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ELISHEVA CARLEBACH: CONFRONTING MODERNITY, 1750-1880

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to The College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism, 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 this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where I look forward to a conversation with Professor Elisheva Carlebach. Professor Carlebach is the editor of The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, Volume 6, titled, Confronting Modernity 1750 to 1880. She is a Salo Wittmayer Baron Professor of Jewish History, Culture and Society and Director of the Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies at Columbia University. She is also the author of several books, including Palaces of Time, Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe. Professor Carlebach, thank you so much for joining us. I really look forward to our conversation.

Elisheva Carlebach: My pleasure, thank you.

JH: I'd like to begin with the Posen Library itself, and in your introduction to Volume 6, which is the one you edited, in the period of 1750 to 1880, which is covered in the volume, you refer to the move of Jews from the sidelines of majority societies in which they lived toward full participation, vigorous participation and even shaping of those societies, both because the societies began to allow Jewish participation and because the Jews rushed to the opportunity that was afforded to them with all of their talents and ambition, the process toward participation in majority cultures and societies was in fact messy and a long process, two steps forward, one step backwards, filled with all kind of fascinating, difficult, but also inspiring stories. I'd like to start with the theme of women in society and ask you to share with us a story or a perspective from among the sources you bring in the Posen Library that might illustrate the process that we're talking about.

EC: Initially, when I came to this period, I thought, oh no, how will I ever be able to draw out of what was largely a silence, since so many of the movers and shakers of the main movements and denominations and the editors of newspapers and so forth, they were all male, Rabbinic culture male, scientific culture male. But as I began to dig deeper, I found so many fascinating voices of Jewish women, in some cases, leading their daily lives, in other cases, really forging new paths that had... In which they were really pioneers, so I'd like to begin with a voice that I found in a number of places of Jewish midwives. Midwives were professional women who deliver medical care by the 18th

century, in many parts of Europe, they're getting professional training.

EC: These are women who are often highly skilled, very educated, I found there's one excerpt here from an introduction to her written register of a Dutch Jewish midwife named Rosa, who writes in an introduction in both Hebrew and Yiddish, she writes beautifully about how wonderful it is to have the profession that she has and how before she approaches any birth, she has a little prayer and she tells us what her prayer is and the line that sticks out for me is, "Let these women deliver their babies easily. Let the babies come out like eggs out of a hen." And I just thought that was such a wonderful line and it's summarized in a certain way, the trepidation that the midwife felt because let us remember that child birth was a very dangerous juncture for most pre-modern women. Many women died in childbirth or the child didn't make it alive out of the process, such was the state of medical knowledge. And we even... I even was lucky enough to find what I would call the voice of a woman "Who died in child birth."

EC: It's a tombstone of a Sephardic woman who was buried in Suriname. Her epitaph was written in Portuguese with some Hebrew. And she writes... Again, this is her epitaph, so somebody writes this in her voice, "On the day of my abundant joy, illness suddenly came over me, I gave birth and died, and the fruit of my womb was brought with me to the grave." So here we have I would say, the two poles, on the one hand, the optimism of the professional midwife who hopes that each delivery will go well, on the other hand, the tragic results of what happens when it doesn't. So these are voices of what I would call women who are doing things in the daily lives of women everywhere, whose voices we never have a chance to hear, and the sources are full of such voices, they've just been overlooked by scholars who are interested in other things.

JH: Another theme, which has a broad sociological scope, which many of our listeners identify with is the pre-history, the very, very early history of what today are the modern movements in the majority of American Judaism. And for example, when we think of the Reform movement with a capital R, we think of today's Reform movement, Reform synagogues, etcetera, infact however, this period represent the lower case r reform in which pretty much all of the modern movements of Judaism, certainly American Judaism were taking shape. So I wanted to ask you if you could cite examples and sources that tell us the story of how this consciousness of Judaism itself was affected and shaped by this broader experience with which you and I introduced to this episode of engaging with the modern world.

EC: I think what's unique in this period is not so much the engagement, but the conscious will to transformation. The willingness to begin to question age-old customs and to ask whether they are really necessary or at the heart of Judaism, whether there's some way... Not just individually, but institutionally, that Jews can change their inherited traditions in a way that preserves what was then called the essence of Judaism, but allow Jews to mingle more freely in society. Socially, to enter the professions economically without having to be hindered by say, a distinctive dress or other customs that made it very difficult. And the question of which customs and laws are part of the inalienable heritage of Jews, and which are really, say, nice traditions or superstitions even that are not necessary, this was an ongoing conversation for over a century.

EC: And it wasn't just about the ideas of Judaism, but also certain practices, and they seemed to have been in the minds of some whole, tied together, and I'm gonna give you some example. Salomon Maimon, who became a renowned contiene philosopher, was deeply critical of the traditional society in Poland in which he was raised. And one of the things the Enlighteners wanted to change was the Jewish family structure, which had emphasized very young ages at marriage. Maimon claimed that he was 12 or 13 when he got married to a young girl of about the same age. And he has this wonderful recollection in which he is told under the chuppah, under the bridal canopy, that if during the ceremony, he steps with all his might on his bride's foot, he will then have the upper hand in the marriage for the rest of his life, if he neglects to do this, he will be in trouble. And he says as he is reminding himself during the blessings under the chuppah that he's got a step on the bride's foot, he says, "I suddenly feel this crushing weight on my foot", and he says, "I would have screamed if I wouldn't have been so embarrassed, but this turned out to be a very telling sign", he says, "Because my wife... And worse, her mother ruined our marriage and dominated me" until he ended up leaving the marriage and leaving Poland.

EC: And this is really not just a funny example, but an example of the way the Enlightenment figures criticized the institution of early age at marriage, which, to go back to a previous conversation, put women, especially when younger women married older and more established men, which was the case in Western Europe, it puts them always at a disadvantage within the marital circle. So this is a criticism both of the lack of individual choice when parents are arranging marriages, of the lack of age of consent, how can a young teenager make a decision that will affect them for their entire lives, so it's a criticism of a lot of practices, that were not really rooted in Jewish law, but had become part of the Jewish tradition in many parts of Europe. So there's a criticism of many different aspects of Jewish daily life that Enlighteners felt hindered the Jews from realizing their full human potential, but then moving towards the west, these criticisms became something positive as they become institutionalized, as you mentioned, in different denominational forms.

EC: So you have neoorthodoxy as it was called, which was a modern orthodoxy in which Jews very much lived in non-Jewish society but adhered stringently to Jewish law. There was what came later in the United States to be known as the conservative movement, by which whatever a majority of Jews observe still continues to be observed, but with some allowances for changes in modern life. And the reform movement, which thought very deeply about what is the essence? What is absolutely essential to being a Jew? What must a Jew believe? What must a Jew think? What must a Jew observe? What do Jewish services look like? What do Jewish families look like? These are all elemental questions. And I wanna point out here just several figures. Isaac Mayer Wise was probably a pioneer in the United States for bringing institutional reform Judaism to the soil of the United States.

EC: He came from Germany, what was then Germany, but is now Czechoslovakia. He had already trained as a reform rabbi. He served in New York and in Cincinnati and founded some of the most important institutions on American soil, which has really served a thriving reform movement for the next 150 years. He was also one of the

founders of the first American Jewish newspaper. And I should add that every single one of the different denominations, every single political viewpoint across the spectrum had their own newspaper. Journalism was another flourishing medium in this period. It was tremendously productive of conversations on every imaginable subject.

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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 to 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: The whole endeavor that we're talking about modernity and Judaism presupposes a simultaneous recognition of and testing of and recalibration of and re-understanding of the boundaries between Jew and non-Jew, Jewish culture, non-Jewish culture, Jewish society, non-Jewish society in all of the many, many contexts in which those things played out. One of the ways in which we can experience this boundary is not just by crossing it by engaging mutually with each other's culture, but also in a more charged way is conversion across that boundary. When people choose one religion over the religion of their birth, in this period, it was a particularly telling experiences with prominent Jews engaged in conversion. Tell us a little bit about that role of conversion for Jews in this period.

EC: It's really interesting that in this period we still have the inwards conversion of people who had been conversos in Iberia and Spain and Portugal, where they had been forcibly or their ancestors had been forcibly converted to Christianity, and they were still coming out of the Iberian peninsula and some of them content to be the Catholics they had grown up as, but many others desiring after several hundred years of not having seen a living Jewish community desiring nevertheless to join the Jewish people at the same time, both in the United States, but far more in certain parts of Europe at certain times, especially in Germany, especially in the first quarter of the 19th century where Jews had been allowed to step forward in some aspects of their lives, especially universities open up, they're allowed to have professional training, but no jobs. No one would hire them because they were Jews. And that's where you begin to get the sense of despair, a sense that we've done all we can to prove that we are worthy of being treated as equals and the gates of opportunity are still locked in our faces. So this leads somebody like the great writer and poet Heinrich Heine to say, "Baptism never meant anything deep to me, but it was the ticket into European culture." And so he undergoes it, but never severs has ties from his Jewish origins.

EC: We've got many well-known figures from Karl Marx to Felix Mendelssohn, the composer, the statesman Benjamin Disraeli in England and many, many others who are either converted or the children of converts, who still have a very strong attachment in

almost every respect to their Jewish origins, but have resolved to remain within their converted Christian community. And it was difficult to decide where one draws the line in terms of admission of such figures into a volume about Jewish culture and civilization, but my own decision and sense of it was as long as people were still acting in a way that was rooted in their Jewish experience, they deserved a place in the volume. And so I keep them. And again, I'm not just interested in the famous converts, but also in the daily difficulties. For example, we have a child who's an adult young man writing to his parents saying, "How is it possible for parents to cast out their own child? Christianity for me is not a rejection of Judaism, it's something that I came to after long, hard thinking about what my priorities are. You've always taught me to be honest with myself, and now that I've made this honest decision and have revealed it to you, how are you rejecting me? How are you treating me as dead?" Which is what traditional Jewish parents did if one of their children were baptized.

JH: The conversion question does indeed trigger all kinds of deep emotional responses among Jews in both directions, I would add. Conversion to Judaism that swells our hearts with a sense of connectedness and conversion out, which as the case of that family you described, really breaks the heart, and then clearly breaks the heart of the convert himself in that case. They're really very moving in it's seeming irreconcilability. One of the ways in which the Jewish community and individual Jews try to do this navigation across this boundary and to re-understand it and to make it into something constructive was decidedly less heart-rending in the ideological realm, but really high stakes in terms of the individual choices realm and the social implications. Forced to join the military as an expression of patriotism. Can you tell us a little bit about the role of the military in this process that we're talking about?

EC: Yeah, so for the very longest time, even into the Middle Ages, Jews had been barred from carrying weapons for the most part. They were not allowed to join the military. The military was something of an honor guard for the nation, and Jews were considered a people who didn't possess that honor and various other aspects, such as they weren't physically able to defend themselves. Something that came up in the Napoleonic Sanhedrin, "Well, what would a Jew do if they had to fight on the Sabbath, or what would they do if they had to fight a Jew standing on the other side of the border, so to speak, and had to fire on another Jew. Would they be able to do that? What was their first loyalty?" This question of dual loyalty. So for a very long time, military service was one of those areas that Jews were barred from participating in. And when those barriers began to fall and the military began accepting Jews, many of them rushed to seize the opportunity to prove that they were just as brave and just as strong and just as honorable as anybody else in the nation. So Jews joined armies on all sides of all conflicts. Even in the United States, Jews join in serious numbers on the Union side during the Civil War.

EC: We have a wonderful reminiscence from what it was like to celebrate Passover in 1861 during the Civil War where a soldier, whose last name is Joel, writes about parts... First of all, going to great lengths to obtain the necessary ingredients for a Seder. Wine, matzah, the bitter herbs. But then he writes, "There were three or four of us Jews together in the full unit. We sat down to our Seder and we tasted the bitter herb, and it

was so bitter that we needed a lot of the wine to quench the bitterness. And by the time we got through the wine, we realized we had greatly exceeded the four cup limit, and we were so drunk that we re-enacted the whole story of Moses and Pharaoh and I had to be rested from their drunkenness." But in the end, he says, "We were able to consume the eggs and the meat without further incident." So there you have, as he says, in the wild words of West Virginia, far away from home and friends, we offer up to the God of Israel our prayers. So this gives you a sense of what it meant to be a Jew, the pride that they had in being able to serve both their country and their religion.

JH: Well, Professor Elisheva Carlebach, I wanna thank you for a delightful conversation filled with wonderful, colorful, but also really profound stories of our history as we think about our own challenges in modernity today and for the pleasure of your company. Thank you, so much.

EC: Well, thank you.

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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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