OFF SCRIPT: OLD WISDOM NEW REALITY

"WE ALL LOOK THE SAME TO A VIRUS: SHARED HUMAN-NESS IN VIEW OF A PANDEMIC"

(Begin audio)

Joshua Holo: The other day on a walk with my daughter, I got an earful about school frustrations and teacher trouble, and like most men, I immediately leaned into the problem and began to propose solutions, but before I even got traction, my daughter cut me off, "Dad, can you just let me vent?" Chastened, I shut up and listened. Every parent of my generation knows that when a child shares her troubles, our job is not to fix it off the bat or to push solutions, but rather to hear her out and affirm her feelings. I get it, or at least I came around to getting it. And I think it boils down to this, searching for a solution or a silver lining risks giving short shrift to the problem itself. Sometimes, the situation simply stinks, and we've just got to wrap our arms around that fact.

JH: But at some point, our job changes. After naming the fear, uncertainty and very real problems we face, we have to move toward the work of making meaning.

JH: Welcome to off-script, old wisdom, new reality, audio insights from religious thinkers about the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Joshua Holo. Our first episode is titled We All Look the Same to a Virus: Shared Humanness in the Face of a Pandemic.

JH: We're not trying to soft pedal the COVID-19 pandemic with some kind of morally uplifting affirmation of shared humanity. Each of our three contributors from the humanist Jewish and Muslim perspectives confronts the sheer ugliness of our current crisis. To Bart Campolo, Aziza Hasan and Leah Hochman, the shared humanity that COVID-19 highlights, is not a facile consolation or ready-made solution. It's a wake-up call to mutual responsibility and shared action. We begin with humanist pastor Bart Campolo and the bottom line of shared destiny.

Bart Campolo: Amid the fast-rising flood of inspirational Corona content, I've spent the past few weeks rationalizing my failure to contribute. In the end, though, it really hasn't been about gathering my thoughts, saving my powder, or even feeling inadequate as a writer. No, the real reason I haven't weighed in until now, is simply that I'm pretty sure my kind of grim practicality won't be very well received just yet. Don't get me wrong, I too, appreciate all the funny quarantine videos and heart-warming stories folks are sharing around these days. We need such reminders that we're in this thing together,

especially when we can't actually touch each other.

BC: What worries me, however, is the worst hurricane ever vibe I keep picking up, which tells me how many people still think this crisis is going to blow over by summer or by fall at the latest, because what I think is that even as we fight the monster at hand, we need to realize the global realities that spawned it are just getting started and gird ourselves for a whole new way of life. Not necessarily a worse one, but surely one far less prosperous and far more difficult.

BC: Lately, I've been studying the Great Depression looking for clues about what's to come. I've listened to Timothy Egan, who documented the Dust Bowl in The Worst Hard Time. And I'm now re-reading John Steinbeck's classic story of family, dignity and survival, The Grapes of Wrath. While Steinbeck's individual characters are too pure for my taste, his vision of good folks pulling together in the face of grinding hardship still rings true.

BC: At one point, in the book's moral center, rough-and-tumble ex-preacher Jim Casy expresses it this way, "Before I knowed it, I was sayin' out loud, the hell with it! There ain't no sin, and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. I says, what's this call, this spirit? And I says, it's love. I love people so much, I fit to bust sometimes. And I wanna make them happy, so I've been preaching something I thought would make them happy. Anyways, I'll tell you one more thing I thought out, and from a preacher, it's the most un-religious thing, and I can't be a preacher no more, because I thought it and I believe it. I figured, why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus. Maybe I figured, maybe it's all men and women we love, maybe that's the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of. Now I sat there thinking it and all of a sudden, I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it."

BC: I wonder how many Americans thought and believed that way deep down when we first heard of trouble in Wuhan. I wonder how many of us think and believe it deep down, even now. I'm quite certain I don't at this point, but I reckon I will before long, if the global economy keeps deteriorating. I love quite a few men and women, after all, some so much I can hardly stand it. If and when we fall into trouble, my tribe and I will suddenly look to you and yours as our dear long-lost brothers and sisters, and we'll desperately pray that you see us in that same Steinbeckian way. In the end, as much as we may wish otherwise, it's only when the chips are down all around that an elemental truth like the oneness of humanity finally becomes as precious as food, water and a safe place to sleep are to a family that's afraid.

BC: Of course, in the end, nothing's really changed or ever will. Life has always been a fragile gift and all of us were always going to die in the end. What matters now is no different from what mattered before, making the most of what time we have by building loving relationships, making things better for others and nurturing genuine gratitude for the wonder of it all. You know, the whole shebang.

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JH: Bart Campolo begins to shape the meaning of being human and the tools we need to engender meaning from the experience of living, that is relationships and improving life for one another, the whole shebang. But what does that look like in day-to-day terms? How do we leverage pain and suffering to ease life's burdens for ourselves and others?

JH: Dr. Leah Hochman, Professor of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, tells us the true story of a Jewish family almost half a millennium ago, who looked to their past as a roadmap to overcoming the tragedies of their present.

Leah Hochman: In 1691, 44-year-old Glikl bas Judah Leib, most commonly known as Glückel of Hameln, began writing a memoir. Having lost her husband of 29 years to a mortal injury two years earlier, the widow with 12 surviving children set out to write about her life to help her with her grief. In the wake of the Thirty Years War, she witnessed travel restrictions and expulsions, robberies and murder, trade, great innovations, the capriciousness of health and life and, most poignantly for today, the ravages of plague.

LH: Over the course of 30 years, she took a long pause in the middle, she wrote and described and shared and drew a picture not only of the world around her, but also of her self-understanding, marked by her unyielding belief in personal integrity, an unwavering devotion to Torah and a deeply personal understanding of a transcendent and impersonal God. She frames it all using what she calls the kernel of the Torah, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

LH: I have always found it interesting that Glückel's story begins not with her, but with her grandparents and her great-grandparents. Her maternal grandmother, widowed herself by an incidence of plague and mourning several children, fled her infected house and lived as a refugee in an outside shelter. Upon returning home, she found it stripped utterly bare. Decades later, while living with Glückel's in Hamburg, her grandmother took charge of caring for the sick and injured refugees of the Chmielnicki massacres. With tenacity and stubbornness, Glückel's grandmother cared for these Jews who were boarded inside people's homes, neighbors, fellow travelers in a life of insecurity.

LH: She climbed up stairs to the attic three or four times a day, Glückel writes, in order to nurse them. Glückel and her sister both took ill, as did their grandmother. The experience was a defining one for Glückel. Glückel's memoir reminds me that in Judaism grief gets written down, pain is meant to be remembered. In response to every political calamity, every religious persecution, every crisis of geography or demography or biology, Jews have committed their suffering to writing. Even now in the Passover season we begin counting the days of the omer, the 49 days between the feast of unleavened bread and the feast of weeks, onto which we have mapped mourning hundreds of people killed by plague during the second century.

LH: Glückel draws on Judaism's attachment to memory and through it she offers us a way to identify with and learn from plagues that by nature have a long history of affecting all people regardless of religion. Glückel herself puzzles over her experiences, but she intuits that what she has learned is valuable and that perhaps you, future reader, will come to know what she cannot. In other words, as a continuous narrative that stretches from one period of confusion and insecurity to another across centuries, we are empowered to look for meaning even if we cannot immediately find it.

LH: I have been reading Glückel's memoir for over 30 years. I do not know that I had ever been able to link the traumas of her grandmother's experience of loss, rejection and disease to Glückel's own acute sense of loss and, connected to that sense, the need to care for all of those who suffer. It's seems so obvious to me now, the admonition to love one's neighbor is a direct response to Glückel's own family history of loving others and, equally as importantly, of not being cared for in a time of great need.

LH: Glückel reminds me that Jewish tradition does not gloss over the pain of a communal or personal crisis, the loss sustained in that crisis or the fear that both inspire; neither do those traditions glorify them. Rather, Jewish tradition seeks to stay in the memory of others' fears and provides us with the task and the opportunity to remember them, and in that remembrance to constantly strive as long as the story is told for the kernel of Torah, that is to love thy neighbor as thyself.

LH: I am so grateful to Glückel for helping me not feel alone. Though I do not share her theology, I share her concern about the safety of our children, and her grandmother reminded me that my grandmother taught me that it is incumbent upon me to act in such a way as to include helping my neighbors, all of my neighbors, rather than lock myself away in fear and turn away.

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JH: When people make a cultural commitment to remember their pain and suffering, they're not luxuriating in storytelling for its own sake, nor even simply investing in a well-conveyed lesson, they are calling to us from the past and reminding us what we must do if we are to rise to the occasion of our own suffering. Which brings us full circle to the lesson of my daughter. We can only rise to that occasion when we first fully acknowledge our loss.

JH: Aziza Hasan, Executive Director of NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change offers us this opportunity for the moments when we might simply be feeling beaten, overwhelmed, or out of control. It's not the easy consolation of a silver lining, but rather the counter-intuitive liberation of humility and in the spirit of Islam, submission. Submission, Hasan teaches us, opens the door for the next step of making meaning and finding purpose, precisely at the time when it seems hardest to muster.

Aziza Hasan: I walk into a Trader Joe's and feel a surge of anxiety when I see empty shelves that are usually well-stocked. The anxiety continues to grow as I travel to four other grocery stores only to find barren shelves. In each of the stores, others have cleared out the milk, bread, eggs, flour, sugar, yeast and toilet paper. I start to feel tension inside of my chest. Others are now competitors, even adversaries. Individuals of Asian descent are bearing the brunt of this otherness, reporting higher rates of discrimination. A recent headline reads: Stabbing of Asian-American Two-Year-Old and Her Family Was a Virus-Fueled Hate Crime.

AH: And yet, this virus does not discriminate against race, gender, ethnicity, or other identifiers. It spreads quickly in communities across the globe and it's doing more than make us physically sick. It's influencing our emotions and how we see one another. In many cases, as threats. So what do we do when this threat is everywhere and it has completely altered our way of being and how we interact with one another? I'd like to share a verse from the Quran that has been speaking to me lately. "In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful. We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger and loss of property, lives and crops. But Prophet, give good news to those who are steadfast, those who say, when afflicted with calamity, 'We belong to God and to God we shall return.'" Chapter 2:155-157.

AH: To acknowledge that we are from God and to God we shall return is to acknowledge that we ourselves are holy. In the Quran, chapter 32:7-9, the text says, "God molded man, and then breathed God's own spirit into him. God gave you hearing, sight and minds, how seldom you are grateful." This part to me is transcendent. Every human soul comes from God's breath into each and every one of us. With every breath we take, we affirm that everyone is holy and deserving of dignity, love and kindness, a consequence of the Almighty's presence in every single person. None of us is better than the other, each of us is deserving of grace.

AH: So the virus doesn't discriminate, neither does God and nor should we. But this much accounts for only part of our text. A bit surprisingly, the Quran links our shared holiness to adversity. Why? Because adversity sows fear and fear is the greatest threat to our mutual recognition of each other's sanctity. People are losing their jobs, worried about food for their families and the roofs over their heads. Individuals facing abuse at home are now stuck there. So when the text calls on us to be steadfast, or faithfully disciplined and offers language for a challenging time, we belong to God, and to God we shall return, it reminds us that we truly do submit ourselves to the unknown and uncertainty, but that we also submit to something greater than ourselves.

AH: In so doing, we look fear straight in the eye and despite its grip, we say to each other, "I see you, I feel you, I recognize you, and I submit to the power of an unknown force that is beyond us and that created us equally." A couple of good friends who have faced very difficult times with overcoming cancer tell me that their trials have helped prepare them for this moment of overbearing uncertainty. They seem to carry themselves with a calm humility and commitment that all of us will see this through. They know fear and they've already had to submit. In their experience lies a mercy that we may be searching for, a reminder that there are indeed blessings around us. Even if

life is not exactly as it was, a reminder of the presence of beauty in our lives and what we took for granted before.

AH: At the end of life, many Muslims offer condolences by quoting this very text, "We belong to God, and to God we shall return." I pray we all find it within us to honor one another in this way, those who are passed and the living, to hold steadfast in submission to this greater unknown, both in its challenges and in its affirmation of our holiest selves, because they're linked. With each breath that is struggling on a ventilator right now or buying food by our side at the grocery store, we're all deserving of recognition, that the divine resides within us.

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JH: Bart Campolo, Leah Hochman and Aziza Hasan call to us in the voice of their humanist, Jewish and Muslim traditions and they all say the same thing, yes, the attack of a virus sheds stark light on our shared human condition, but much more importantly, it demands that we rise to the occasion of our shared human destiny, a story that we have yet to author.

JH: On behalf of producer Jennifer Haut, HUC-JIR and myself, we hope you enjoyed this first episode of Off Script: Old Wisdom. New Reality, audio insights from religious thinkers about the COVID-19 pandemic.

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