



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

HUC-JIR PRESIDENT ANDREW REHFELD:
AT THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGIOUS AND ACADEMIC VALUES

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.

JH: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. This is Joshua Holo, your host, and I'm really pleased to introduce you to Andrew Rehfeld for discussion about campus speech and politics. President Rehfeld comes to us from the St. Louis Federation and from Washington University in St. Louis. Andrew, President Rehfeld, thank you for joining us.

Andrew Rehfeld: It is a pleasure to be here.

JH: So free speech is indeed a pretty messy topic. And so for as universities, even public universities, are not actually required to allow any kind of speech at any time.

AR: The scholar Sigal Ben-Porath, she is a scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, and she wrote a book on free speech on campus, and puts forth these two cardinal virtues, being free expression and intellectual candor. To what extent are those two pieces valuable, and of value, at our institution? My own view is they have to be very, very high, possibly the bedrock of our institution within, that if we're not actually committed to that, not only are we not committed to the aims of higher education, any kind of higher ed, but we're also particularly not committed to the foundational principles of reform Judaism. We're not ideologically rigid, but we outta create a culture in which there is intellectual candor. The free expression is where I get hung up.

JH: I actually get more hung up on the candor. 'Cause the candor implies that you're revealing something of yourself which could make you vulnerable. But free expression, you could have a thought experiment and express freely a very, very controversial idea in some kind of sound proof idea room, but if you're really being frank about yourself, you could get yourself into hot water. Or at least you can imagine scenarios in which the religious commitments and the enlightenment commitments might come into more.

AR: If you think of HUC as a still small place in a very big world, in which we are developing leadership, and developing rabbis, and cantors, and educators, and non-profit professionals, and we use this space to create a shield against the world that our students are gonna be entering into, then we create that space where you can have, I would say, intellectual candor and really be vulnerable. We can really try on ideas

without consequences beyond what the ideas would lead to. And you can see where they go.

JH: I agree. We agree in what's desirable, and I think achievable. I don't think it's... And I think it is by and large indeed achieved actually. It's lived. But I think that that's where the vulnerability lies, is in the candor, because of the ideological overlay. It's candor pushing up against what? In a secular university, in theory, you're not pushing up against anything 'cause anything goes. At least in theory. But in a seminary, there actually is a "there" there that establishes parameters.

AR: So do you think our students... If a student came in and said either of the following two statements: "I believe God gave Torah at Sinai, and we are obligated to follow that law, and I'm here as a reformed Jew to figure out how to do it in the face of modernity." That's statement one. And statement two: "I believe Jesus was the son of God in the way that Christians say that he was, and I'm here as a reformed Jew to figure out how my Judaism can fit with that." Now, first of all, are both of those beyond the bounds of what would be acceptable ideology? In some ways, you'd have to say "yes" for both, but in very different ways.

JH: You would have to say "yes" for both from opposite tacts. But, in fact, I will tell you that we have said there's no problem with the first.

AR: That's interesting. To be clear...

JH: In practice...

AR: There's no problem in practice with a student coming in saying, "I believe God gave Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai in fact... "

JH: And we gotta figure it out.

AR: We gotta figure it out, and I'm obliged to follow it, and I'm here as a reformed Jew to figure out how to follow it.

JH: Right. Yes.

AR: There's no problem with a student saying that.

JH: There was no problem when the student said it.

AR: And if a student came in and said, "I believe Jesus is the son of God in the way Christians say that he is, and I'm here as a reformed Jew to figure that out as how I can fit it in," we would have a problem with that.

JH: That's right. We would put a limit on that. Now, these are sociological distinctions that are not in fact principled ones.

AR: So let's bracket this conversation, which depends a lot on getting into the technicalities of what the word Messiah means, what its Greek origins are, what the Jewish theology says in each of these pieces. Let's just have a category called, "Christian belief about Jesus." And I know there's a lot of nuance there. Let's just... For the layperson, okay?

JH: Fine. Okay, so stuff that really is statutorily unacceptable in Judaism.

AR: And let me just say that if any student came in and said, "I believe in Jesus," and doesn't even fill it out...

JH: Qualify it. Yeah, it's a problem. Right.

AR: "I believe in Jesus." I think that we would say, "Woah, this is not the place for you."

JH: In some of our schools, we would say, "Woah... "

AR: That's right. And if a student were here and said, "I believe in Jesus. Praise Jesus," and started that free expression, all of that, we would have a problem.

JH: Right, candor and free expression, we would have a problem.

AR: We would have a problem. So there's a limit there. Now, go on the other side. If a student said, "I believe God gave Torah to Moses at Sinai, that it obligates us down to the present day, and that my job as a reformed Jew is to figure out how to accept that obligation... "

JH: "And live up to it to the best of whatever reform reading I give it."

AR: However you... Which to me is also an inconsistency, that's why I'm posing it. What do we do with that student?

JH: Okay, so there's two problems as I see it on the Sinai side, the Sinai question. If you wanna talk about the inconsistency of feeling obligated to live up to... That strikes me as one set of problems. If however you wanna talk about the irrationality of believing that God gave the Torah to Moses literally being to being on... So let's talk about just the top of Sinai question. Just the communication of a specific Torah that has claimed interpersonally to have been given by God to Moses...

AR: As a real historic fact.

JH: As a historical fact.

AR: And you believe it because of faith.

JH: So, the reason I believe that that did not pose a problem at the time, is because we will revert to sociology and actually we will privilege sociology over principle. Because sociologically it's acceptable. Nobody mourns the fact that the sociology trumps the

principle.

AR: Right, right.

JH: We don't think twice about it. It's not that it was... In case I'm thinking of, it's not that this belief went unnoticed or nor did anyone fail to observe some of the problems it raises, or its anomalous-ness in our ecosystem. All of those things were acknowledged with the person at the time, but in totally accepting ways.

AR: So, okay. So what if the student came in and said, "I'm here to be a good reform Jew because my Rabbi told me to do so and I do whatever my rabbi said, and now I'm going to learn and I'm going to... But I'm going to check with my rabbi to see if I can accept that." I mean I'm giving a caricature of course. Let's just imagine that, what would we do in that case?

JH: Based on my experience, I would guess that if they were willing to be that explicit about it thereabouts, that we would not accept.

AR: Right.

JH: In course of study, if this person evolves into these beliefs, or in the spirit of your original opener, in the spirit of candor and free expression, they outed themselves as believing these things. Wow, I don't... That strikes me as...

AR: Well, especially... We're not dogmatic in terms of you have to believe certain dogmas, but I do think you have to believe certain dispositions about the world. To me rationality is one of them. Second one is moral autonomy, you're dispositioning, "I retain my moral responsibility..." Could we ordain you as a reform Rabbi, somebody that got up and said, "My responsibility is to follow what my rabbi has told me."

JH: I don't know if I personally... Let's put it this way. I would... I perceive an irreducible conflict there.

AR: Yeah, yeah.

JH: But I have to say, Richard Lovey of Blessed Memory, a person whom I would characterize as more than any other single individual in our generation of great leaders, shifted the reform conversation away from the hardline rationalism to a much softened spiritualized version. He effectively straddled even this question about authority and autonomy in interesting ways. 'Cause he asks us to take Mitzvah, commanded-ness, seriously, and still doesn't fully relinquish autonomy.

AR: So couldn't you do that though, consistent with autonomy, that you have a view of the moral world, such that what is the good, the right, the just, the sense of duty, does obligate us as a feature of the moral universe. But that authority is built... Having moral autonomy doesn't mean you do whatever you wanna do, it just means you are the judge of what your duties are. And so the sense of reform obligation, I have to have no problem with understanding being obligated to the good, the right, the just, but not

based on the authority as the source of it. I mean, it's Kierkegaard. You can be obligated to do something, but not through...

JH: Right, which is why in your case...

AR: It's who has the authority to decide.

JH: The key to your case is that the student in question says, "I'm gonna ask my Rabbi. Whatever my Rabbi says." That's the key to your...

AR: That's the problem.

JH: And I think what you...

AR: And the authority... By the way, the authority is who can decide what to do, not who decides what is right or wrong. Because the point... When moral autonomous mean, oh, I get to that what's good for me is good for me, so I get to be the judge of what the moral universe is obligating me to do.

[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, rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars. Unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

AR: It's interesting, just about this conversation, is how we have gone into the whole area that, I would say, is not the area that our students are worried about feeling free expression or feeling intellectual candor.

JH: Correct.

AR: It's the place that it comes out mostly is of course in the political and the social.

JH: That's right.

AR: And so, let's think about... I'm sort of curious, because I think we are in a time that we are hypersensitive to the effect of language on people. And, in some ways, it's a very good sensitivity to have. The sense that you can harm people with words is very powerful and we need to be...

JH: And it's a very Jewish sensibility.

AR: It's a very Jewish sensibility and I think that we need to always be reminding ourselves, and to the extent that we can raise awareness, that the words that we use actually have a profound effect on others is important. The kind of trigger warning that I would want people to have entering HUC and any serious place of study, would be once a year a reminder that being an institute of higher learning, you will be confronted, sometimes in unexpected ways, with words and ideas that will make you feel uncomfortable. And here's how to think about that and here's how to manage yourself when you get those-.

JH: -That's the key. It's the managing yourself and the... That's the key. That trigger warning, I suspect, would work when, upon being tested, it is dealt with in constructive, socially acceptable, civil, not overstated ways. And if you were to establish patterns of behaviour around this, then I think that that kind of trigger warning would not only suffice, but it would become increasingly unnecessary.

AR: To be fair, it's less of a trigger warning than it is a, "We're about to enter into a 12-month conflict."

[chuckle]

AR: You just know that you might get hurt. But I think that that's the right contact, because we spoke about this once to an audience at WashU, an incoming class of freshmen. And I said... And I think it's particularly true here, we create safe environments for people not so they can live cushy intellectual lives, we create the safety around it so they can be supported in having hard conversations and not shutting down those conversations. So we need to create the culture in which the hardest ideas about our Jewish life, about our ethical life, about peoplehood, about Israel, about Zionism, about politics in the world, we need to have people able to confront. We should talk about the Israeli plans.

JH: We will. I wanna point out that one of the great conferences of Jewish thinking and democratic thinking is the embrace of conflict as a potentially constructive thing. Conflict of ideas I mean. But committed conflict none of the less. Both of these systems of thought and philosophy pre-suppose that you need conflict to arrive at meaningful ideas and truths, and that pre-supposition has weakened. In just polite conversation these days, you can't...

AR: Yeah, that's right.

JH: And so, all the more reason for us to take advantage of this moment, to re-up on the value of well-orchestrated and meaningful conflict...

AR: There's gotta be a reason we're creating safe spaces if we're not gonna use them to actually...

JH: Right, exactly.

AR: In our case, towards a virtue of intellectual candor and free expression, to the point.

JH: So, yeah, I want you to weigh in on to the State of Israel.

AR: Well, let's start with the Trump peace plan.

JH: [chuckle] You gotta come out first... Okay, the Trump peace plan.

AR: Oh, you want me to weigh in on the State of Israel? Good thing. I'm pro.

JH: That's right. We're pro. This is a PSA, Joshua Holo and Andrew Rehfeld are pro-Israel.

AR: I'm a declared Zionist, and I say that proudly.

JH: Passionately. Absolutely.

AR: Yeah. And this is where I think it's really important that HUC have created a safe space for students internally. You can't view what's going on without the domestic politics of both Trump and Netanyahu.

JH: Sure.

AR: And both of these were wins for both of them in terms of delivering them. And that's why the peace plan is there at the time, although it has been built for a while. So, yes, all that's true. You can't ignore the fact that if you don't have the other side at the table, diplomatically, it seems a little stupid and silly. Yes, it makes it harder. Yes, exactly. Dead on arrival, I get it, and it probably is. I'd say, "Yes, okay." So let's just say that you're an organization out there, you wanna condemn it, or whatever, great, [Hewbrew], do it, that's fine. Now, let's leave that aside and let's ask about the plan. Okay, so none of that actually gets to the plan. Now, there are lots of reasons you should object to it and people have.

JH: Indeed.

AR: And on moral reasons, reasons of injustice, that there're takings of occupied territory unjustly seized and you're proposing that as a path to peace that's outrageous. Okay, let's argue about that, let's figure that out. And Thomas Freeman put in a column, imagine that the Palestinians had begun this process by saying, "Oh, this is interesting, I take it as your first offer, let's talk." We would now be in a path to... It's possible to some resolution. It's not that simple. It's obviously not that simplistic. But simply to say that this must be bad because of any number of reasons, particularly because of the political side of it, is I think not actually respecting the idea that there's a plan on the table. I don't think it's a good plan. I mean, the substance of it, I think there are lots of injustices in it.

JH: Yeah, it's a hard one to see moving forward.

AR: But I actually want us to be able to look at... To have a seminar where we're actually saying...

JH: Dispassionately...

AR: Dispassionately... "What is objectionable about this point?" Well, there are all of these settlements that appear to be illegal on just takings, let's talk about that. I'm not presupposing this is the right plan. I am saying that if HUC were to come out and just pile on condemnation, even if the political scientist professor thinks that it's a bad plan, we shut down debate within about any number of these issues, and it would be better to be able to ask the question: Should the Palestinians say yes to this plan, given that it's on the table, take the Thomas Friedman approach? And I just fear of saying yes as a first offer, let's build on it, because every other time that they've said "no", the next plan that comes back is even worse for them. So if we cared about the Palestinians pragmatically, should we be in a position of giving some justification to this plan?

JH: Right.

AR: So that they could that we have to be-

JH: -It's a completely rational question to ask.

AR: And we ought to be in the position of asking that question here.

JH: That's right. And asking the inverse. Does it indeed make sense for the Palestinians to reject this out of hand, barely state unseen, and there's going to be an interesting conversation there about why and why not?

AR: But there can't be an interesting conversation if we come out and say, "This is dead on arrival and we cannot foster the kind of space for people to be able to consider that."

JH: If as an institution...

AR: We just simply react.

JH: We stack the deck.

AR: Correct. And it's that way with any number of political statements and we have to create the culture where all of our students are feeling safe to have the hard conversation, not safe to avoid the hard conversations.

JH: And by the way, the tragedy... Speaking as a professor, the tragedy to me is not just that there might be a person who has really legitimate, interesting, challenging ideas on the opposite side of the political spectrum that should get silenced, which to me is a bonafide tragedy of higher education in and of itself. The layered tragedy on top of that is the stunting of the potential curiosities of the person who's on the majority side of... The notion that they wouldn't be sparking, and challenging, and fertilizing that curiosity is maddening to me.

AR: The image that I just had when I said... I was imagining the person that puts padding down for gymnastics.

JH: Right.

AR: And thinks that the purpose of the padding is to lie down on the padding. Right?

JH: [chuckle] Right, exactly.

AR: When the padding is to go take some risks.

JH: Right.

AR: Go challenge in a way you might get hurt and understand that's the only way you're going to be stronger. Go in and don't say, "What you've said offends me." That doesn't add to the intellectual conversation. Make a note. If it's really uncomfortable, remove yourself and come back when you can, but try to get at the ideas at the core of it so that we can advance conversation, because I am worried that we are not using the safe spaces that we're creating for that intellectual candor.

JH: I get that. There are interesting conversations afoot, one of them on this podcast with the President of Wesleyan, about how this plays out. What does safe space really mean and how must it ultimately be deployed for the sake of sparking these-.

AR: -I wanna go back to where we started this branch of the conversation. That words can harm.

JH: Yes.

AR: Because they carry with them meaning, and we have to... By the safe space that we're creating, does require us to enter these spaces, each of us thinking about using language precisely, and accurately, and understanding... And sensitively to the other person.

JH: President Rehfeld, Andrew, as always, it's been a great pleasure to talk to you and I look forward to more conversations, but we won't be recording them all.

AR: That you know of.

AR: Josh, it's been a pleasure. Thank you for everything you do, that you have done for HUC and for the College Commons Podcast, it's a great delight.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website. College commons dot H-U-C dot E-D-U, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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