



**COLLEGE  
COMMONS**

## COLUM MCCANN: THE INFINITE SIDES OF APEIROGON

(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 I have the great pleasure of introducing you to Colum McCann. Colum McCann is the author of seven novels and three collections of stories. Born and raised in Dublin, Ireland, he has been the recipient of many international honors, including the National Book Award, the International Dublin Impac Prize, the Chevalier des Arts et Lettres from the French government, election to the Irish Arts Academy, a 2020 Jewish National Book Award for Apeirogon, and an Oscar nomination. In 2017, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts. He is the co-founder of the nonprofit global story exchange called Narrative 4. He lives in New York with his wife, Alison, and their family, and indeed he joins us from the streets of New York where we may have some interference in the course of our conversation, but we very much look forward to talking to Colum. Thank you for joining us.

**Colum McCann:** It's such a pleasure to talk to you, Josh.

**JH:** Let's begin by talking about the book itself, which will lead into the relationship that undergirds it. Apeirogon is a nonfiction novel that follows two friends: A Palestinian Muslim named Bassam Aramin, and an Israeli Jew named Rami Elhanan, who together find common cause in their pursuit of peace, but also common tragedy in their parallel experiences of losing their respective daughters, Abir and Smadar, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We recently, as you know, Colum, had the honor of interviewing your friend, Rami Elhanan, who describes the beginnings of your friendship that led to the book. And so I can't help but ask you if you would tell us that story as you remember it.

**CM:** I met Rami and Bassam in November 2015, when I was on a trip to Israel and Palestine with my nonprofit group, Narrative 4. And we've been with a group of artists and activists, we've been touring around for a couple of weeks, it was toward the end our trip, it was a rainy Friday afternoon, it was cold, it was already getting dark, and we went into the town of Beit Jala, which is just outside of Jerusalem as you know, and walked up this staircase, this rickety staircase, into the room where two seemingly unassuming men sat and they were pouring out coffee for us and welcoming us. Within half an hour, Josh, my world was completely turned inside out,

upside down, my ribcage was pried open, my heart was sort of laid bare, by listening to the incredible power of the stories of these two men, each of whom had lost daughters in separate incidents and had come together against the all available evidence, against all available odds, to start a relationship that spoke to the necessity, not even to like one or to love one another, but that we have to begin the process by understanding one another.

**CM:** And I came back to New York where I live, and I couldn't shake the story from my soul, it was just impossible. And so I decided then to embark on a journey, which eventually became a five-year journey to write this novel, *Apeirogon*. And *Apeirogon* is a shape with a countably infinite number of sides. I know it's a strange thing to wrap your mind around, how can a shape be infinite? But it was a beautiful term to me for the idea that we're all involved, we're all there, we're all complicit in some sort of way, and we all belong to this particular story. And especially when you talk about the Holy Land in a certain way where everybody is there, everybody travels to Jerusalem at one stage or another, even if they only do so metaphorically or through some sort of gesture, through their faith or their understanding.

**JH:** The book, *Apeirogon*, itself seems to also to indicate that there's a countably infinite number of sides in the sense of partisanship, that there's a million sides to the problem or an infinite number of sides to the problem, it's quite a compelling image indeed. You composed *Apeirogon* in a very distinctive manner. In many chapters, you relate anecdotes and facts that on their face appear to be non sequiturs or tangents, and then you deploy the sensibility of these seeming detours to shift perspective on the emotional or narrative heart of the story, which is of course, Rami and Bassam. Introduce us to one such example and share your thinking about it.

**CM:** When I was writing the novel, and after having spent a lot of time with Rami and Bassam, it hit me with the force of an axe one particular day that Rami and Bassam were telling the stories of their daughters over and over and over again and the purpose of that was to keep them alive. And that struck me then, that's a Scheherazade moment, that's a *Thousand and One Nights*, that's *Arabian Nights*. I knew I was writing a fractured novel in the beginning and I knew that I wanted to sort of disrupt the conventional narrative around Israel and Palestine and write a different sort of book. What I didn't know was that I was going to do it in a 1001 different sections. Some of them are one sentence long, some of them are four or five pages long, two of them are actually blank, some of them are pictures, some refer to...

**CM:** Ancient weaponry, others refer to bird, migratory patterns but nearly, everything always comes back to Abir and Smadar, the daughters of Rami and Bassam. Everything comes funneling backwards almost in a breathing motion to the story of these two incredible men and their families. And they are incredible men. They have now become the best of friends, for me, and they're also heroes at the same time. They're incredibly courageous and they use the force of their grief as a weapon for understanding. And they travel around the world. They've come to United States, they go around Israel, they go to parts of the West Bank, they go to Ireland, they go to Sweden and so on telling their story over and over and over again. And I heard it so many times that each and every time I heard it, it affected me deeply. There was nothing theatrical, rehearsed or echoey about it at all. Every time I hear it still, it still breaks my heart.

**CM:** Smadar was killed in a suicide bombing in 1997 in Jerusalem and Abir was killed when she was hit with a rubber bullet from just a couple of meters away in the back of her head when she

was 10 years old in Jerusalem and yet, these two men pry every ounce of light and every ounce of hope out of their own stories and their own lives. There's actually a line from the Mu'allaqāt, which are those sixth century Arabic pre-Islamic poems, a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful line, I think, which says, "Is there any hope that this desolation can bring us solace?" And I think it's a profound meditation on how we negotiate the darkness of the world and turn it in, somehow, to a form of light, and that's what Rami and Bassam do. And that's why I think they're incredible people.

**JH:** Having met Rami, I can only agree. I'd like to investigate a little bit more about the structure of the book. There's another element to it, which is that, at least as I read it, the terrible irony of Apeirogon lies in its chronology whereby we learn that Rami and Bassam had already established a friendship and dedicated themselves to a shared pursuit of peace before Abir, the daughter of Bassam, died and in dying, thereby created the horrible parallel with the death of Smadar, Rami's daughter. And as I read and later, further thought about Apeirogon, I got a sense that you backgrounded that chronology and the irony that comes with it, so I wanna ask you if that's indeed the case or was I simply inhabiting the book's intrinsically non-linear storyline?

**CM:** Yeah, it's definitely there. The chronology is this. So Bassam at 17-years old, he gets sent to prison for seven-years. While in prison, he becomes commander of the Fatah unit. And one afternoon, there's a documentary on the Holocaust on television and he watches it because, frankly, as he said, at that time, he wanted to watch Jewish people die, but as he watched it, his world got completely shifted and disrupted and he began to think in different ways. When he got out of prison at the age 24, he co-founded, along with a number of other Palestinians and Israelis, a very great organization called Combatants for Peace. And in that organization was Rami's son and Rami came along to a couple of meetings. It was, as you say... I don't know whether it's ironic tragedy but two-years later, after he had found the Combatants for Peace, that Bassam's daughter, Abir, was shot.

**JH:** It sounds like Rami, Bassam and their families were remarkably generous in sharing their story with you. What can you tell us about writing a non-fiction novel, not just about two people who are still living but two people who became dear friends to you and a big part of your life, as far as I can tell?

**CM:** Well, it was incredible. I went to them and I said, "Rami, Bassam, I would like to write a book about you guys," and they're like, "Okay." And I said, "Hold on a second." They said, "We've had lots of articles written about us. We've had great documentaries on us." I said, "But I'm not sure you really understand what I'm saying. I'm a novelist, I make things up. I approach it in a different way. I'm interested in the texture of the human heart, I'm not interested in the facts and figures. I want people to feel this experience. I want them to walk in the pulse of the moment." And they're like, "Okay." [chuckle] I said, "You know I'm gonna make stuff up, right?" And they're like, "Okay." And I said, "Can you explain that to me?" And they leaned to me and they both said, "We've had the worst thing ever happened to us. There's nothing that can be done to us that is worse than what has already happened to us. And even if you get a slice of that truth in the book, even if you only get a morsel of it, something good will come out of it. And we trust you and please go ahead." And they trusted me. I stayed with their families I traveled on Rami's motorbike, I walked through the checkpoints with Bassam, we walked to the hills, we

sat out under the Jericho Stars, we sang songs together, we ate together. It was an incredible experience and...

**CM:** I've written 10 books, and some books lived for a year or two, and then you sort of see them fade off in the background. And they don't always hang around your life. This particular book, I think I'm gonna be living with all my life, because it was sort of... It came to an apex for me in terms of what I wanted to say about stories, about storytelling, about faith, about conviction, about camaraderie, friendships and so on. It was an incredible journey, and I wouldn't swap a moment of it. Sometimes it got difficult. It's really difficult for Rami to read about himself walking into a morgue. For him to have to re-experience that through the book was a difficult thing, but they have both been incredibly generous about what the book says and what it does, and thankfully, they both said that it's an honest and real portrait. Even though I did change some things, I think the texture, the deep texture of the truth is there.

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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](http://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](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). O, 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:** I wanna switch gears a little bit and go back to what brought you to Israel-Palestine in the first place, and I wonder if your engagement with Israel-Palestine had anything to do with your experience in Ireland or your consciousness as an Irishman?

**CM:** Definitely. I grew up in Dublin. I grew up in suburban Dublin. It was a pretty safe background. However, both my parents came from very poor backgrounds, and my mother had come from Northern Ireland, and every summer I would travel with her up on a bus to a rural farm in County Derry, where I would stay for a couple of weeks each summer, and it was an incredible thing. I was going to a different land almost. I was going to an occupied place. We would stop... We would go through a checkpoint. The British soldiers would get on board the bus. The landscape changed, tensions changed. Some extended members of my family were involved in the struggle, and I was confused. I was confused by what was happening in Northern Ireland, and to tell you the truth, I'm still confused today.

**CM:** And one of the things that I truly believe is that we need to be able to say, "I am confused." We need to be able to say, "I don't know," because the disease of our time is the disease of certainty. When somebody comes along and say, "This is my truth. It is the only truth," or "I am correct and you are not," or "I am correct, and you can only come into my room if you look like me or sound like me or have the same faith as me." That is certainty, and it is dangerous. Whereas uncertainty or curiosity is so much braver, so much bigger, so much more faith-filled in fact. And I'm always reminded of Walt Whitman who said, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then. I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." And one of the things that I think we

have to re-embrace all around the world, but particularly in the United States, is our ability to say that there are so many more than one size, and there's so much more than one particular truth, and if we're gonna get anywhere, we need to, as Rami and Bassam say, we need to start understanding one another, 'cause if we don't understand each other now, we're gonna have to end up understanding each other six feet under.

**JH:** In the effort to understand each other, as you said, you need the curiosity to look, and I'm thinking of the Apeirogon. It seems to me like a circle insofar as it's got infinite sides, but in the circle imagery, I'm thinking of the Jewish version of what Walt Whitman said, which is, "When the Rabbis speak of Torah, they say, turn it and turn it, for everything is in it," and that obligation to constantly be looking at different angles. So here's our ongoing work in that. And unfortunately, we're stalled at the moment. As we record this conversation on May 13th of 2021, as we're speaking, missiles are flying between Gaza and Israel, and I'd like to ask you to share with us what you've learned or what you'd like to convey about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that actually encouraged you, against all odds

**CM:** What I wanted to get at in my pursuit of what's going on over there was the deep human truth that was behind an extraordinary friendship. And in fact, when you really look at it, behind so many, if not a vast majority of people, going to the West Bank, going to Tel Aviv, going to West Jerusalem, going to East Jerusalem, I came upon some of the most extraordinary generosity, some of the brightest people that I've ever come across anywhere in the world. And...

**CM:** There were people out there who were saying that that certain politicians did not speak for them, Netanyahu is not speaking for them, Hamas is not speaking for them. It's so much more complicated than that, and we cannot reduce it to simplicity, because simplicity enables stereotypes, stereotypes enable fear, fear enables violence, and violence begets grief. And so with all of these dominoes stacked up against one another, what we need are people who are brave enough to stand up and say, "No, we have to stop these missiles flying from Israel to Gaza." We have to speak out against some of the unspeakable things that are happening to people on the ground. People getting taken from their homes and their children being arrested, and things that are happening in front of our eyes. We need people like Rami and Bassam who have the courage of their convictions, who are on the right side of history to continue talking. I acknowledge that so much of this is happening on several different sites. I mean, there's great stuff happening with B'Tselem and Breaking the Silence, and organizations like that in Israel. And there are good people that I wish we could access.

**CM :**And we have to tell these stories over and over again. I love what you say about the Rabbi saying, "We have to turn it over, turn it over and look at the kaleidoscopic nature of all of this." If we look at the kaleidoscopic nature of this, we will begin to see the true nature of ourselves. And can this stuff cure things? People think you're sentimental when you say, yes. But I find that the cynics are sentimental. The cynics refuse to journey outside of themselves. I think the true optimist is a cynic? Yes. She or he knows how dark the world happens to be, but that's no great revelation. The great revelation comes when you're both way from the cynicism and you try and find some sort of common ground. And Rami and Bassam would say, "Elementally, we have a common humanity." That's not anything sentimental, that's a deep, deep, deep truth. And we need people around us, whether they be school kids, whether they be politicians, whether they

be people on the TV station or artists, tell them that story over and over and over again. And that's where the repair, Tikkun Olam comes about. That's where we access some of the great aspects of our character.

**JH:** Well, Colum McCann, thank you for being one of the artists who cracks open some of that light, and for the generosity of spending some time on this really lovely conversation with you, it's been an absolute pleasure, and I hope that we'll have other opportunities for our paths to cross.

**CM:** I hope so too, and thank you for the chance to speak with you. And keep up the good work, because people say that the world is knit together with the atoms or Quarks or whatever, but I actually think the world is knit together with stories, and it's people like yourself who give me and Bassam and Rami a chance to speak to the world that help legislate that. So that's deeply appreciated.

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