



## RABBI MIKE URAM: NEXT GENERATION 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 2019.

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**JH:** Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast. We're going to have a conversation with Rabbi Mike Uram, who is the executive director at Penn Hillel and the author of the best-selling book, "Next Generation Judaism: How college students in Hillel can help reinvent Jewish organizations" which won the National Jewish Book Award in 2016. He spent time in all of the different denominations and seeks to break down the boundaries that prevent people from having full self-actualized Jewish identities. Rabbi Mike Uram, thanks for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

**Michael Uram:** Thank you so much, great to be here.

**JH:** In your book, "Next Generation Judaism", you argue for, if it's a fair encapsulation, you argue for higher impact on a smaller scale. You talk about Shabbat dinner, relationships, etcetera, it's the un-programmed program or strategy, so to speak. We in the organizers world are generally primed pretty well to hear the power of this tactic. It's something we can connect with. But I wanna ask you about the liabilities or limits or vulnerabilities of this tactic. Everything's a cost-benefit.

**MU:** Yeah, I think since the book came out, and I've spoken to people around the country, I actually feel like some of the ideas have become nuanced in the way they should have been in the initial book. First of all, I don't think the idea is "higher impact in a smaller scale."

**JH:** Okay, thanks for the correction.

**MU:** But the way that I've started to say this to folks now is that the whole way that identity is formed and the way that people relate to religion and institutions and community is changing, mostly driven probably by technology, but that we live in a world

increasingly that's focused on customization, people are doing things in micro trends. For example, the classic example is when I Love Lucy was on TV in the 50's, over 74% of Americans watched the exact same show at the same moment. And then you look at even something like Game of Thrones, it only gets 3% of the American population for the final episode, which is a much higher than average weekly viewing.

**MU:** So there's been this huge shift. And it's really interesting. Also, millennials are the least trustful generation in the history of Pew research. So if you ask people in the Greatest Generation, "Generally speaking, can you trust people?" about 45% of them agreed, and for millennials, it's 18%. And they don't mean that they're gonna get mugged. It means they don't trust institutions and organizations and macro community to get them. And yet, almost every instance of organized Jewish community is built on an operating system that is totally designed for a macro community, for affiliations, for a one-size-fits-all approach. I want to say one other piece of introduction which is, whenever I say one-size-fits-all, synagogue leaders tend to say, "We're not like that. We've got the sisterhood and the brotherhood, and we've got a yoga service and a library service." But when you start to think about how those things were engineered, it's the same group of leaders trying to reach out to the same populations and markets and to get them to show up in the same space. So, there's a lot of entry points but ultimately, it's the same product. And so, what I'm arguing for is that, in addition to these macro communities and the classic programming model, that there has to be another strategy for all of the people who aren't gonna show up.

**JH:** Right. They're the golden demographic that everyone wants to reach and no one knows how.

**MU:** And I think the other piece that I've learned that's also not in the book is, whenever I would try to... With all the nuance that possibly could explain this, I think people, what they still heard is, "You're saying take people out of the building and out of the synagogue or out of the Hillel, and sticking them in small Shabbat dinners." And that was never really...

**JH:** I apologize for contributing to this, to the over-simplification.

**MU:** It's something that's maybe off in the book. What I started to realize is the way to hit this home is to think about two important holidays in the Jewish calendar, and we both have Yom Kippur, and we have Passover and Pesach. And in Yom Kippur, it's all about macro community. If you think of a typical Yom Kippur service, what gets you in is a ticket, a membership, you heard the rabbi, the cantor is amazing, your friends belong there, it's all institutional relationships.

**JH:** Even Rosh Hashanah dinner, most people don't grow up with memories of Rosh Hashanah dinner.

**MU:** But I think that most of what we do in the organized Jewish world, whether it's education or youth group programming or Hillel programming, runs on this Yom Kippur paradigm. Which is a few people come up with a great idea, they broadcast out, and

they try to get as many people as they can in the room. Again, that's very much that macro community model. But the other thing we have is Sedar. And we know that you can have Sedar, everyone can do it for themselves. There's no institutional coordination, and yet you feel like you're part of something larger. And so, just like we have both of those modalities in the calendar, I think organizationally, we should have both of those modalities. And yet, almost everything the synagogues, federations, JCCs do is still on the Yom Kippur paradigm. If that makes sense.

**MU:** What gets you into Sedar? A friend invites you. The gap between leader and participant is much more narrow. It's egalitarian. Totally customizable. And so, I think in a healthier version of American Judaism, you would have organizations that would have real strategies, both to grow the number of people coming to the building, coming to services for synagogue. I would give this example, could you develop a strategic plan where you're gonna grow the number of people who come on Friday night by 30%, but also have a strategy to grow the number of people lighting Shabbat candles with their family both by 30%? Generally speaking, when we wanna keep a synagogue strong, we only count what happens in the building but that's not the full totality of what Jewish life could be.

**JH:** Got it. And so, when I asked the question which posed it as liabilities or vulnerabilities on the one end and benefits on the other, you're saying you want the balance in the first place. You recognize that there are limits to the Pesach Sedar. That's why we have Yom Kippur, which you also want us to have it.

**MU:** Correct.

**JH:** Yeah, I hear you.

**MU:** But I also think there's layers to that if we wanna dig into it. For example, we know that there's some Seders that are amazing, there's some Seders that, "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat." And you lose quality control in that way. But what I've also seen happen on campus when we do this, for example, if you send the rabbi out to the fraternity house, your really cool... The Torah of hooking up with a bunch of cool fraternity guys. It can be amazing, and the rabbi can bring all this lived wisdom and textual stuff, but the whole fraternity is then facing the rabbi and talking to him or her...

**JH:** Effectively reproducing a satellite.

**MU:** Right. And when you take the rabbi out, ironically, maybe there'll be less text but, all of a sudden, this community of people is engaging with itself. And I think part of what I'm trying to push in the book is, one model is a client-server model where the organization does it for you. And then the other thing is, "How can you unlock the power of social networks to do for themselves?"

**JH:** And I would say there's another layer, which is the chronology of the life cycle, so that you're going to favor one model over the other depending on where you are in life. When you're pre-marriage or pre-child married, the Yom Kippur model of having a physical space that you attend or go to regularly is less attractive. But when you have

kids and you need a preschool, all of a sudden that changes.

**MU:** Correct.

**JH:** And then after that kid's bar or bat mitzvah, then maybe you're gonna recede a bit and go back to the Pesach model until you wanna join your elders community back at the...

**MU:** I actually hadn't thought about that insight. It's true, but all the more so why two operating systems allow...

**JH:** Both, exactly.

**MU:** It allows much more for the complexity of different life. But I think there's another layer there too, which is... One of the things I'm really driving at is that there's all of this neuroscience and linguistic science that seems to suggest that you almost can't think or conceive of something if you can't articulate it. So the way we speak drives the way we think.

**JH:** Without the word, there is no idea.

**MU:** Correct, better said. And so, I think about all of the hidden implicit messages in the language we use, and one of the things that has become clear to me, is that there is a dangerous conflation between involvement, affiliation, use of Jewish services like preschools or membership or whatever it is, and very quickly assuming that because someone affiliates or shows up, that we're also then doing the work of activating their Jewish lives or making a real difference. And it's an easy mistake to make. It's really hard to run a legacy Jewish organization and you don't have a ton of time. If you find yourself at board meetings and strategy meetings and planning meetings, and the only questions that we're asking are, "How are the numbers? How many people are showing up? How do we increase the numbers?" I think those are actually dangerous metrics.

**MU:** And so part of what I like about that foil of the Seder... I've gone around the country and I've asked people... One of the exercises is to say, "Tell me a list of what are the most transformative Jewish experiences you've had that made you the Jew you are today." And the list is always the same. You can guess. It's family, it's grandparents, it's some role model, could have been a rabbi or a camp counselor, who took an interest in you. It's camp, it's Israel, and then if there was a death in the family, it could be around avelut and mourning customs, where all of a sudden there is an activation. But what has never showed up, I've done this 150 times, is someone talking about a program. I don't mean a program like, "I went on this trip and explored." But a one-off program, a lecture, a youth group dance, a Hillel barbecue.

**JH:** A Purim carnival.

**MU:** A Purim carnival is never... And honestly, services has never shown up either except the kind of, "My father died and I started going to minyan."

**JH:** Or, "My bar mitzvah." Bat mitzvah sometimes comes up a bit.

**MU:** And I think that, again, it shows we're so addicted to programming and attendance. And we don't even realize that we think that because the room is full, we've succeeded. But we may not have. And ironically... I always play this game, "Imagine you could get Gal Gadot to come," or whoever the biggest Jewish star is of the moment. So you bring that person to whatever community and you get 20,000 people to show up to hear this. And you think, "This is the biggest success we've ever had." And my theory is that the vast majority of newcomers that you would get in that moment, they might like Gal Gadot, they might feel like, "Wow, this reinforces fact that Judaism has nothing to say about my life, 'cause she has nothing to say about Judaism." But more than that, they show up and it's all the same cliquiness, it's all the same inside or outside, and it reinforces... And so that's also this power of, "How do you focus on experience, impact, Jewish growth as opposed to affiliation, numbers, attendance, program?"

**JH:** I'm completely convinced by your argument but, at the same time, wanna push back on two dimensions of what we're calling the Yom Kippur model or the program model to which you're offering this critique and compliment, we should say. In the worst case scenario model, where someone shows up and pays dues but fundamentally have maybe even barren Jewish lives and whatever, if we're gonna make a caricature. I wanna argue that it's still a very powerful metric because we can rebrand that metric as those people giving. They may not be getting. They may not actually be... But they're guaranteeing it for you and me. And that's an act of generosity, it's an act of Tzedakah, and it's a mitzvah.

**MU:** You mean they're giving 'cause even if they don't love it, they're showing up to be part of a community.

**JH:** And their presence.

**MU:** To answer Amen to someone who's saying mourner's kaddish.

**JH:** Yeah, yeah, in the minyan-ish kind of way. But more than that, there's real practical benefit there. They are paying the dues that keep the roof over the head for everyone else. And, in a world, by the way, where most people pay less than their freight, so to speak, that's Tzedakah.

**MU:** I totally agree with you and it's such an important point. And then there's also part of me that wants to say, if we weren't so addicted to it, if it wasn't already... In other words, even great Hillels and great synagogues and great JCCs it's... I run an organization and we have to keep the lights on. It is too often that the only question I have time to think of is, "How many people showed up?" And for us it's not membership, but it's fundraising. The real way I would love to see this happen... Sorry. And I think that they're... In some ways, it's generous and it's an important Tzedakah and it's mitzvah. In other ways, I think that we are just shirking our responsibility, which is engagement, which is this methodology that we talk about, in its purest form would say,

"Great, you're a member. That is an act of generosity on your part. Now what we owe you is to seek you out and to find out what inspires you, what pisses you off, what are the questions you're asking about your life, what are the things you're... How do we put you in community? How do we add rituals so that you can make sense out of life?"

**MU:** And I think that it's too easy to feel like... Again, it's like, "Well, we have all these members. We want to get them more involved." What's involvement? We got the softball team and we got the sisterhood. And everyone's thinking about, "How do we fill up these boxes?" as opposed to, "How do we help people live more transformed lives?" And the thing is, it's a paragraph. All the people who are making those mistakes, myself included, the way it goes, the topic sentence is, "What are we doing about membership?" And down in the paragraph it's, "Because we know that membership leads to connectivity, which leads to softening of the loneliness in our lives."

**MU:** But what I want to do is I want to invert the values pyramid. The metric I would like is, "How do you grow membership? How many people came to services? And then, how do you start to, in a real way, both have a strategy to follow up with people so that they're growing, that they're deepening?" And the second metric is, "How do you measure the work beyond memberships up or down or the room looked packed? Or High holidays were small this year than I've ever seen." And if the vast majority of really good congregations don't have an immediate answer to that question, it feels to me like that's a blind spot. And part of what makes Hillel innovative is that we have these evaporating organizations. We don't get to work with people for their life. Every two and a half years, the whole thing falls apart and you could have the most amazing thing and then they graduate and it's over. And so, in place of building institutions, we have to do something else. And I think we got very stuck on meaning, but there were these great researchers and they came up with this metric, which is they did about 1000 interviews of people and they found that there were four components to transformative Jewish experiences. And the four components were, it creates a positive Jewish memory where you carry like...

**JH:** A story.

**MU:** "I didn't always love High Holidays, but I remember the Rabbi used to tell these stories, and it becomes part of your DNA and identity. It increases Jewish self-confidence. There's a massive epidemic of feeling inauthentic in Jews, honestly, in every denomination. So it increases Jewish self-confidence. It increases Jewish knowledge. It gives you more tools to use Judaism to build a good life. And then, this is also an essential one, it increases connectedness to other Jews. So again, you have the largest attendance at High Holidays ever, but everyone shows up in little groups of two, three, or four. They talk to the three other families they know and they leave. It's not a failure. It's just a missed opportunity. You hit the metric of getting everyone to be in a room together, which is powerful, but there's more we could do."

**JH:** All right. It would be difficult to disagree with you and I certainly don't want to. I am compelled and moved. I get it. But I'm worried about your first question which is, "How do you do the work of actually helping people get to that place?" And that's where I want to

push back harder because how do you do it? I'll tell you how you do it. You do it by having enough professionals to spend the time to do it. And how do you pay for those professionals? By getting those people to pay the dues to show-

**MU:** Can we play with that for a little bit? Finish your point, but let's play with it for a little bit.

**JH:** So that's why I want to recast the positivity of the old model. And just as you generously and creatively, as opposed to nearly throwing the baby out with the bath water, are saying, "I don't wanna get rid of young people, I just want to also inflict it with Pesach." I too want to push back on you to say, "I don't wanna be quite as negatively..."

**MU:** Fair.

**JH:** "Intoned for the membership model."

**MU:** So A, I think you're right. I have this tendency sometimes because I'm trying so hard to...

**JH:** Shift the conversation.

**MU:** Shift the conversation, I overdue it on the Seder model. But there is one place where I want to be negative, not because I'm happy to be negative, but because I think it is a truism. It may change if social dynamic... I think that it's the rise in the antisemitism that we're seeing is gonna have an effect on this conversation because this conversation is more cohesive in 2016 than it is in 2019. But the one place where I think I'm really on a safe place is that while the Yom Kippur paradigm and the Pesach paradigm are both essential, and both need to be amplified. The old model, as you called it, the Yom Kippur paradigm is gonna be increasingly hard to fund, and it's not because I don't like membership. One of the chapters in the book says these three different models of community. And I used to teach it in this way where the club model that had insiders and outsiders and boundaries was bad and then I realized that's not at all how I feel. The club model's amazing. Because by having boundaries, it means you can belong.

**JH:** Right, right, right.

**MU:** What's dangerous is when we believe that the club model can work for everybody as opposed to understanding the whole purpose of a club is its niche.

**JH:** Yes, agreed. Yes, agreed.

**MU:** But no matter what we want to say philosophically, unless there's a radical change in the way that identity and consumerism function, and technology functions, membership models, the way they're currently structured, are gonna be increasing... There is gonna be a shrinking group of people in America who are willing to pay for it. And so, here's the point I want to make. The business... There's not a single synagogue in America where the mission statement of Congregation Ner Tamid is, "We will work to

sustain Congregation Ner Tamid." Every mission statement of every Jewish organization that has one that I found, it's always usually... I think Jews are pyromaniacs. There's a lot of fire imagery of kindling, and sparks and... Right? There's Tikkun Olam, there's prayer, there's God, there's community, there's Torah. No one says "sustain." There's an old joke. Woody Allen used to say this old joke, that for Jews swimming is not drowning.

[chuckle]

**MU:** It's not enough. And so if the essence of what we're trying to sell in the world is the technology of Judaism to make our lives, our relationships, and our world better, not to keep our organizations alive. And so the analogy that I always use is, Kodak invented digital photography, I think, in the early '70s. But all the corporate executives, they get tricked into thinking that their business is selling paper, and film, and chemicals. And then they actually... Research shows they knew the market was shrinking, that people didn't wanna buy film and paper and chemicals. And so they tried new innovations, and cool brands to get the young people to buy the film. And meanwhile, all these teenagers with flip phones are starting to kill photography, because what they want is they want it to be instantaneous, they want to be able to share it, they don't wanna have to rely on their parents to drive them to the Fotomat, where there's some weird guy looking at their photos. But the point is, Kodak's business wasn't paper, and film and chemicals. Kodak's business was memories.

**MU:** Preserving memories, sharing memories, bringing people together, and they couldn't recognize it. And so I think the fight to hold on... I'm not against membership, but the fight to hold on to it sometimes rings to me like the fight to get the young people to understand how good the paper and chemicals are. And I think our business is Judaism, not membership. This is something we've done in real life at Penn Hillel, but by playing this game of, "We don't care about who comes to Hillel," the irony is that by not focusing on the institutional survival and doing stuff that inspires people, and changes their lives, and puts people in real community, they wanna be part of an ongoing thing. We always like to say, "Of all the students we involved through our shadow brand called JRP without ever mentioning the H-word, Hillel, 30% of them became leaders in Hillel." And so many of those alumni are giving back to Hillel. And the key is not to figure out how to hold on to it, but how do you monetize the thing that matters most, which is Judaism? And just like Instagram and Apple has figured out how to monetize photography. And you think about the CD business, the record business, gone, they thought it was gonna be the end. But now through streaming, and downloads, and iTunes, there's a new way.

**MU:** It's about music, it's not about CDs. I think there are ways to monetize deep Jewish experiences that sustain institutions and professionals, but it doesn't have to be just membership. One of the big flips that I didn't write in the book that I wish I had, is one of the key... One of the flips I already mentioned to you is inverting the values pyramid. But one of them is also, how do you supplement what is a receiving... Everything we do almost as a receiving model? How do we come up with great things to get people to show up and to receive what we can offer? How do we supplement that with a seeking



model that goes out and says, "We are gonna bring you Judaism wherever you live, work, and play."

**MU:** You go out and if you talk to what we call "engagement Jews", and you say, "What can we do? What would make you interested in our movement, in our synagogue?" "I'm good, I'm good. I'm really proud to be Jewish. I have great memories. I still go home to my grandparents for Seder." But if you ask a different question, not asking what can we do for you, But to really get like, "What's your story? And what inspires you?" On a gut level, all of this stuff starts coming out, and people, all the research shows us also American Jews by large are really proud to be Jewish. There's a default belief that Judaism is awesome and valuable. They want more, they just don't wanna join our clubs. So what if there was a way to activate people Jewishly, where it was about Judaism and not about club membership? And then the club benefits. Ultimately, the club would benefit, right?

**JH:** Right, the club would... Yeah, yeah.

**MU:** There's a way to do it. We just have to be bold and to be willing to experiment without knowing the answer.

[music]

**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](http://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](http://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.

[music]

**JH:** I get it. Yeah, let's invert the values. Let's invert the stated values. And once we invert them, make them our real values. The values as currently written are not our real values. I don't think Jews are prisoners to the membership model. I think you're right. The critique is right, we should do better and all that. But I don't actually think that if you talk to Jews in synagogues, no matter what their mission statement says, you don't have to work hard to get them to admit that membership in and of itself is not the goal.

**MU:** So I often say, when I'm doing workshops or speaking, that in my day job I know how complicated it is and how nuanced it is. And it's hard, and we don't live up to half the stuff that I... But my job is to provoke here, I think. And the very first piece of this book was some scholarship that I discovered at Northwestern when I was a GCSE Fellow, which was an outreach fellow back in the '90s. And there were two scholars at Northwestern that showed on a whole bunch of levels, they were working in the inner city, but they found that if you begin with deficiencies and what's wrong and you map out a community... For example in a Jewish community, you'd say there's assimilation

or there's apathy or there's un-affiliation or there's ignorance.

**MU:** And then the community then tries to respond in a value-based way that, first of all, it magnifies politics in the organization. 'Cause once you're in a deficiency mindset, then it's a zero sum thing. There's one answer. And then what's really interesting is then the thinking often becomes the answer to every problem is a program, that's their language. And then the value of the organization is, "These people couldn't do it without us." And to raise money you have to, every year, talk about how bad it is and, if it wasn't for us, and then people internalize that deficiency map. And what they showed, what's really interesting, is that it then breaks the bonds of community. And instead of relating to each other, they relate to the institution and become passive.

**JH:** Or the problem of the institution.

**MU:** Yeah. And just by flipping it to mapping out the assets. And so I think that there's power in being disciplined and forcing people to say, "Stop talking about the problems the way you always talk about them."

**JH:** I get it.

**MU:** The topic sentence has to be, "Our business is changing people's lives. Membership is a nice accidental outcome, and we will do it at..." And I think it matters.

**JH:** No, I get it. I'm with you.

**MU:** I really would love to get your take on one other... Can I ask you a question about it?

**JH:** Yeah, you can ask me.

**MU:** I make this contention in the book that we need new language to describe Jews. And I'm wondering if you ever came across...

**JH:** All the time. There is no noun in the English language that represents the category into which Judaism belongs. There just isn't. We're not a religion, you can't call us an ethnicity, you can't call us a nation, you can't call us a territory. But we're all of those things, undeniably. By any intellectually honest assessment, we're all of those things. The only term in any language is Israel. There just is no other word that captures not merely the inextricability, but more importantly the multi-facetedness of the unity of what it is to... What Jewishness is. And it has the added advantage of reminding us that Israel is both a land and a people and a patriarch. And that begins to, just in the word, to dimensionalize the thing along contours that are faithful to our category, which isn't otherwise represented.

**MU:** You just did a totally amazing thing, which is in attempting to describe Jewish identity, you offered a beautiful, complex, nuanced both description of how impossible it is to describe it and then an attempt to describe it. And then, now let's contrast that with the colloquial ways that people define themselves and the way that organizations talk

about Jews. I would say in my own experience that 70%, 80%, 90% of the time where I've been in any meeting of the organized Jewish community, that wasn't the conversation. It wasn't even close. The conversation was affiliated/unaffiliated, involved/uninvolved, knowledgeable/not knowledgeable, religious/secular, core/periphery. I think what you started to articulate is when a Jew wakes up, what they're thinking about, if they feel Jewish at that moment, is much closer to what you were talking about, than the way that the population study of the local community would mark them. Which is in/out, binary, more/less, more. And so I think what I've also found in talking to people over the years, is that everybody thinks that Habad is the most welcoming denomination. Which philosophically, it should be the Reform Movement. Right?

**JH:** Right. Yeah. We still would claim that place.

**MU:** But why? And then I was thinking about... I've had coffee conversations with, I don't know, 1500 or 2000 college students over the years. And every reform, conservative, reconstructionist, secular, every student who identifies as Jewish but isn't Orthodox, I realized not a single one of them in all those coffee conversations ever expressed guilt about what they believe about God. They've never expressed guilt about ritual observance. The guilt always comes out, "I don't go. I used to be involved. My grandmother really wants me to go. My family used to be involved in federation. We stopped." It's affiliation guilt. And so you're saying "don't get so stuck on the membership thing" is a very long on trip around. But part of the reason I keep attacking membership is not 'cause I wanna blow up that model, but to highlight the ways in which it's dangerous. If we spend our time as demographers, as social scientists, as community leaders, as lay leaders focused on you're affiliated, you're not affiliated, you're core, you're periphery, and we measure everyone in a binary way, there is a certain violence. And inevitably the way we talk about it is gonna be internalized.

**JH:** I agree. I hear you.

**MU:** Again, I don't think that the membership model should go away, but I think that we all need to, with a smile on our faces, play a game of, "What happens if we pretended like it didn't exist? What happens if we pretended institutions didn't matter? What happens if we pretended we didn't need it?"

**JH:** We are fundamentally in agreement. And again I find your arguments very moving. And the flipping is what you're aiming for it to be, which is constructively provocative. I just feel like, "Fine. Let's take those sociologists at their word. Let's not focus on the negative and let's do an honest assessment of, "What are the strengths we should be leveraging in one realm?" And then for the things that they're not strong on, let's leverage them in the others." So for Kemach, for money to get the stuff done, let's focus on the blandishments of membership of your capacity to help Judaism thrive by being a member 'cause it's beautiful and powerful and true. But let's go to Pesach when it comes to a whole slew of other things that we have not, as a community, fully done justice to. And remember the positives on both and then pursue them vigorously as you propose.

**MU:** But I think that the... And it's funny, you keep saying that you find that you agree, and I realized I'm arguing, but not against you. I'm arguing against the straw man of, what's a gender neutral way of saying straw man? Straw person?

**JH:** A straw, yeah, a scarecrow.

**MU:** A scarecrow, that is impressive. A scarecrow. So, I'm arguing against the scarecrow of this image, but I think that the reason why I'm trying to do it, is I actually think it's a way to provide hope. Because when I'm alone, and it's been a bad semester, and we're behind on fundraising and it seems to me like some core part of our program is shrinking, I'm not in a mindset of expansive thing. I'm in a mindset of a self-pity.

[chuckle]

**MU:** And I think that Rabbis, for example, they have incredibly hard jobs. I saw this happen where this young person wanted to connect with Judaism, and I actually connected them with all of these Rabbis, and they did not have time. Not because they're bad Rabbis, they don't care. They're working 75 hours a week with the funerals, and the bar mitzvahs, right? And the one Rabbi in that community that had time was like an Aish Rabbi, and that's real. So, part of what I'm trying to do with the very strident pushing is to say, even when it feels dark, and even when it is really hard, and there are limited resources and limited time, one of the ways that we can dig ourselves out, is if you can't fix it all, what if we start with like, "Let's find new language." The truth is I really do think that instead of calling Jews involved and uninvolved, if you find a language that actually describes them in affirmative terms, that starts to betray what's the methodology to reach them, if we stop saying involved, but active. Or, instead of saying program we talk about engagement, 'cause a program tends to connote one-off, an engagement means you've got a plan where you're growing towards something. I think obviously a new sense of energy reveals itself and there is often a way, I think, to monetize those things.

**MU:** But I think it's not just about seders, and this is something that I think makes people really uncomfortable, but there's all of this stuff from Rick Warren, and Ron Wilson talks about it, and all this marketing materials, the most important you can have as a brand is evangelists. And I think about what goes on at so many synagogues or Hillels, and it's like, "Well you're a reformed Jew, I'm a reformed Jew, we're the same." We don't talk about it, we make all these assumptions. And I think it's dangerous. Because underneath all of it, there is an incredible shrinkage among the number of Jews who are active. Actively using Judaism to enhance their lives. I don't mean affiliation. I mean deeper, right? And even if you're strong, even if you're a reform movement, even if you're in Park Avenue synagogue or Wilshire Boulevard synagogue, the strong institutions or Penn Hillel, you can get tricked into thinking that the vibrancy of the number of members you have or the people who show up in your building, means it's working. But I actually think, what we actually have to do is not get more people to show up, I think we actually have to make more Jews. I don't mean conversion here.

**MU:** Part of what I talk about in the book is, I offer two different ways to describe Jews, but one of them is engagement Jews and empowerment Jews. Simpler version is, engagement Jews are people with very short institutional resumes who feel just as Jewish as we do, but don't seek out organized Jewish life. Empowerment Jews are people with long Jewish resumes: Camp, youth group, bar mitzvah ceremony, right? And we often think that everybody is just an empowerment Jew in waiting, and I actually don't think it's true. I think there's 85% of American Jews, I think fit in the category of engagement Jews. Which is, they feel deeply Jewish, they're proud of it, they want to deepen that connection, but they either are actively turned off, or just entirely uninterested in organized Jewish life, and that's just too many people.

**MU:** And what is Jewish leadership a euphemism for? It's a euphemism for making decisions, planning programs, and writing checks. Being on committees, planning the gala, and write the check. What if we said that part of Jewish leadership is two additional responsibilities? You have to seek out Jews you know, where you've never had a Jewish conversation, and start one. And the second piece, is you have to go and be a creator of Jewish life. You wanna be on the board? Awesome. Minimum gift, you gotta serve on a committee, you gotta be at three of the four annual meetings, and you have to host Shabbat dinner once a month, for people who are not active otherwise in Jewish life. And that's it. And you take the number of people in a five mile radius. You could imagine.

**MU:** I can see this actually at Penn Hillel with our data, where you can see that at a certain point in time, there might have been 350 people at Shabbat dinner in Hillel. At that time there were 2500 Jews on campus. The buildings packed, we're the best Hillel in the country, we're feeling great about ourselves, there's nowhere for any one to sit, 350 Jews. But when you think about it as 350 out of 2500, it's a failure. So how can we develop a strategy where friends are inviting friends so it goes to 700 people? 350 in the building, 350 in fraternities, in a store, right off... That, I guess, in aggressive ways where I think that we're in a moment where every synagogue, every JCC, every camp, every day school, can't just stay in it's lane. How can any Jewish organization be an agent of total change and transformation for every Jew that they could possibly connect with? And there's models of this, right? Like feminism. It began with going and sitting with women...

**JH:** Consciousness raised.

**MU:** Consciousness is raised and you don't feel oppressed, we have to help you, right? People in the Federation world, has figured out how to get friends to ask each other for money. It's way easier to say, "What's your Jewish story?" Than to ask for a donation. So it's hard, but I can imagine a Jewish future where instead of saying, "How do we sustain ourselves?" I can imagine a Jewish future where there is not only growing diversity of how we express, Judaism but there's factually and quantitatively more Jewish action happening in homes and synagogues. And inevitably, and this is the dirty little secret, you get people having Shabbat dinner, you get people in more book clubs, you get people going and doing more service projects with Jewish friends that are going to a soup kitchen. It's not that hard to imagine that even without trying, there's gonna be

more affiliation. You've been trying to poke a little bit, which I appreciate. I think there's one mega weakness in the whole thing, where it all falls apart. I'd be happy to talk about it.

**JH:** I know. Yeah, you've got my curiosity.

**MU:** If we did a whole presentation about what this looks like, the model becomes instead of doing just programs, you start to do relationships, and then you build cohorts of ambassadors, or fellows, whatever, we call them interns sometimes, but where they do peer to peer engagement. And so it means where you get 15 or 20 people in this demographic and 15 or 20 people in that demographic, in each of them they don't plan mega events, but they each do their own Seders. And so then you say, "Well, what does that look like? What are they really doing?" Then you'd hear me over and over again, I'd say the same things: Shabbat dinners, book clubs, Tikkun Olam projects, Passover Seders, Shabbat dinners. I think where it really falls apart is when it comes to prayer. And prayer...

**JH:** Especially a Jewish prayer which requires a quorum and it...

**MU:** A quorum, it requires whether you're Renewal, Reform, or Orthodox or Conservative, it requires expertise.

**JH:** Yes.

**MU:** You can have an amazing conversation with Jews about Judaism without an expert there. It'll be very personal. It's harder to pray without someone who really knows how to facilitate that. And there's something underneath it also, which is all of this customization, it's not good. It's not good. There is an existential crisis in our world that... Right? So the idea of, "Well, let's just jump on it." I don't mean this is an ideal form. It's a short term tactic. There was a Christian thinker I heard on the radio, this amazing quote, he said, "You don't leave church because you're bored, you go to church to be bored. Don't underestimate the power of institutionalized boredom." So, if everything is about meaning and customization and it being deep and in your gut, that's a great way to turn people on to Judaism. But there is a deep religious value of, "This is not about you. Your job in this moment is to subjugate yourself to sit and be one." All of the confession, all the prayer for High Holidays is all in the plural. You're supposed to make yourself small and to submit and then something is revealed about the human condition through that submission. It's not our only modality. We're also Israel and we wrestle.

**JH:** No, of course not. Right, there's a million.

**MU:** But there are serious ethical, spiritual, moral things that can't be done by getting what you want and by customization. That's where this stuff all falls apart.

**JH:** Especially an American... And the autonomy promoted by this movement, the reform movement, that has been celebrated as a very, very... And to talk about submission, Arnold Jacob Wolf, one of the great reform rabbis of the last part of the

20th century, wrote an article about how you really need to understand Judaism as Islam, meaning submission. He was trying to put a fine point on it. He was a provocative writer and speaker. So you're right, and that's a hard sell.

**MU:** One of the things that's great about working in Hillels, I get to work with and I get to see the products of reform, conservative, Orthodox, and in between. I get to work all these different Jews and rabbis. And there was a colleague I worked with who's a very deep Jew and very pious and very Orthodox, all those things that mean as, separately, boxes that are checked. But he said something right around the time I was listening to a lot of kids music with my little kids, a Rick Recht song, it's this song about La'asok B'divrei Torah, which is to engage in the business of Torah, and how it's to be a good person to love your neighbor. And I remember, no offence to Rick Recht was an incredible guy and a gift to our people, but this rabbi's words, named Jonathan Shulman, were in my mind and I heard the song and I got angry. Because what I realized was Torah... What he had said is a Torah study is an Avodah.

**MU:** You don't do it because it's fun or meaningful, you submit to it. Especially classic Talmud study is very esoteric and can be tedious. And when I had this moment where I realized, the way you learn to love your neighbor as yourself, is not by looking at that verse in the Torah, that's like a nice fortune cookie saying. The way you learn to love another is through the heart, it's when you say, "I'm gonna put aside what I want in this moment to do something for the larger world or the community, like study Torah or pray." It's delayed gratification. And by learning to delay your gratification, by learning to tamp down your own impulses, that is what gives you the deep skill to love your neighbor as yourself. And so that, my engagement model, has nothing to say about those deeper lessons. Expect maybe at least we're in conversation with those engagement Jews to say that mini sermon, right?

**JH:** Right, right. And American individualism and the modern world we live in, it's all... It makes all of that an uphill battle, which is one of the reasons that the Yom Kippur model is not sufficient in the first place. So it cuts both ways in terms... You said it blows up your model. It doesn't, it blows up the other model as well.

**MU:** You can water down Shabbat dinner, and it works. Meaning you can take... And I remember we would do this with these interns where they'd say, "It's not on my style. Can I just do it my way?" And it would just be food on Friday night at the fraternity house. There'd be no kiddush, be no Motzi, no candle, but they call it Shabbat dinner. And that was enough symbolically to initiate a whole set of conversations and memory sharing and a sense of connection. The problem is most Jews, many rabbis included, you look at the Hebrew of the Siddur, you look at the English of the Siddur, it's not easy.

**JH:** No.

**MU:** That's a hard thing, and there's one other thing I think it would be worth it to say, which is, if you were to ask me what would be a positive outcome from all of my strident arguing? I think there's three, and I am equally happy with any of the three of them. My goal in arguing this way is not to be right, and I actually don't think I'm right. I play that

character in these moments. My goal is to push people to think about the same questions that we're all dealing with from a different perspective, because it's the only way to move forward. And so, if someone listening to this podcast or reading the book felt like, "This guy is full of hoo-ha. He knows nothing. This is the answer for my community." it would make me... It would fill me with pikuach nefesh with a sense of satisfaction, 'cause that's actually why you expose yourself to new ideas. Because you see, "This guy's full of it, this woman's full of it, this is the answer." I think if it concretizes what people... I knew this all along, but now it's in a package, that would be a great outcome.

**MU:** And I think if it were new for anybody that would be a good tool, but the whole thing I'm trying to do... And I feel like this is the gift that was given by a few amazing mentors. Jeremy Bracken who was the Hillel director of Penn for many, many years. I graduated from seminary, he was in this very narrow box about what Judaism should mean and what success means, and he just was anti-establishment in how he thought. And just a few of the right questions and I was off thinking about everything. And we need people to do that. I'm stuck in a lot of ways in my own work, my own life, but I think I have a chance to play this role to unstick people. And it made me think of this, there's this beautiful thing in the Talmud where rabbis are getting sick and Rabiokhan goes to visit them and heals them, and then Rabiokhan gets sick. And the Talmud asks this amazing question, "Why couldn't Rabiokhan heal himself?" And the Talmud says that a prisoner can't free themselves from their own prison. And so this is it. Each of us in our way, we can be brilliant in one moment and totally stuck in the other way. And that's what each of us is doing in our lives and in our organizational leadership. And so I'm trying to nudge... I've got plenty of work to do on my own end, but with a lot of passion and fake confidence to nudge so that maybe there's a new crack of light is formed and that's the way we reinvent the world every day.

**JH:** Well, thank you for nudging on the College Commons Podcast. I really enjoyed talking with you.

**MU:** Thank you so much.

**JH:** I wish you every success and I hope our paths cross soon.

[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, 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](http://collegetcommons.huc.edu).

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