



RABBI SETH M. LIMMER: POLITICS IN JUDAISM AND JUDAISM IN POLITICS

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host. You're listening to a special episode recorded at the URJ Biennial in December of 2019.

JH: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, and this episode with Rabbi Seth M Limmer. Rabbi Limmer serves as senior rabbi of Chicago Sinai congregation, and he has served as Chair of the Justice, Peace and Civil Liberties Committee of the central conference of American Rabbis. On behalf of Chicago Sinai congregation's lead role in organizing the Reform movement's participation in the NAACP's 2015 America's Journey for Justice, Rabbi Limmer accepted the Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath Bearer of Light Award, which is the highest honor bestowed by the URJ. In 2016, he authored *Medieval Midrash: The House for Inspired Innovation*. And being a medievalist myself, it is a great pleasure to welcome you, Rabbi Limmer, to the College Commons podcast.

Rabbi Seth M Limmer: Thanks, pleasure to be here.

JH: Among your many sermons which touch on a wide variety of really cool topics...

RL: Thanks.

JH: You offered one about the decision in Chicago Sinai to set up, in permanent fashion, national flags in the temple space. For many of our listeners, the mere fact that that would have been: A, that they wouldn't have been there already; and B, that it was a question, is news. That's something that we can all learn from. And your sermon lays out some really interesting history questions and solutions, and I wanna ask you to engage with us and walk us through that because I think it's a really instructive experience.

RL: There is no greater honor than serving at a historic congregation like Chicago Sinai that's been around since 1861, where we use David Einhorn's prayer book, but also had both of his son-in-laws, Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G Hirsch as our Rabbi. So we have some history at Sinai...

JH: These are some of the absolute leading lights of Reform Judaism in America, going way back 100-odd years and plus.

RL: And if I may say so, so far to the left, which is a very Sinai thing, that they were not good friends with our founder, Isaac Mayer Wise, and actually denied him entry into the City of Chicago because he was a centrist. So we are a congregation of strong opinions, and we were founded in 1861 as a union congregation. It was actually as Einhorn was leaving Baltimore, denouncing slavery, and going to Beth-El, which became Emanu-El in New York, and that was the mode in which Sinai saw itself. And we consider ourselves an American congregation, both Kohler and Emil G Hirsch wrote the Pittsburgh platform, the defining document to Reform Judaism in America.

RL: And our history has it, whether or not it's true, that in every sanctuary of all seven buildings that we've ever had, an American flag has stood on our pulpit as a sign of our commitment to America. And if you know your American Jewish history, in the 1800s and in the early 1900s, it was very important to show how patriotic we were, how committed we were to the American project, and how thankful we were to the American experiment. In all of the Reform movement that started changing in the '30s, and obviously by 1949 there was a much more wide embrace of Israel within Reform Judaism as almost exclusively the Reform movement became a Zionist movement. There was still, of course, a little sliver of Reform, I would say, intellectual elite, that remained anti-Zionist after 1949. And the last President of that society, before it folded sometime around the year 2000, was our rabbi emeritus, Rabbi Howard Berman.

RL: Rabbi Berman, in a visionary move, relocated Sinai, and not an easy move, from down in Hyde Park with a dwindling Jewish community, to smack dab in the center of thriving downtown Chicago. The building design is thoughtful in a million different ways, but especially with the placement of the American flag in our octagonal sanctuary, right beneath the quote from Leviticus by way of the Libertyville, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof." And right underneath that Biblical quote that fed the American Revolution stood the American flag and the American flag only. And Rabbi Berman spoke often about how important America was to Reform Judaism, and how Reform Judaism was exclusively American and predominantly American.

RL: And there was somewhere between suspicion of and antipathy for the presence of an Israeli flag in the building. I heard rumors when I first got there. I got there after an awkward rabbinic transition. I heard rumors that the preschool wasn't allowed to have Israeli flags for Yom Ha'atzmaut. So whatever I stepped into was not entirely clear, except that there was a bit of a quagmire. We were approached, as the leadership, two years ago by five thoughtful members of the congregation, some third generation, some in the last 10 years. And they asked if they could put... If we would put an Israeli flag in the sanctuary, right next to the American flag. The temple president and I met with these really thoughtful people and explained that this was not a simple yes or no question, that Sinai had a very deep history with flags, into which I have only briefly delved on for the purposes of the boringness of this podcast...

JH: I'm sure you know every in and out.

RL: But however, wake up out there, however, what became clear was that this was still a contentious issue. And what I started to learn, as I heard from people, is that all symbols have power and we cannot control the power of symbols.

RL: So what happened in the end, we took the American flag out of the sanctuary and we co-located it in a hallway with the Israeli flag, according to all customary protocols, with a whole massive history of flags of Chicago Sinai next to it, and an explanation of why we are committed to the Israeli flag and what our support for Israel is so it doesn't alienate people. It was not easy, it was also not easy for a leadership that loves to be united to make a decision that disappointed some people, but... And this is why I love being at Sinai, and this is why we are Reform Jews and not just Classical Reform Jews. We're not shying away from hard questions. It was a hard question, it was potentially divisive, some people got so upset that they did leave. But we did what we thought what was right when a situation confronted us today about how we want to identify, we took it seriously, we took 18 months of learning and debate and discussion, and I think we came up with a solution that has worked overall and puts us in a very appropriate place, and we're committed to it.

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 signup@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: You have really shaped your career explicitly and proudly and effectively in the realm of social justice. You co-edited a book with Rabbi Jonah Pesner called Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority. And as we said before, you won the URJ's highest award, etcetera. One of your sermons has to do with idolatry and why we reject idolatry effectively. I wanna ask from the point of view of the social justice lens, which not only respects diversity, but actually celebrates it and promotes it. I wanna talk about what I see as potential tension, give you the opportunity to tell me, "There is no tension, I got it wrong," or embrace it.

RL: So I can answer it only personally, this way. I'm a Reform Jew, old-school style, I believe in individual autonomy. I was a philosophy major in college, the only thing less popular than a medievalist. And I'm with Emmanuel Kant, we all have autonomy and dignity, we should all make our decisions, we should all be readers of Torah and deciders of Torah for ourselves, and my job is to help people ask questions, not give answers. When it comes to the potential equalizing, I'm okay with that. Judaism is my system, Reform Judaism is my system, and I autonomously choose how it works for

me. My very good friend, Reverend Shannon Kirshner is Christian, and is one of the best people I know. And her Christianity works for her in a very similar way that my Reform Judaism works for me, and I would never wanna take hers away from her, and I would never want it for myself. And I would freely let a third person choose between them and not feel too gloating if they chose Judaism and not feel too bad if they chose presbyterian, Shannon Kirshner style.

RL: And if that is a form of idolatry, then so be it. My Judaism is not God-based in some sort of absolute sense where there is a deity up in heaven to whom I owe obeisance and who sets one right way. And so for me, idolatry is... And blasphemy, it's not about cursing God or denying God, it's about worshipping material things, having the wrong priorities, and it's about using God or religion to damn people. That's idolatry, that's blasphemy to Setuma. And if that ultimately winds up flattening out things and making all things equal, so be it. And if that means that my kind of Judaism isn't fit to survive, there are plenty of other kinds of Judaism and I'm really not worried about the Jewish future. [chuckle]

JH: Got it. So if there's a hierarchy of preferences and values, you basically keep them to yourself.

RL: I think everyone has their hierarchy of personal values and preferences, and I wanna be really respectful about what they are for Jews and for non-Jews. And if anything, I think what the social justice stuff does is it helps me figure out what is the right interpersonal space to challenge people's assumptions in a supportive way, 'cause sometimes we're teachers, if we have students who have theological questions or questions about how to lead their lives, we can't just send them out, we've gotta give them materials to think about and help them be thoughtful people.

JH: And help them work through it, right.

RL: And then sometimes people are coming to us and that's not what their need is. Whether it's someone who needs the police to stop arresting their children, or it's someone who's beloved one has just died, we know that's not the right time for a theological lesson of difference. It's time to get the police to stop arresting their children, and it's time to comfort a mourner and help bury their dead and help them get their life back together. And then theology can come when it's the appropriate time. So it's not that one goes to the side, it's about knowing when is right for which and respecting what the person brings in that.

RL: I wanna ask if, in the course of your rabbinate, you have encountered either directly, in your congregation from your congregants, or indirectly, in the Jewish world in which you function, resistance or even resentment perhaps to not just social justice, but more pointedly to what one might perceive as a focus on social justice implicitly at the expense of: A, Yiddishkeit, Jewish learning; or B, at the expense of political conservatives in your orbit.

RL: Yes, next question. To unpack that for you, and I'll start with a story. A member of my former congregation, politically conservative and actually works with and is friends with a former vice president of the United States who is a long-time... Who was a Republican and a long-time member of the Republican Party, and often spoke about getting us together. And every time I was in the office, it didn't work, but really thought we'd get along, really thought we would be great despite our differences, a lot of respect there. The straw that broke this person's back was when I made the decision to move to Chicago. And then because I wasn't that person's rabbi anymore, and I broke up the relationship, that's what pushed that person over the edge and they stopped speaking to me. It was never any of the political things that I said because we were in a relationship, and which was easier in a community congregation like that than it is when I'm brand new at a place like Chicago Sinai Congregation.

RL: So two different stories about Chicago Sinai Congregation, and to me, they're both positive. The first is, I gave a sermon, my very first Yom Kippur, about welcoming. I was being welcomed, I always noticed how terrible we were at welcoming strangers into the temple, but I had red carpets and tea and crumpets laid out before me on a weekly basis. And I realized also that immigration Reform had been stalled. This was going back six years, when there was real hope that a comprehensive immigration Reform would be passed. We were starting to deal with ICE raids and phone calls between the two holidays, and I spoke about what we needed to do as a congregation to change and be more welcoming of the stranger. And during that sermon, I called out President Barack Obama as the deporter-in-chief. I chose those words intentionally, but I did not really pay attention to the fact that the earliest and most ardent supporters of Barack Obama from his... Were all the members of my congregation.

JH: Of course.

RL: And they were the ones who had rolled out the red carpet and welcomed me so kindly. And one of them came up to me after the service, but not after that moment, a week later. He said, "Rabbi, I did not like what you said, calling my friend the deporter-in-chief, but it's really important for me to hear it." And that same person arranged for me to go to the White House Hanukkah party that year by which time President Obama had put DACA in place. And I got to thank him for making that change and get to report back to this person. This is what happens with political pressure, and this person was a part of that political pressure being exerted. So that's a good story because of somewhat people expect of Seth Limmer, that I'm going to go after a Democratic President that I love like Barack Obama, but the time called for it and I did. And so the times where I have gone off their policies of President Trump, and people have... I get emails from a couple of congregants, and when I do, I invite them in to talk to me, but when I sit there and I talk and I remind them, especially on immigration, which is where we're most outspoken, and we're bringing people to borders, we're trying to close detention centers, we're doing tons of stuff around this. I remind them that I am saying this about President Trump's policies and I was saying it about President

Obama's policies, and we're saying it to the senators, and we're... So we're... It's not a limited case. And so that helps.

RL: The second story is a little bit more painful in the personal, but in the systemic, it's a very good outcome. We have a long history of working with the Jenner Academy for the Arts, which is a school in the historic Cabrini-Green neighborhood of Chicago, just six blocks away from Sinai, but a whole world away. And in our 10 years of relationships, it is everything from our Blessings in the Back program, which gives all these fully-funded school lunch kids food for them and their entire families for the weekend to bring home every Friday afternoon, we built libraries, we do mentoring programs, we run school trips for them, our volunteers run around that building, and the kids in that building think that they're staff and then second parents. We are... Chicago Sinai has been enmeshed in the life of that congregation. And three years ago... Five years ago? We're all getting old.

RL: Five years ago, the president of that school went to our volunteers and said, "They're gonna close us, they're under threat of CPS closure". And he had this idea that they should merge with the Ogden International School, which is just one block north of Sinai, and the... Effectively the same neighborhood, but our neighborhood part is called the Gold Coast, and they're called Cabrini-Green. And so my friend, Reverend Randall Blakey and I were asked and built a really, a group of community leaders, community organizing style. And over the slow and steady process of three years and a much longer story than I'll tell now, we were able to get both school communities in massive percentage, like 80% to 90% supporting of a merger of the two schools, a total redrawing of the boundaries and a redefinition of the neighborhood. No longer slum in Gold Coast, but one school boundary and one school with two campuses for all the kids from both schools. And that went through, and it's been a year and a half now and there have been some very small bumps, unless the bump happened to your kid, they're very small bumps, from an institutional perspective, and things are going well, and all the kids are thriving and succeeding. And beforehand, only one school's kids were thriving and succeeding.

RL: So real measures of success and a great spirit in the school integration can happen. Along the way, we had Sinai families who were in the Ogden school who didn't want the merger to happen. And one of those families came to meet with me and said, "This isn't your fight. Why are you getting involved in this? Your kids don't go to either school." And said, "As a matter of fact, your kids go to a private school, so why do you care about public school at all?" I explained that I had my own reasons why my kids were in private school, having to do with when we moved to the city, and I said, "There isn't justice happening here. If you walk around inside the Ogden school, you see resources the likes of which are the same as my kids' private school. And you walk around the Jenner school and you see a dearth of resources. You walk around Ogden, you see hope, you walk around Jenner, you see struggle, survival and incredible achievement. And that's just not fair. And if I have an opportunity to bring those two together and bring everyone up to the highest level, my Judaism tells me I can't walk away from that.

RL: And not just that, I didn't go looking for this. The people from our synagogue, whose Judaism has led them to volunteer at the Jenner school for the last 10 years and be a part of that community, they came to us and said, will you help us? Can we do this as a congregation? And so that's what we're doing." And when that person ultimately quit the temple, called the temple president and said to the temple president, "We can't be at a place that wants to ruin my kids' education and wants to do X, Y, or Z." And the president said, "Well, we're sorry to hear that, but this is a project that we believe in. And if you're not the kinda person who thinks that this is the kinda change that the world needs, then we're probably not your congregation." A painful story for that one family, but that's from a systemic justice approach, you have to take stands and the way to take a stand, for me it is... Yeah, I can take stands, or I can write an op ed and say what I believe in.

RL: If we're gonna do something, it's not me, it's not a couple of people, it's not even one synagogue, it's about a whole bunch of people listening and doing and building consensus together. And if we're a part of that and we're thoughtful about that, and we build our own teams within our synagogue and we build own teams thoughtfully with allies and partners, then yes, we'll lose people, but we won't lose our conscience and we won't, the hits we take will be minor compared to the successes we make and the change we're able to achieve.

JH: Well, here's to more successes.

RL: Thank you.

JH: And to the pleasure of having you on the podcast, It's really been a great joy to get to know you.

RL: It's fun for me, too. Thanks so much.

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 biannual series, special thanks to Mark Palev and the URJ chief program officer and biennial director, and Liz Grumbacher, Director of North American events. We hope you've enjoyed this episode, and please join us again at collegecommons.huc.edu.

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