



SARAH HURWITZ: REDISCOVERING 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 of 2019.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast where it is my great pleasure to introduce Sarah Hurwitz. From 2009 to 2017, Sarah Hurwitz served as a White House speechwriter. First, as a senior speechwriter for President Barack Obama, and then as head speechwriter for First Lady Michelle Obama. Prior to serving in the Obama administration, Sarah was chief speechwriter for Hillary Clinton on her 2008 presidential campaign. She's the author of *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life-In Judaism, After Finally Choosing to Look There*. Sarah Hurwitz, thank you for joining us on the Podcast.

Sarah Hurwitz: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

JH: I wanna begin with some of the themes that come from your book. You speak of discovering a vast and sophisticated Judaism after you reject, as you describe it, you reject the kind of what we call pediatric Judaism or childish Judaism, and I wanna ask you to share with us some of those aspects of depth and sophistication that sparked your re-engagement.

SH: Yeah, so I grew up with pretty standard 1980s Reformed Jewish background of dull and comprehensible services. Hebrew school, but not much going on at home and had my bar mitzvah and I just walked away. Wasn't much to see there, I thought. I wound up taking an intro course very randomly after a painful break-up, looking for things to do. Took this Intro to Judaism course. And I was really blown away by the sophistication and edginess of what I found, and I think the two main things that really most struck me were the ethical wisdom and the spiritual wisdom that Judaism offers. As for the ethical wisdom, the bar secular society sets is, you do you and be okay generally to others, right? Don't infringe on other's rights.

JH: Right. It's a Locke, a Lockean...

SH: Exactly, like don't steal their property, don't assault them, don't infringe on their rights. It's a very low bar. It doesn't say be honest, be generous, be kind, be loving. Doesn't say show up for people. And I found this much higher bar in Judaism. Just studying the Jewish thinking around speech, around gossip and shaming made me realize how inadvertently and casually cruel I am everyday. I'm much more conscious of the impact my speech can have on others. I still mess it

up a hundred times a day, but I used to mess it up a hundred and fifty times a day. So we're getting better.

[laughter]

SH: The thinking around Hesed, just this ministry of presence that Judaism demands where when someone is sick or in mourning, Judaism doesn't say, "Well, send flowers, send a text." It says, "Get yourself to them, be physically present with them." Even if it's uncomfortable, even if it's inconvenient, be there physically with them, which I think is really profound, and...

JH: And like watching your tongue hard and...

SH: And heart, right?

JH: Demanding.

SH: It's very demanding. It demands a lot more than the secular world does which is you know send a text, buy them something, have a consumer solution to this. Judaism says no, there actually isn't a consumer solution or... Fine, you can buy them things but you could show up.

JH: Like you can also do those things, right? But it's not enough is what you're saying?

SH: Right. But the key thing is your presence, right? Which is hard. It's challenging, it's demanding. And I think with the theological wisdom, what I found was I grew up thinking, "Well, the Jewish God is a man in the sky who rewards you when you're good and punishes you when you're naughty. And controls everything."

JH: Can I pause you there?

SH: Yeah.

JH: I wanna dig down and make sure if, when you use that, if you're not speaking in shorthand for a kind of oversimplified, be a good person and God want... Or if you really mean specifically that you were taught reward-punishment, boom, boom?

SH: I was taught nothing about God ever.

JH: Oh, okay.

SH: Nobody ever had a conversation about God which is stunning, and shouldn't be shocking to us when people choose who are looking for spiritual connection, as human beings do, go elsewhere to Buddhism. Or Burning Man, Ayahuasca, Teshub. If we are not gonna meet their spiritual needs, I understand why they leave. So actually, I got nothing taught to me or consciously said about God, but sitting with the sitter in my maiden with a prayer book, we...

JH: Which you apparently actually tried to read?

SH: Yeah, well look, I show up twice a year. We had the sitter, it had the English translations, it was a Reform Schul, and it was very clear. If you are good, God will bring rain to your fields. If you are bad, God will dry up your fields. Unetanah Tokef, right? Lo rha, who shall live, and who shall die. This is a very clear themed theology which...

JH: Yeah, fair enough, assume if you're coming on those two days alone.

SH: Exactly, if you're coming on those two days alone. Now, is that the theology of the sitter? Of course not. It's much more complicated than that, and Jewish theology is much more complicated than that. If you actually study Unetaneh Tokef who will live, the God decides who will live and who will die. It quotes most frequently from the Book of Job, which by the way totally subverts the whole idea of a reward and punishment theology, right? So I didn't see any of the theological complexity. And frankly, if you were like most Jews who show up twice a year, you're not gonna see it.

JH: Right, and it'll...

SH: You're gonna assume that the Jewish God is a man in the sky who controls everything.

JH: It might actually affirmatively veil it.

SH: Yes.

JH: Which is a bitter irony.

SH: It's a bitter irony, and so, you... But actually learning about Jewish theology and discovering that oh, there are all these different conceptions to the divine. There are the mystics who say that God is everything. You're God, I'm God. The homeless man on the street, that guy is God. It's a very, it's a profound way to look at your daily life. Martin Buber who says that God is what arises in deep human relation between two people, right when they're fully contemplating each other's humanity where arises between him and his God. There's Mordecai Kaplan, God is the process by which we become our highest truest selves. I can give you... None of these are on literal theology that should be your whole theology, but they're just people with a lot of subtle sophisticated thinking about God, and that blew my mind. I really thought, well I don't believe in the man in the sky. So I guess I'm atheist. Maybe I'm spiritual, but not religious.

JH: Got a common formulation.

SH: Common formulation which like good for those people. I'm sorry, once you... The man in the sky who controls everything. It gets really... Breaks down fast. So like, okay well if that's true, then what about the holocaust? Oh, well people have free will, people perpetuated the holocaust. Okay, well, what does God do all day? Well, I'm not interested. I'm not interested in the mental gymnastics, I find it insulting. Fortunately, you don't have to do that in Judaism. There are a lot of smart, thoughtful, soulful people who have spent centuries, if not millennia, putting forth a lot of different conceptions of the divine.

JH: Can I ask if you have encountered, more than merely glancingly, other theological systems against which to compare Judaism, and the comparison of which may have further encouraged you in this understanding of your Jewish theology?

SH: I haven't studied other faith traditions, which I think is a real gap in my knowledge. I actually really regret that.

JH: Most of ours, yeah.

SH: Yeah, but I really... I think it's important to do and it's on my list of things I wanna do. So I haven't. I can't compare it.

JH: The reason I ask is because many people sense in Judaism on a comparative level, the same thing you do, which is a kind of elasticity. That the primary Jewish way of being is your first set of comments about ethics and about how we exist in the world as an expression of our divine covenant. And so I think it has promoted some of the flexibility you're talking about, which you have cast, not as flexibility but as dimensionality. And I love the way you did that, 'cause you talk about Kaplan, you talk about Buber and the fact that it's all...

SH: And I actually think flexibility is a very good word, too.

JH: Yeah, I do too.

SH: I think that's, there's a dynamism to it. There isn't a... We don't do systemic theology. We don't have a doctor and a creative God, and I find that so wise because it reflects a fundamental humility. I think when people start telling you that they know what God is and what God does, what they're doing is they're actually shrinking God down to this human size thing that they can control for their own purposes, and it's extraordinarily dangerous. And I love that Judaism says this is so beyond any one of us to define, to cabin, so we just, we intimate, we gesture to it. I love... My more observant friends use the name Hashem for God, which I love. The name. It's like, we can't even say the name, we just say the name. It's like, how beautiful.

JH: It's one of the reasons that people sometimes say that there is no Jewish theology. That a theology is a foreign category to the Jewish experience.

SH: There, you're right, there's no systemic, one Jewish theology but there are many, many, many theological ideas and intimations. I think that's...

JH: Yes. Absolutely. And I think when people say theology, they mean, they connote within the word "systemic".

SH: Exactly.

JH: So when you deprive it of that qualifier of systemic, then you have this beautiful jumble of... So I'm reacting to your passion, it's really quite contagious.

SH: Yeah, and I love what you're... That's a really interesting point about how people do when you say theology they assume systemic, and they say there's no Jewish theology, and I disagree. There's a lot of different theologies, none of which are systemic.

JH: We have this highly textured, colorful, vibrant relationship with God. If that's not theology, what if... Yes.

SH: Yes, right? And it's humble.

JH: In an interview with The Washington Post, you spoke about this theme that you raised here now about the... Well, I read it as impenetrability of the High Holiday Liturgy. But what you're saying now it's not actually that it was impenetrable to you, it's that when you read it and try to

work with it such as it was on the page, it's not that it was impenetrable, it's that it was off-putting. It was downright taking you in sort of the wrong direction. So I wanna ask specifically about liturgy. If you have since found inroads into not only the High Holiday Liturgy, but really the Siddur in general. Because it remains dense language, foreign language, and it remains, theologically speaking again, distant enough from most of our experience, that you have to connect a few dots before you get there. And I wanna know if you agree, and if so, have you been able to connect some of those dots and if so, what it's led you to?

SH: One of the most frustrating things that people say to me, it's often Rabbis, it's educated people who actually know quite a lot about Judaism. They say, "Sarah, just let it wash over you. Let the liturgy wash over you. Just go to have an experience," blah, blah, blah. You know, whatever. It's like, "Okay, so why don't I go to the Buddhist sangha, or the Unitarian church, or why don't we just read an Israeli phone book? If this is just nonsense that's gonna wash over me, why am I bothering?" I find it so incredibly condescending and demeaning. We should actually know something about our liturgy, and have the opportunity to learn something about our liturgy, so that we can work with it as sophisticated smart adults. So for me, the key to having a meaningful experience with liturgy is learning something.

SH: Rabbi Jeff Roth once said, "If you say Modeh Ani, and you don't know it means I'm thankful, it may take you somewhere, but not necessarily to thankfulness." So I'm done with the, "Let's all be ignorant and let things wash over us." We're not idiots. What I would like to do is we should have a sense of what could these prayers mean for us? What could they mean for us? And I'm not saying have some academic thing of, "This is the meaning," but just really sit down and think, "Hey. Let's look at the biblical allusions to this prayer." If I'm reading the first blessing of the Amidah and it ends with the phrase "Shield of Abraham". Gee, where does that come from in the Torah? Oh, interesting. It comes in the Torah in the moment where God comes to Abraham, says, "I'm giving you the promised land."

SH: And Abraham does not respond, "Wow, God. I so believe in you. You're awesome, thanks." Abraham says, "But how shall I know I am to possess it?" Generally, if God shows up and makes you a promise, you'd think you would say, "Thank you, thank you."

JH: Condition free, right. Yeah exactly.

SH: But Abraham is like, "I don't believe you. I doubt you." Okay, so we start the Amidah with a moment of profound doubt by our ancestor. Well, that's interesting. Somehow this prayer doesn't become groveling, repetitive praise for God. It becomes a little bit of a protest. It's a challenge. I look at the Hashkiveinu prayer, "Lay over us a canopy of peace." Why do we translate sukkah? It doesn't need a translation, we know what a sukkah is. It is a fragile open air structure which you are totally at the mercy of the elements, and we are praying for peace in that fragile, open air, totally unsafe space. We don't pray for an underground bunker of peace, we don't pray for a fortified castle of peace. What a beautiful prayer. And a very real prayer about like, "Look, we're all at the mercy of the storms and the winds and the rains of our life, and it's scary. And what we're asking for is to be able to have some peace amongst that difficulty." Like okay, now these prayers are interesting. Now when I say them, I feel something real and moving.

SH: So, the way I figured out to work with liturgy is A, to know something about it and I hate it when people gaslight me as like, "Oh, it's an intellectual Judaism." No, it's not. Having basic adult knowledge allows me to have a very emotional experience, a really spiritual experience. It's not intellectual, it's not academic. So learning something, that should be a good thing, not

something that we sort of demean. And I also... Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appell gave me a great piece of advice where he said, "Sarah, if you're gonna read the siddur, the Jewish liturgy, prescriptively as prescribing a theology that you must accept or reject, it's not gonna go well for you. But if you read it descriptively as a description of our ancestors hopes, yearnings, fears, joys, sorrows, you could be moved by it. So when I read a prayer that says, that's begging God like, "If we're really good, you'll bring rain for our fields, but if we're naughty and we go to other gods, it'll dry up." Do I believe the theology? No, I don't. Come on, it's disproven on a minute to minute basis, but can I identify with the fear and the yearning and just the longing for control? I feel that all the time. Just as we're yearning to have some control and to be able to have some power in my life. So, I'm very moved by that prayer even if I don't subscribe to the theology. So I think there's a lot that can be done with our liturgy, what shouldn't be done is for us to mindlessly recite it.

JH: So clearly, the answer to the question is yes, you have connected the dots. You've done the work of...

SH: Yeah, not enough. I haven't done it with the whole siddur. I have a lot of work to do, but I think with some of the main prayers I really, I have done... Tried to do the work to make it meaningful. And look, that takes time. I don't judge anyone for not having the time to do this, it is hard. It is hard, and that's actually... That's why I wrote my book. I wanted to say to people, "Look here's what I found that can help you work with the siddur or work with theology, or ethics 'cause you don't have time. You're raising kids, you're taking...

JH: Yeah, right. That's fine.

SH: I wanted to distill it and make it easier for people 'cause it is... It's tough.

[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 for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more, just click sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: I wanna move now to some more political questions, in particular about Israel, but I wanna draw from your own professional and personal experience in the Obama Administration. As a prima, help us out, understand what isn't obvious to us about the way Israel is discussed, queried, investigated, engaged in the purely secular political realm, which in your case is at the highest level in the White House. And compare and contrast that if you would, to your experience of how Israel is critiqued, engaged, queried, etcetera, in the internal American Jewish conversation about Israel.

SH: So, I worked for the First Lady, [chuckle] that's why I never worked on Israel. That wasn't an issue she worked on so I can't really speak to any of that. What I can say is that I find it very frustrating when people say, "Well, what about Israel?" No one has ever once said to me, "Well, Sarah, what about America?" Because they actually understand America is an entire country with a diverse group of people, industries, with a history, with cultures, languages, it's a country. And when people ask me, "what about Israel?" I get it. I know what they're saying. They're

saying, "What about the conflict, the Israeli conflict between Israelis and Palestinians?"

JH: Are they asking you your opinion, your position?

SH: Yeah, and I will tell you I find it infuriating that they've somehow reduced the entire country of Israel, which has a diverse population, all kinds of industries, histories, cultures, languages, we've reduced it to a modern political conflict. I think I have more... A question I have more to say about is the understanding of Israel in the discussion in this really insider Jewish community that 20-25% have really engaged insider Jews who live and breathe this and the vast majority of American Jews. And I just, I've now spoken to thousands of people, I've answered hundreds of questions. I can count on one hand the number of questions I've gotten on Israel and anti-Semitism combined. The insider Jewish world is obsessed with those two topics. And I get it. I totally understand it, because these are the folks who are regularly going to synagogues and walking through terrifying security. These are folks who are wearing kippahs and actually feeling some real and very well-justified fear, sadly.

SH: These are folks for whom Israel is central to their identity. Of course they're gonna talk about Israel and anti-Semitism, that makes perfect sense. That is central to their Judaism, their identity. For the majority of American Jews, it's not what they're thinking about. And I worry that the institutional Jewish world by focusing so heavily, almost exclusively frankly on these two topics, you're losing the rest of us. Judaism is a 4,000-year tradition that has some of the most profound wisdom on how to be human, that has holidays, rest rituals, ethics, theology, languages, culture. We can go on and on. And to sort of boil that all down to Judaism equals anti-Semitism plus Israel? Of course those two things are central, but what about the rest of Judaism?

SH: Ask the average American Jew, "do you know what anti-Semitism is? Of course. Do you know what Israel is? Of course. Do you know what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are? Yes, Jewish New Year, Day of Atonement. Great. What does Judaism say about how to be a genuinely good person? Social justice. Okay, that's every religion, thanks". But we actually have millions of pages of commentary that's specifically Jewish and actually quite wise. What does Judaism say about God? Man in the sky, I'm screwed up and not religious, no. What does Judaism say about what happens after you die? I don't know, heaven... Okay, three most important questions any human being asks about their life and the average American Jew can't even articulate a three-year-old level answer.

JH: I don't have any reason to disagree with you. It does evoke another question, a follow-up that I have. I listened to a story. It was a podcast, actually, if I remember. It was the arc of a sort of recovered evangelist, a person who had grown up super Christian evangelist and actually evangelized. And then for whatever reason, abandoned that. And he tells the story of going to college, and being in a mainstream college and evangelizing Christians. It's very hard on them. Because in mainstream colleges, of course, people are resistant to that. But he did say that he was the most skilled person he knew at it. And he could really make inroads with everybody. The only two populations he could not make inroads with were gay people and Jews.

[chuckle]

JH: On the one hand, let's stipulate what you said about a kind of troubling ignorance on the part of Jews about their own tradition. And then on the other hand, apparently this evangelist was functioning in the population that we're saying has a lot to learn. And yet they appeared to have some wellspring of identity strength. What do you think about those two things co-existing?

SH: Well, I can understand why the gay people would resist it, since the evangelical Christian community has not been particularly supportive of gay people, so that makes sense. As for Jews, yeah, I think lots of people... The Pew survey says that what, 93, 94% of American Jews feel proud to be Jewish. That's wonderful, right? They're culturally Jewish. They do Chinese food on Christmas. That's wonderful. And what are they passing down to their kids? That feeling? Is that what we're passing down, like a vague feeling of pride and slight persecution? That's sad. We have 4,000 years of the most profound wisdom about how to live a beautiful, meaningful life, filled with gorgeous rituals and holidays and strong communities and families, and you're gonna pass on a vague feeling of pride and persecution?

JH: And Chinese food on Christmas.

SH: And Chinese food on Christmas.

[chuckle]

SH: So I think, you know... I'm guessing that the Jews just weren't that impressed by what was being offered to them, to be totally honest. I think they probably were a little challenged by maybe the theology being presented. And also, they have that sense of pride, that sense of being proud to be Jewish. But if you asked them why, what are they gonna say? "Oh, social justice, proud heritage. We've survived a long time. They tried to kill us, but we're still here." What are they gonna say? What are they proud of? It might be enough now. In a generation or two, I'm not sure where that is, right? We've made a bet, actually, on that feeling. We've made a bet on a kind of, I hate this term, 'cause I think it's a nonsense term, but on ethnic Judaism, not a thing. Jews are every ethnicity, every race, but...

JH: Increasingly so.

SH: Yeah, increasingly so. And so, we've really focused on that idea. It's almost we've almost tried to make Judaism into an American ethnicity, like being Irish or Italian, which is great. And who cares about being Irish or Italian now? Tiny little ethnic neighborhoods, here and there. 100 years ago, people cared a lot about that. "You're Irish and your daughter marries an Italian, oh my God, end of days." Who cares now? Not many, no one... We're getting there now. We've put the bet on people who had identity, feeling Jewish, kishkes. "We're persecuted. We're proud." That's a three, four-generation bet, and now we're getting to that third and fourth generation. And it sends chills down my spine when someone says, "Well, I'm Jewish by heritage. Jewish by heritage. I'm culturally Jewish. I don't know anything about Judaism. I don't do anything Jewish. But I'm Jewish by heritage. I'm proud." That's Irish or Italian, is what I think that is. I'm guessing that that was strong enough to resist the evangelist now, I don't know if a next generation or generation after that, it will be.

JH: Well, clearly, you're doing the work to not find out that way just to go...

[chuckle]

SH: Exactly. I'm trying. We'll see.

JH: Tell us a little bit about lessons you learned in the presence of great leaders, and what it meant to you. Because I wanna ask... This may not be actually the case, but I think there was a sequence in your life, where your work with the administration was prior to your choice to excavate your Judaism.

SH: So my work in the administration was both prior to and during my learning about Judaism. I started learning about... I was in the administration from 2009 to 2017. I started learning about Judaism around 2014. So it's sort of a midway there. Working for the Obamas was the greatest honor and privilege of my life, and I think... I worked mostly for Mrs. Obama, so I'll sort of speak to her. The greatest lesson I learned from her is, "Trust the power of saying something true. And just being relentlessly true to who you are." I just think she was always asking herself, "What's true here? What is the real beating heart truth of this situation?" And you can't necessarily blurt that out, you have to be thoughtful about how you are sharing that with people so that it will be received. But, she was really thinking like, "What's true for me here?"

SH: I just so appreciate that. And there were so many times when it was like people would say, "Well, this is what First Ladies do. This is how they do it." And she'd say, "I'm not a generic First Lady. I'm me, and we're gonna think about this. Like this silly ribbon cutting ceremony that First Ladies do, okay, I'll do that, but we're gonna invite a bunch of kids from inner city DC, and they're gonna come in and they're gonna be part of it. And we're gonna talk about the history of this. And they're gonna come to the White House, and we're gonna have speakers throughout the White House come and be with them. That's how we're doing this." I just felt like it was really impressive to see her just constantly standing her own ground, speaking her own truth, and I think that's something I've carried with me as I'm doing the work of promoting a book. Sometimes people will say, "Oh, I want you to be on stage with this person and do this." And I'll say, "That's not what I do." When people say, "I want you to come and have a debate about Israel with someone," that's not what I do. It's not what my book's about, that's not what I do. I'm not interested."

SH: Or, "Let's talk about the sociology of the Jewish people." I'm not a sociologist. I'm not an academic, that's not what I do. Or come do, "Be a scholar in residence and teach." I'm not qualified to do that. I'm very clear like, "Here is what I do. I am just a Jew in the pew, often not in the pew, who learned deeply about Judaism and wanted to share what I found with Jews like me." That's what I do. And I think just being fierce about being loyal to what I offer and who I am, and not trying to be anyone else. That's something I learned from her.

JH: And that is part of your arc of finding Judaism, it seems.

SH: Yeah. I found Judaism totally randomly. I broke up with a guy I was dating, I had time on my hands, I was bored and lonely. I was not in, I was not on some big spiritual journey. I didn't think Judaism was gonna solve my existential problems. I was bored. I happened to hear about Intro to Judaism class. I took it figuring, "Well I'm Jewish by heritage, I should know about my heritage." I was the Jewish-by-heritage person five years ago, that was me. And, taking this class and then many classes, reading many books, studying with Rabbis, since then, I've come to realize like, "Wow, what an impoverished Judaism that was. What a sad, thin, lame Judaism that was." We have such transformative wisdom that just infuses my life every day. And having... And I'm really lucky that I can afford to buy books, I can afford to take classes, I have these options. But I wrote my book because I know people are so busy, and they don't have the time and they don't necessarily have the money to take a class, so I just... It's like, "Okay, just read this book to get started." That's all... If you're gonna do nothing else, just... Will you just read this and maybe get as excited as I am about this? Maybe, we'll see.

JH: Well, I'm glad that podcasts is one of the things that you do do, and that we've got the benefit of your time and your energy and passion. Thank you. And all good things.

SH: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

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, a 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 collegecommons.huc.edu.

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