



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

(Begin audio)

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 this episode of the College Commons podcast, where it is my great pleasure to share with you a conversation with my friend and colleague, Rabbi Joseph Edelheit. Rabbi Joseph A. Edelheit is Professor Emeritus of Religious and Jewish Studies at St. Cloud State University. He served as a rabbi in Reform synagogues for 30 years. He has served as a prison chaplain on a presidential advisory council for HIV/AIDS and created a multi-faith orphanage in rural India for children with HIV/AIDS. His book, the subject of our discussion, "What Am I Missing?: Questions About Being Human," was published by Wipf and Stock in February of 2020. He currently lives in Rio de Janeiro, where he writes, volunteers as a rabbi, and enjoys teaching his grandchildren English. Rabbi Edelheit, Joseph, it's a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you for joining us.

Joseph Edelheit: It is great to be here with you, Josh.

JH: I wanna begin by talking a little bit about the premise of your book, "What Am I Missing?" And in particular, I want you to elaborate an idea that I really loved in the beginning of the book as you present it. You posed the question, "What am I missing?" as an opportunity, "a fascinating means of opening vital conversations about the very nature of being human." Elaborate a bit on what it means to be missing something, to have a void not as a lament but as an opportunity.

JE: Like the six biblical characters I use, we are all missing a component of what we had thought would be everything. Let's take Abraham and Rachel, the first two Biblical characters. Using them, we see that they bring monotheism into Western culture. They have a promise of what the people and land will be, but they're missing Torah. They precede the possibility of what occurs. What does it mean that we include the matriarchs and patriarchs as cornerstones to how we know ourselves as Jews, when, in fact, the entire book of Genesis precedes chronologically? Well, each of us comes to know ourselves as, "Well, I have this, this and this, but I'm never gonna actually run the New York Marathon. That is not a part of either what I'm striving to accomplish or how I will know my life afterwards."

JE: Something happened after 1976 during the Olympics. Nadia Comaneci did

something that had never done before, she got a perfect 10. Wow, it had never happened before. I'm not sure she should have ever received that perfect 10. That word "perfect," now, we understand to be flawless. It should be used more as the verb to mean finish, complete. So, when we're missing something, we're still incorporating the possibility. We get up tomorrow morning and, "Wow, I didn't finish that." That is very different than the perfectionism that can be so oppressive, "Oh, I did that wrong yesterday." No. This book is motivated by the possibilities of a different discourse.

JH: A discourse that is opened up by the rejection of perfectionism and some kind of embrace of a search and the value in looking for what you're missing.

JE: Absolutely.

JH: I wanna ask you to do two things. I want you to tell us the story of Richard, the AIDS patient, and then I want you to tell us what Joseph Edelheit learned, that Joseph Edelheit was missing because of that experience?

JE: Thank you for the opportunity to tell this story. I tell this story as often as possible as my own act of teshuvah, repentance. I was the rabbi of Emanuel in Chicago, and I was called in October, early November 1986. I had begun to become involved in HIV/AIDS, that was the emergence in Chicago at the time. A young woman called me and asked if I would visit her brother, he had PCP, he had Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. And I said, "Absolutely, but don't you have a rabbi, a congregation?" "Our rabbi said there is no place in Judaism for my brother, Richard."

JE: I met Richard, who had a master's degree and worked at the Chicago Public Library. He was a specialist in American folklore. He was very weak when I met him. We spent a meaningful 45 minutes together. And he said, "Rabbi, thank you, but can you come back? I'm not feeling well." And I said, "Absolutely." It was the second week in December. And I put on my overcoat, and as I buttoned it, he extended his hand to me, and for a horrific nanosecond, I did nothing. Because I'm certain the Holy One meant Richard to be my teacher, Richard extended his hand closer to me, and I took it and I shook it. And I went downstairs and, Josh, I sat in my car in Chicago, crying and screaming and cursing, "How could I have done that?" Richard, of blessed memory, six months later would die, and I sat with him and his mother and sister holding his hand as I helped him say the Shema. Richard was the first of 32 people I buried in the next few years. He taught me about courage. He taught me not to be afraid.

JE: So, whenever I meet anyone living with HIV/AIDS today, the first thing I do is take their hand and, if possible, embrace them. Richard was my ability to understand how little I had experienced of the other. The next Yom Kippur, I gave a sermon in which I rewrote the Unetaneh Tokef for people living with HIV/AIDS. This is the very somber prayer of Yom Kippur which asks, "What will be our fates as individuals? Who will live and who will die?" And I wrote it quite specifically about people living with HIV/AIDS. There were people in my congregation who left immediately upon hearing that I was going to talk about HIV/AIDS. I was questioned by some leaders, "Is it appropriate for us on this day, Rabbi, to hear this story from you about this question? How many Jews in

this time are dying of AIDS, Rabbi? Really, is this about all of us?"

JE: And I remember saying it is about all of us, because Richard has a Jewish mother, Richard has a Jewish sister, and all of us are going to know people. I would go on, because of Richard, to engage others in this question in Chicago, and then nationally. Richard is always present with me in reminding me what it was like for that terrible nanosecond to do nothing. And it's the realization that I did nothing, but Richard was there to help me move beyond that nothing. I was missing something Richard gave me. I don't know what Richard experienced when I didn't take his hand, I know what I experienced as transformative. We must be challenged to move beyond our unknown. That's difficult today. We are much more, in my view, dangerously certain, siloed, isolated. So, in that dark December night in 1986, a messenger from on high, who was a stranger to me, said, "No. You can take my hand. You can do this."

JH: It gets us back to the power of the missing to move us to growth. And if we are complete, if we are... Or we think we're complete, there's no motivation to change, to grow, to seek betterment.

JE: And what does it mean today to accept as part of being human that, of course, we're missing something. Of course, I've not yet had that experience. That's not a judgment, that's a realization. And there's a big difference about that.

JH: You spoke about the structure of the book as being built around six biblical protagonists as models or centerpieces for consideration, each one of them missing one of the pillars of the Jewish experience, Jewish civilization. Either they miss Torah, or they miss God, or they miss the community, the people of Israel. I'd like to get political and go straight to King David, one of the characters who lacks God, according to your reading, because he is denied the opportunity to build the temple, the sort of place of meeting with God. What can we learn from David, specifically as a leader, about transforming one's void into what you call a vital conversation about the very nature of being human? How do we elevate David's void, and what does that mean for today's leadership?

JE: I had some friends challenge me over the years as I developed this paradigm, and they would say, "Clearly, the traditional author of the Psalms, how can you say that David is not connected with God?" Well, to the degree that the editors of the Tanakh choose to ascribe David as the author of the Psalms, that may be his way of being tucked inside the tradition. There is something quite... Using the great song from Hamilton, I'd like to have been in the room where it happened, when in the year '90, the sages are sitting around that table and deciding what got into that Tanakh.

JH: The Hebrew Bible.

JE: Who would have dared say, "You know that 2 Samuel Chapter 11 and 12, that's a key narrative we need to keep? Really? Why? If David is going to be the source of the Messiah, do you understand what we're saying? The source of the Messiah raped a woman. The nameless child who is born dies, and then King Solomon is born. And

we're going to keep David, not just along the margin, he's at the center of the narrative." Yes, I worked with the title of that chapter, Josh, a long time, Naked Power. Your question is apt. I don't know how do we translate the brazenness of David into the world in which we're living, but on any given day, it's shameless, literally shameless, intentionally done without shame. That takes us back to Genesis and the very initial act of becoming human where we "ate from the tree of moral knowledge." Well, so, if we didn't know the difference between right and wrong before that moment, we were without shame. That's different than knowing the difference and doing it. Now you are shameless. And there's a big difference.

JH: You've sidelined the shame that you do have.

JE: Oh, yes. We can't retrieve that moment of paradise when you just don't know. We can't, as humans, imagine what that was. We do know, we know it from the time we're toddlers and our parents or grandparents are saying, "Stop, don't do that." It is fascinating to me that the very first human affect ever mentioned in Scripture is busha. They were not shamed. There's no other affect mentioned about those primordial human beings. We, today, have leaders who tragically, in my view, don't reference their own busha. They don't reference their own shame. David is at the very center of the historic prophetic books all the way through the end of the Bible.

JE: Somewhere along the line, the rabbis decided, we can't have a perfect king. Maybe it was when they decided that Moses would be buried outside the land in a place nobody knew. Once they decided that, well, the next big narrative character also can't have it all. I think it's important, not merely coincidental, that nobody has it all. Over the years, as I've studied and read and developed these ideas, I'm pretty sure in my own mind we're not supposed to have it all. We are supposed to engage being human, knowing you're not going to have it all. What are the choices you're going to make given that awareness?

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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.

JH: I'd like to move on to a question that challenges ourselves and our loyalty to our own tradition, and I wanna challenge you. Multiple times in the course of the book, you articulate a deep commitment to the idea of religious pluralism, and more importantly than that, I think, you recognize that monotheism is often intention with that commitment. You write and I quote, "Ancient conflicts over who is the most loved by the universal one God are still stimulating hatred. Tragically, this distortion has proven to be

a dangerously intractable idea." Is the exclusivism of monotheism that you describe as a distortion, in fact a feature of monotheism rather than a bug in monotheism? Are you gussying up monotheism so that it can even entertain the idea of pluralism, when in fact, it is irreducibly exclusivist?

JE: Brilliant question, Josh, and we don't have enough time to unpack it, especially at a point in the current discourse of cancel culture and weaponizing certainty. And my doctor father, Professor David Tracy, University of Chicago, is the one who imbued me with the striving of radical religious pluralism. It is a risky, inexplicable horizon. It is one in which I want desperately to be able to say there is one universal creative revelatory redemptive source for all peoples. I like to use the analogy of a kaleidoscope, the old kind. When I was a child, I used to buy kaleidoscopes and break them to make sure that they all had the same 18 little pieces of plastic in them. I would like to hope that that is how I understand the pluralist experience of monotheism. There is one infinite inexplicable mystery of God, of that power in the universe which we call God, and each community experiences it by twisting their part of the kaleidoscope differently, so they're going to see the same thing I see differently.

JE: Over the many years I have studied, read, taught, and engaged in dialogue on this question, I had hoped for more opening and more care and more risk-taking. Now, I'm afraid to tell you that what motivated me in the yearning for the pluralism that Tracy taught me theoretically, I'm no longer as confident in my praxis, in my pastoral work, that that is open to others. We know from persons of color that books written by non-persons of color have taken their story with a discourse that is not theirs. I have a son and a daughter-in-law who teach eighth grade English, and they can't teach a book written by a white woman that is a classic of American literature because it's not the discourse of the people who have the experience.

JH: Is this Harper Lee?

JE: Yep. How does that impact my continued yearning for the pluralism at the core of my rabbinate, my intellectual zest? How do I keep pushing against that? I'm reading and writing about this, about cancel culture, about insular certainty. If you're not Jewish, can you lay claim to being an ally and teach about anti-Semitism? If you are not Jewish, can you understand and help us with issues around Israel? How do we manage what community and pluralism is going to mean? Well, it's not a part of my intellectual framework to have difference as a limiting of presence. For me, going back to your first question about Richard, it was difference that taught me what I was missing. I need and yearn for difference as a dynamic in the community.

JE: Yes, you're right, there is something naive at this moment in looking at my pluralism. I have not been asked that of late, and I will admit to you, I'm pushing the rock up the hill and it's steeper right now. Look, I don't want to cave in to the certainties of the day. I want to keep asking people, but the pluralism allows us to have multiple conversations. Do you want to limit the conversations? There are not as many people who would sit at that table with me today.

JH: I understand that. I think when you and I, who maybe share broadly a perspective, I think maybe this is our opportunity to ask, "What are we missing?" And maybe one of the possibilities of what we're missing is a full appreciation of the violence perpetrated by those conversations that you and I have had the luxury of experiencing as enriching, the luxury of experiencing as stimulating, the luxury of experiencing as intellectual life. And maybe what you and I are missing is an appreciation of the destructive force of those conversations, of their assumptions, of all of the things that have flowed from their assumptions, and that we have been exponents of, unwittingly, to be sure, but maybe we have to sit with that a little bit. And I say we advisedly, by the way, not rhetorically to mean you. I'm trying to give a lot of hard thought to that.

JE: Tracy taught me a word I had never used before, David Tracy. In the first course I had with he and Steven Tolman, and after three weeks of the seminar, there was two weeks of reflection. And I went to his office and I said, "Oh, is this when we write our paper?" And he looked at me and he said, "No. This is when you reflect." I said, "I beg your pardon?" [chuckle] I was 38 years old. I'd been to Cal, at HUC, I was a rabbi. "Reflect?" "Yes, don't you want to think about what we've been thinking about?" "Really? We're going to do that now?" [chuckle] Yes. I think you're right, Josh. It is now going to be a time when persons like yourself tell us to stop, stand still, and reflect. If my book provokes some questions that someone like you then says, "All right. Let's reflect upon that demand for pluralism that Edelheit is asking for." Okay, I agree, we do need to hear those whose pain diminishes my presumptions.

JH: Well, then I thank you for the inspiration, and most of all for the pleasure of your company and the conversation, and here's to many more. Thank you very much.

JH: Thank you, Josh.

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