



PASTOR JOHN CAGER: RACIAL JUSTICE & RELIGION

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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.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and it is really my pleasure and honor to welcome my friend and colleague and neighbor, Reverend John Edward Cager, III. Reverend Cager began his ministry at First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, where among other programs, he developed a taxi voucher program for seniors and disabled persons. And he is the former director of the Center for the Study of Black on Black Crime. Reverend Cager now serves as senior pastor at Los Angeles's historic Ward African Methodist Episcopal Church and he serves as president of the Los Angeles Council of Religious Leaders, and of the AME Ministerial Alliance of Southern California. Reverend Cager John, it's really a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

Pastor John Cager: I'm grateful for you having me on the show.

JH: You and I were introduced to each other by our mutual friend and colleague in justice work, Rabbi Joel Thal Simonds of the Jewish Center for Justice. So I think it's appropriate for us to begin our conversation about justice. And so I want to start off by asking you about nomenclature. In this moment of civil and human rights struggle in the nation, and in some degree around the world, I've noticed that there's really no name for this experience yet. Are you comfortable with us simply referring to this moment as, "Black Lives Matter" or do you think there's a better term?

PC: I think the strength of the moment and the strength of the movement is its decentralization and its lack of a name. Previously, movements have been derailed because once they're named, they're targeted, once they have identifiable leaders, they're bought off, chased off, shot off, ran off, or whatever. And I think one of the reasons we're looking at weeks of protests, rather than the days we would see previously, is because of the amorphous nature of it, there's no identifiable target. Yes, there's some leadership from Black Lives Matter, there's some leadership from dignity and power now, there's some leadership from some kind of in the old organizations that

have hung around for the last 50, 60 years. So everybody has a piece but no one has the reigns, and that's why it's lasted so long.

JH: So decentralization is the key. It's its major strength, and we can call it any number of things. I wanna talk to you about religion in this moment, if you, at least if I, read and think about what I hear from mainstream media, I'm struck by what feels to me to be a decidedly secular tenor to the endeavor, at least as is filtering through the media outlets that I'm getting. And I suspect it's true for other people. So I wanna ask you, what does religion or faith, in particular, bring to this struggle that people need to know about and to be able to benefit from?

PC: I think we need to deconstruct the question. As you mentioned, there's a decidedly secular presentation to this moment, which is distinct from earlier iterations or protests, when there was a very, very, very strong religious underpinning. I listened to the podcast of Dr. Robin Henderson Espinosa and she interviewed Andre Henry, who was an activist. And one of the things that he said which struck me as a 57 year old, orthodox normative black preacher, for the protesters now, the event of protest is their church. And that speaks to a few issues for us middle aged and past middle aged, religious people. Number one, the energy that is in the protest, their nimbleness, their ability to react quickly, their ability to bring passion at a moment's notice, is precisely what almost every religious community I know is looking for.

PC: The generation that is in the streets is the generation that is missing from our pews. That's a problem, not for the protesters, that's a problem for our religious communities because all of us come from religious traditions where it was the energy and the passion of young people, in the Christian community, we call them the "Joshua generation." It was Joshua's generation that got into the promised land when Moses's generation was dying out. And so the question is, how does the faith community capture the energy and capture the participation of those who are protesting? Clearly, they're able to carry on the protests, sustain them without the leadership of the church. We can't say that people of faith aren't involved because people of faith are involved in almost everything that goes on there, but it's without the leadership of organized religion. That tells us, A: Something about the leadership of organized religion. Maybe all of our faith communities need to assess what are we doing wrong that they can exhibit their passion in the streets and not within the walls of our faith communities.

PC: It also challenges those of us who are faith leaders to... If we're not leading the parade, we're not leading the march, don't we still have a responsibility to be in the parade, to be in the march? And for some of us religious leaders, we have pretty big egos. And we have often take the attitude that if we're not in charge, we're not going to be there. The Bible teaches and all of the Abrahamic faiths, that humility is a virtue. And some of us in religious leadership, need to humble ourselves. Go out there, observe and learn from these young folks. And believe it or not, take some of what is happening in the streets, and bring it back into the temple, into the shoal, into the synagogue, into the church, into a cathedral.

JH: First of all, I find that compelling and inspiring that a major leader such as yourself should be aiming for humility for this greater cause. I find it very moving and thank you for that. I wanna know what you know about one of the Jewish struggles which is that we in the progressive world of American Judaism, which is, in fact, a majority of American Judaism, we fear that the justice work that we all care about, doesn't actually address the distinctively Jewish heritage that we're also trying to promote in synagogue. And so sometimes you hear people saying, "Justice work is great. We should be doing it. But what about the uniquely Jewish traditional heritage and voice, if all it is just generic social civic justice?" And so I think that there's this bringing it back into the synagogue that you spoke about, bring it back into the church. A lot of Jewish leaders feel like that's already happening. In fact, it's happening to the exclusion of the tradition. Does that happen in black churches too?

PC: That happens in black churches, white churches, brown churches, Asian churches. It's a generational struggle. It's the battle of traditionalism versus ministry in the contemporary moment. I have a church where I have a lot of older people who are financially supportive, and I have younger people who are not as financially supportive but are very energetic and the argument is frequently, "We need more young people but the young people don't give money. So you need to listen to the old people and we love the tradition." I am not an expert on Judaism. I do know that the worship that took place in Solomon's temple was different from the worship that took place in the post-exilic temple. I didn't know that Jews in 2020 don't worship like Jews in 1520, or 1020, or 520. And if we are all believers in God Almighty, then we must understand that God has the ability to adapt the way he receives our worship.

PC: I remember going to New York City in the late 60s and 70s to visit my older sister. And in the late 60s and 70s, New York had somewhere on the order of 60,000 Jewish, primarily a Yiddish theme Delicatessens. Now it's down to under 200. And you can't find the folks who had the traditional tongue sandwiches with the... Etcetera. Do I lament the fact that I can't get those kinds of sandwiches anymore? Or do I go ahead and say, "Okay, well now I've gotta eat sprouts and fruit plates and not eat as much gluten." Well, the fact is doggone and I'm 57 years old. I don't need any more fatty tongue. I don't need to eat all that bread. [laughter] It's bad for me, and I need to make a dietary change. Similarly, as much as we love the traditions of our faiths, as much as we love the old liturgies and the old rituals and we love to be taught just like, we want to pass on what our grandparents and great grandparents and the patriarchs of the faith passed on.

PC: Ministry is in the moment. God operates in... Well, he operates in all time, but he operates in present time, in the present age. And it may just be that those young people don't need those pillars that we've stood on. It's a different world. It's hard to take... For those of us who are in the last half of our life, that maybe our traditions are not as relevant as we want them to be but God's will is mutable. Before the flood, we weren't allowed to eat meat. After the flood, He said, "No, you can eat anything as long as it's dead and there's no blood running in it." If God can change, why can't we change?

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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.

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JH: Okay, let's talk a little bit about some of the intersection, specifically between the sociology of our moment, this crucial, crucial moment and churches. What is the central message that black churches need to be conveying to their own communities in this moment?

PC: Let's have two understandings: The first is that the Black Church, like Reform Judaism, is not a monolith.

JH: Fair enough.

PC: And there are as many different points of view and perspectives in the Black Church as there is in Reform Judaism. Having said that, from a normative position, a position of relative orthodoxy in the Black Church, what we should be saying to our people is, change is good, and be willing to empower people to make change. What has always crippled the Black Church is opposition to change. Don't get confused when Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and all of the pillars of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s were operating. When they were meeting in black churches, those churches weren't full. The support for the Civil Rights Movement in the black community was about the same as the support for George Washington during the Revolutionary War. There were a third who were for it, a third who were against it and a third who were ambivalent. And so if I have a message for my colleagues in the Black Church is, "History is watching; make sure you're in the third that's for it this time."

JH: Flipping the coin a little bit, what do white communities, again, granting your point about diversity, well taken, what do white communities need to learn from black churches that we won't otherwise learn?

PC: Racism is an effect of classism. Where we see incidents of racism throughout human history, it has generally arisen as a justification for one people to economically exploit another people. When you look at the import of African slaves into the new world, it only happened after attempts to enslave the indigenous people proved ineffective because they knew the terrain too well and they could escape. Wherever the explorers landed, when they landed in East tribe and they tried to enslave the folks there, they tried to enslave the Māori, didn't work out, so they found someone else to

exploit economically. Understanding that, I would say to my white colleagues, there are three things you need to teach. Number one, you need to teach that racism is wrong, it's just that simple, and you need to teach that racism is wrong categorically. That will mean some changes in our language, in our terminology.

PC: I'm a funny guy. I grew up in a community called Shaker Heights, which in the 60s and 70s was kinda known as the great ethnic experience. We had blacks, whites, Jews, all together, and I can tell you some great Italian jokes, some great Jewish jokes, some great black jokes. But I don't tell any of those to my kids or my grandkids because in order to change the world I have to eliminate those attitudes, even though some are really funny. [chuckle] In order to change the world, gotta change the language, gotta change the attitudes, gotta teach what's right and what's wrong.

PC: Number two, for white people in general. When you understand that racism is wrong and that it's just an outgrowth of classism, you need an underclass so that you can be an upper class, you have to get back to teaching that God has created all of us equal. None of us are any better than any of the others. Some of us are different. There's strength in diversity. There's nothing wrong with our differences, but we can't teach that different is other because when you otherize someone you dehumanize them, and once you dehumanize them that makes it much easier to exploit them financially, sexually, politically. When you start using words like "those people," when you start referring to other groups as "those people," that is the first tip that you have a racist and a supremacist attitude, and we have to wipe those out and understand that we are all created equal and have the same value to God.

PC: Third thing we have to do is understanding that racism is a child of classism, is understand that if I have harmed you, it's biblical, if I have harmed you, I have a responsibility to undo the harm. Similarly, even though I may not be a racist, if I am enjoying the fruits of racism, if my great-great-great-great-grandfather cheated your great-great-great-great-grandfather out of a business and you are now living off of the proceeds, I can take you to court and I can make a legal claim on, I was exploited. Similarly, if you have people who for hundreds of years were exploited for labor, exploited sexually, exploited politically, and then for a couple of hundred years after that, were legally exploited through Jim Crow laws and were held back, the damages that they suffered were actionable. If you want to change the temperature in any room, be it a room full of Liberal Westside Los Angelenos or conservative congressmen from South Carolina, bring up the issue of reparations for the descendants of black slaves. And you might have the most incredible Kumbaya moment going on before then, but once you bring it up, everything freezes. And that's something that my white brothers and sisters will have to examine.

JH: Do you have a theory or a position or a way of opening the conversation about reparations that you would like to share and we can talk about?

PC: I'm recently becoming adherent to the call for reparations, not from a financial standpoint, but because it's a sign of repentance. America's God is money. My great evangelical friends, my great Reform Jewish friends, my great black Pentecostal and

Baptist and Methodist friends, make no mistake, we may serve God, but America serves money. And in every industry, including religion at times, money equals respect. And so you got two issues to look at, how do you value the damages of 246 years of slavery, and then another 120 so years of Jim Crow-ism, and then another 40 years of the current generation?

PC: Well, people have actually valued it. A simple search, Google search, will come up with a numbers that social scientists and economists have come up with, and I think the most acceptable amount to my very bad mathematical reasoning is about \$1.4 trillion now. While that is a tremendous number, remember, we've given reparations to the Japanese-Americans who were interned. We've made reparations in other cases, officially as a government, paid the money out, but to the African... The descendants of African slaves, and then freed persons who were illegally abducted and put back into slavery. I believe it was General Sherman who suggested after slavery, we give every African-American person, family 40 acres of land and a mule. [chuckle] We know how many people were in slavery, what would be the value of those 40 acres with that mule 160 years later? Probably about \$1.4 trillion.

JH: I really wanna work with this because of the opening comment that you made in this topic of reparations, which I think is very insightful, and it captures how big a political hurdle it is, because you basically said, "Bring me the population of Americans who see themselves as the most open to the hard work of anti-racism, bring me the people who see themselves as the most caring about this issue on a human and a civic level." You put them in a room and you talk about reparations to them, these people who define themselves in the most favorable possible way for this conversation, and the truth is that even those people, they're gonna resist and they're gonna resist mightily. So I wanna talk about what goes on in those conversations that is such a hurdle when you see in their eyes that they're beginning to shift their opinion, even though they see themselves as your allies.

PC: It all traces itself back to classism. And as people of faith, we all know what our texts say, if you're a land owner and you harvest your crops, you don't glean to the edges of the field because you leave something for the poor, for the widows. If you have purchased land from another family that after 50 years in the year of Jubilee or after seven years of the sabbatical year, you gotta give it back to them. And because God is against the building of generational wealth and oligarchical fortunes, says that in the Old Testament, says that in the New Testament, says that in three or four other faiths, including all the Abrahamic faiths, God does not want anyone to have a significant economic advantage over anyone else, which is completely counter to the American ideal. And the American ideal has become, "Get all you can." If you remember the 1980 movie, Wall Street, Michael Douglas. What was Gordon Gekko's line? "Greed is good." I have a good Rabbi friend who laments that when he started his rabbinical career, he had plenty of young people in his congregations who wanted to be doctors and teachers and wanted to be in helping professions and help make the world better. And now he says, "Everybody wants to be a hedge fund manager and become a billionaire and a mega billionaire."

PC: So for the sake of the conversation in that room, what does that mean? All of us and black people too have become perverted by the desire for... By greed and avarice. And everyone in the room, even if they don't have a nickel in their pocket and would not be harmed at all, everyone comes from the standpoint, "Well, what will I lose? What advantage will I lose by giving them this money? I'm not gonna give them, they don't deserve this money. They need to get out and get jobs. My grandfather came over here from Latvia, from Italy, from wherever, with nothing and had to start a... " "Well, no, he didn't come over here with nothing, he came on with white skin."

PC: And that white skin was an advantage, and has continued to be an advantage. I'm looking at you now, Josh. You could be British, you could be French, you could be Polish, you could be Russian, you could be Algerian, you could be Omani, I can't tell. You look at me, you know there's a significant amount of African DNA in me. I'll share this story, and it's off topic. I have a relative, one of my nephews, who works for a major, major bank. He went to transfer to a position in that bank in Orange County, California. Because the young man is fluent in Spanish and has a... Goes by a nickname that is Hispanic sounding, when he sent his resume to the division of that bank to transfer it to Orange County, they looked at his resume, looked at his credentials. His academic credentials were impeccable, his production credentials in the bank were impeccable. They brought him over with just a phone interview, gave him the job. When he arrived to his office in Orange County from Chicago, there was a little disbelief.

PC: Because when he walked in, they were expecting a White or Cuban or Anglo-looking gentleman. And what they got was this tall very dark-skinned young man to work in Orange County. And one of the human resources persons pulled him aside later and said, "If they had known you were black, they would not have hired you. They would not have brought you into this office." And so, in the context of the conversation in the room, whether the people think, "They don't deserve it. We can't afford it." The whole mindset is, "They're getting something that I should be getting." We see the same thing working out in our American elections. America is different from most developed countries, in that we have a sizeable portion of the population that votes against its own self-interest because of resentment politics. "I don't have it. But I doggone sure don't want them to have the opportunity to have it, so I'm gonna block it." [chuckle]

JH: Alright. Well, I want to close this out and bring it down to the human level. And I wanna hear from you, as an individual, as a friend, as a fellow human being, in this pivotal moment. I certainly hope it's pivotal. Meaning, I hope it means we pivot to change. And I wanna point out that you spoke out strongly when our nation confronted Charlottesville. You spoke out strongly when nine innocent people were murdered at Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina. And I want to hear you speak from your heart now. What's going on in the mind and the soul of Reverend John Cager when you experience this moment of human and civil right struggle?

PC: Well, I have to say, I have been emboldened by two things. Number one, the fact that the protests won't die. We're now going on to a month, when typically this would have passed out of the news cycle weeks ago. What it tells me is that there is something beyond the normal that is going on here. I choose to believe that is providential, and that there is some divine intervention somewhere that is causing the debate to be raised to a level where it will not go out of the new cycle. The fact that Senator McConnell is pushing a police reform bill. However strong or watered down it may be, this would have been unthinkable a year ago, two years ago, five years ago. I'm also emboldened by the fact that the struggle now is multi-ethnic, it's multi-generational, it's multi-faith. Which is what we saw the last time we got transformational change, which was about 60 years ago.

PC: It was not just a black movement in 1963, in 1965, in 1961. It was a multi-faith, multi-ethnic movement. And because of those, I am hopeful for change. Now understand this, we will not see 180-degree change. We will not see 90-degree change. We will not see 45-degree change. But America is big, and to see change at the level of 5-degree. A 5-degree course change may not seem much for people who are looking for us to, "Get rid of police departments!" But a 5-degree change over the length of time, makes a huge difference in the direction that the country goes. And I may not see all of the changes that I need to see within the span of my life. But I've got kids, I've got grandchildren, I've got great-grandchildren. And if the changes now lead to a better quality of life, better access, better opportunities for them, I'm grateful for the 5-degree change.

JH: Well, John, here is to continued change for the better. Here is to continued partnership among all people of good will, and good faith to see it through. And speaking personally, I can say it's a pleasure to be a part of it in some way. And to be your neighbor in Los Angeles and to experience your leadership. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me, and I look forward to many lively and rich conversations with you.

PC: My pleasure.

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, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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