the motivations in the Jewish press, not motivations in a cynical way or in a veiled way, but impulses to either out of fear or out of genuine concern or out of legitimate statistical observations, all of which conspire to promote fearing the worst or seeing the worst possible scenario. Alright, did you feel like you were subjected to that impulse as well in the process of this?

KC: So my junior year of undergrad, we had Cherie Brown come speak about the cyclical nature of anti-Semitism. And how, within the Jewish community, oftentimes we're scared active. So something happens, we get scared, we want to react. And we react in haste and we react without thinking, and in doing so, the intention and the impact of the actions may not always align, which may further perpetuate the issue. So sometimes the best thing to do, like Tilly mentioned earlier, is to pause for a second, look at the situation. Say, "What's happening? What do I want to accomplish in this moment?" And then, "How can I move forward in doing that?" And sometimes it's reacting in the moment, it's reacting initially right away when something happens, it could be putting together a vigil in 16 hours. And sometimes, it means waiting four days to put out a statement and understanding that it's okay to take that time to think through what's happening.

KC: Because oftentimes, what happens is we jump with that haste. We label something as anti-Semitic. By labeling something as anti-Semitic that someone else has done, it angers them, and then it's like you're calling my ism istic, and it creates this ongoing cycle where it's just repetitive in nature. So if we can break that cycle, we break the situation, we stop the situation. And sometimes, with the external media coming at us, it was very difficult to be able to take that moment, to take the step back, and say "Here's what happening, here's what we need to do and what can we do?" For me personally, one of the greatest things that had happened could have happened, was for people to reach out and say "What can we do to help you?" And then to be okay if that answer was "Right now, we've got the situation under control, and we need you to just wait." Or to be okay with the answer being, "Right now, we're figuring out what we want to do and we will let you know how you can help us once we have that answer."

JH: You're stretching out the timeline a bit, to buy yourself some time to deliberate and strategize to do what you can. And I hear you saying that sometimes the press in it's reactivity, actually undermines that effort.

KC: Yes. One thing, too, is the press covers... It's called like the airplane crash situation. The press covers the time the plane crashes and the time the plane gets lost at sea, but media does not cover the 5,000 times a day that a plane lands safely. Medias covering

these flash points on our campus, but is not covering the fact that we have 300 students at a Shabbat dinner, that we have... This past year, there's an event called Shaboom, where the Hillel shuts down. And instead of having Shabbat dinner in the building, they have students host around campus.

KC: This year, they had 90 students hosting Shabbat dinners. And that means there's 90 students who are not only proud of their Jewish identity, but who are actually taking it into their own homes, and then walk off college campus with the understanding of: What does it mean to host a Shabbat dinner? How do I create this welcoming sacred space in my own home? And that's not in the media, it's not in the media that I had opportunities to sit down with leaders of other student communities who I never would have interfaced with, and had very deep, meaningful conversations about very complex political topics.

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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.

KG: This week, this executive order has come out from the President Trump Administration about really, as an effort, it seems to squelch BDS activism and speech on campuses. And one could imagine that there would be people in the Jewish community who think that's great. Our students, our children no longer have to be pressured by this, made vulnerable by it. If one of your hopes is that your children will have a connection to Israel, and they'll speak up for Israel, this idea that they should go to college and be protected from the fact that there are people who don't see that issue the same way, who don't have a very hard time with that narrative, is not gonna help them in the end become good advocates for Israel, if that's what you're aiming for, because those voices are not absent in the broader world. So this idea of: Can we cleanse these spaces so they'll be safe for our students who are earnest and good intentioned? We're not really ultimately doing them a favor. And so the reaction of that, when there is sort of a what feels like that is anti-Israel agitation on a campus, that that becomes a dangerous place for Jewish students, is really not giving those... I want Kendall to follow up, but it's not giving them any credit. And it's not taking seriously. It's pretending that you're gonna be able to erase these issues from the rest of their lives as well.

TS: One of the things that I'm seeing is just a higher rates of anxiety and social anxiety amongst our students already...

JH: In general.

TS: Coming to campus in general, and let's add to that. That the way in which people talk about university campuses today is often about how that campus has had to manage anti-Israel activity in the past...

JH: Yes, yeah.

TS: Other language that may come from our community that could be racist and in Islamophobic in terms of referring to other communities and their activism. So I worry about students arriving on campus today, looking over their shoulder for anti-Semitism lurking around every corner. And when they experience anything that looks possibly like it could be anti-Israel, having a reaction of, "Oh, this is the anti-Semitism that everybody warned me about." And that's not the way that I want Jewish students to come to campus. First of all, I want them to come to campus excited to engage in Jewish life, excited to build a relationship with Israel, excited to experience Israel possibly for the first time, and not afraid of being engaged in dialogue with people whose viewpoints may be different from their own. And I also would hope that not only would Jewish students want to come and engage in Jewish community and Jewish learning in that way, but they would also wanna come to a university environment where they can engage with different ideas and different challenging ideas, that may be different from their own, and not to be afraid of engaging in conversation about Israel with people whose viewpoints might be different than theirs. So that's really what I'm concerned about.

JH: Is there an interest on the basis of your shared experience, at one of the, not only largest, but also greatest universities of our nation, to systematically, sociologically, scientifically poll: What are Jewish students experiencing at America's great universities?

TS: Yeah, it actually... There was a study that happened on our campus and it was looking at various identity groups. I think even better that it was done by the University of Michigan rather than being done by the Jewish community. And it was looking at different identity groups and how comfortable and how happy they felt on campus. And I don't remember the exact statistics, but the vast majority of Jewish students feel comfortable, feel happy at the University of Michigan. When we ask different questions about anti-Israel and anti-Semitism and whether that's been experienced, the students may respond, "Yes." They have experienced something that is anti-Israel or sometimes something that is anti-Semitic, but that does not mean that they're not happy and comfortable and feel safe at the University of Michigan. So sometimes I think we're actually asking the wrong questions, that in our own studies in the Jewish community, we're asking questions around anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiments and how those are experienced on campus. And again, that means that we're focusing on those flash point moments and we're not focusing on, overall, how does a Jewish student feel at the University of Michigan. And I'll be quiet and let Kendall comment about how she felt as a Jewish student, but in terms of the polling, the results on our campus is that yes, the Jewish community does feel comfortable, safe, and happy at the University of Michigan.

JH: That's compelling evidence. And I'd like you to take the interview home, if you would, and tell us about your experience.

KC: Never once was I uncomfortable on University of Michigan's campus, sharing that I was Jewish, or sharing that I was the president of the Jewish community, which made me the face of the entire Jewish community on campus. And I think being on a campus where there is such lively discussion about Israel, inside the Jewish community, we have the entire political spectrum of beliefs, as well as outside of the Jewish community, there's the entire political spectrum of beliefs, but having had the opportunities to sit in those spaces and to have the conversation with Jewish peers and non-Jewish peers allowed me to have the opportunity to gain language to better articulate how I actually feel, to understand the nuances of what does a word mean, and what connotation am I sharing with someone when I say word A versus word B.

JH: Or the connotations they receive versus the connotations you intend.

KC: Yes, the intention versus impact again. And then also it gave me the opportunity, Tilly uses this phrase a lot, "It's a push and a pull." It's a pull into the Jewish community, it's a pull into comfort, and a push out into an uncomfortable situation, and growth happens in those moments of discomfort. But knowing that I could walk out of an uncomfortable conversation and go straight and pick up my phone and call Tilly, or walk into the Hillel and to be able to debrief that and share that with my support system around me, was amazing. And then also to know, every Friday night, I had a Shabbat dinner at Hillel where I could go and be with this active lively Jewish community and to know that there were two and a half to three hours every week where nothing mattered other than being with my community, was one of the most amazing experiences I could have had.

TS: I'll just say one last thing. And that is that I think that the students who feel most closely connected to Hillel and that they have a person there, they have a Tilly, they have a... Or they have a Lisa. They have somebody there who they can talk to, they feel that that's where they can get their hug and their sense of community, I think that they are the most resilient when they are facing either anti-Israel or anti-Semitic incidents on campus, because they know that they have a source of support and somebody to go to. It's those students who have not had the opportunity or taken advantage of a Jewish community on campus who feel disconnected from the resources that are available, that they might feel most vulnerable on campus because they don't have those sources of support. And then I think about the parents and the alumni who are even further removed and in the dark and experiencing information about campus through media and social media and feel even further away from it, they feel the most worried about what's happening on campus. I just wish that more students and even the parents and alumni would engage with us to understand just how strong and resilient our students are and how these moments do come up, there's no question, but they have a rich, strong Jewish community on campus that they feel supported by, that they feel a part of, and that these are all learning and leadership experiences for them, where they come out stronger on the other end.

JH: Well, here's therefore to more connections. And thank you for your connection to us and the podcast and taking the time, it was really a pleasure to hear from you and [*Hebrew*].

KC: Thank you.

TS: Thanks for the opportunity, Josh.

KG: 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 collegetcommons.huc.edu.

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