



## RABBI SERGIO BERGMAN: WORLD UNION FOR PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM

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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, where we're going to have the pleasure of a conversation with my friend and colleague, Rabbi Sergio Bergman. Since his ordination at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, Marshall Meyer of Buenos Aires in 1992, and again at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem in '93, Rabbi Bergman has served as a leading liberal rabbi in Buenos Aires, Argentina. As the National Deputy for the City of Buenos Aires, Bergman became the first rabbi in Argentina elected to a representative office, and he was subsequently appointed by President Mauricio Macri in 2015 to serve as the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development. He's the author of seven books, including the Civic Manifesto, which includes a foreword by Pope Francis, and he is the recipient of numerous awards. In 2020, Rabbi Sergio Bergman was appointed to serve as the president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Welcome Sergio, it's great to have you.

**Sergio Bergman:** Thank you so much, Josh.

**JH:** So let's start with where our work coincides most intensively, which is your new position at the World Union for Progressive Judaism. First of all, tell us what the World Union is and what it does.

**SB:** It's the global organization, the umbrella organization of the reform movement around world to connect and to link the progressive, liberal, reform and now, reconstructionist Jewish population living in different kind of congregations, countries, languages. Right now, 1.4 million reform, progressive Jews around more than 50 countries in the five continents.

**JH:** I wanna talk to you about how you think COVID has changed the situation for world Judaism, and maybe some of the opportunities it's offered.

**SB:** I have no doubts about the huge opportunities. We are resilient people, and we learn from every challenge how we can strength our identity and to take the good thing from the context and to keep going faithful to our values. And here, like you said, first of all, we need to raise the

question really, did COVID crisis bring the changes or the changes was there in a long process coming to us? And right now this is an acceleration of some process that we need really to take seriously right now, and also to learn from that. First of all, it's to celebrate life and to keep life and to be healthy, and to be sorrow about the number of deaths and people that get sick, and I think that is something important for us that is to have the conscious of the gift of life and to be healthy. In the other hand, technology streaming to use the good thing of technology and modernity to keep going with our traditions, and we immediately start to run the program Shabbat around the world, we became like a Jewish Netflix.

[chuckle]

**SB:** The people really can change, can change. It's not you change channels, you can change services, you are now open to go to every community in different places and also to enjoy for different approaches, leadership, ways to pray, to teach. And this is part of the richness, not only of the Jewish tradition, more important from our movement. We are a movement that need to move. We are reform because we need to reform, that means that these new contexts bring to us an opportunity to rethink what impact we will have in the reform, liberal agenda in the next years and how the new reality offer us an opportunity to change.

**JH:** I wanna ask you about an aspect of liberal Judaism around the world that is probably new, may be challenging to some of our American listeners, because in the United States, we tend to think of liberal Judaism in general, or reform Judaism in particular, as associated with certain assumptions such as egalitarianism and gay marriage, for example, just to name two. However, the diversity of the world union members sometimes challenges those assumptions about what liberal or progressive Judaism actually means. So, walk us through some of the differences in global definitions of what progressive liberal or reform means for the Jewish world.

**SB:** For me, this is interesting, how we can build a round table to offer to everyone a place and really to respect and to honor Jewish diversity. We need to listen each other and we need to learn, and to interchange from our experience because this is for me, the reason of became liberal, progressive Jews; the interaction with your society and the dialogue between the Jewish identity and the general context. And for me, this is part of our challenge is how to convince the North American leadership and congregations and Jews that you need to be more open mind, and more really flexible to include diversity in their reform movement and also from the margins on the periphery to say, "You are not alone." For me, the World Union is not an umbrella organization on the top, it must be on the back to support the people on the ground, because the real reform movement is on the ground, it's not in an office in Jerusalem or New York. It's not in a second-level federation. It's supporting our leaders, rabbis, cantor, professional, laypeople on the ground to say, "You are not alone, you are connected."

**SB:** And this is one of the reason what we have the world international conference, connections. [chuckle] This is the mission of the World Union, to make connections and to respect the diversity of the Jewish people. And you know it very well because you are part of this diversity. How the mind of our people change when you are in contact on the ground with different communities.

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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 [collegetcommons.huc.edu](http://collegetcommons.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 [collegetcommons.huc.edu](http://collegetcommons.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:** We've been using words like liberal quite a bit, so let's take the word and move from Jewish politics to global politics. What does it mean for a practicing rabbi to serve as the Minister of Environment for a nation of 45 million people that includes ecosystem spanning Antarctica, all the way to the tropics?

**SB:** Josh, it was, for me, the more challenging and more rabbinical task that I take ever. Even people ask me, "What are you doing? You are a rabbi. What are you doing here?" Like Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development. And I really, first of all, I need to explain that I have a background in science, because it's not so easy for someone that is a rabbi or have a training in social studies to become a Minister of Environment because you need, really, a technical knowledge. And my first degree was in Pharmacy and Biochemistry. That means I received my training in science. And then I moved to humanities and social studies, and then I became a rabbi, and then they made me crazy and I became a politician, but the last part, I can fix it. But this is part, for me, of the vision of our tradition, what means for us to be a light among the nations. It's not to be right and not to be over others, it's to serve the humankind and the people like an extended family. Because the Jewish tradition teach us that we don't need to help only the Jewish people, that we don't need to fix our small community on town. We are talking all the time shows about tikkun olam.

**JH:** Right, right.

**SB:** Really, we believe that tikkun olam, we can do it alone, and we can believe that we are the only ones that who can do it. And I think that when, really, we are inspired by the voice of the prophet of Israel, we have really a universal approach to these teachings, because it's something that we want to share. In this case, President Macri offered me a huge opportunity. It's like we are telling the story again of Noah, because climate change is the symptom, it's not the problem. Climate change is the alarm. Climate change is like the temperature, whether you have fever. But when you have fever, you need to dive deeper about what is going on here. An infection, you need some treatment, you need to go to the doctor because you have fever. Here the question is climate change, is the fever of the Earth. What is wrong? The only wrong thing that we have here is humanity, what we are doing with the world, what we are doing with the Earth, how we profane nature and how we need to change. That means you need, first of all, not to have higher politicians' discussion. First of all, you need to change habits, and the only way is education, and the only good news about this agenda is that the young people, our kids, they know it, and they lead us; how we produce, how we consume, how we became to be sustainable, how we recycle, how we use energy.

**SB:** All these things are really natural to our kids, because they are ready to change habits, and then we need to change the market and the politics and the international agreements. And for me, it's like we are reading the Torah about Noah. The people are discussing, "It's true, the climate change, it's the limit, it's the end, what's happening," but in the middle, you need to build the ark because the flood is coming. It's impossible to continue in this way behind the limits. And this is something that we need really to do, and this is a global agenda. I was really so excited about all the international conference. We signed the Paris Agreement, and I attended four of the conferences of the parts in the United Nations about climate change, meeting with people. The funny thing was, I met the Minister of Environment of Israel in the old synagogue in Marrakesh. And this is the kind of global partnership, how we can be together, committed of real, real and concrete tikkun olam. And this, for me, is something sacred. The beauty and the gift that is the nature and how we need to learn from the nature, I think that is amazing. And for me, it's not reading Torah, it's to become Torah in action.

**JH:** I wanna talk about Argentina in a different perspective now. You speak about human beings being the problem. Let's talk a little about a human problem in Argentina.

**SB:** Yeah.

**JH:** For those of you who don't know, Argentina is the largest Jewish community in all of Latin America with about 200,000 Jews, if I'm not mistaken. It's maybe the seventh largest Jewish community on the globe with a strong Zionist and Hebrew tradition, but it also has a complicated history. Many of our listeners, if they're my age or older, may have read the likes of Jacobo Timerman's Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number, or more recently, the Ministry of Special Cases by Nathan Englander. Both of which associate Argentina as repressive government of the late 1970s and early '80s with anti-semitism. And even closer to home, even more recently after democracy, the 1994 bombing of AMIA, which for our American listeners is the equivalent of the Jewish Federation, seemed to indicate that anti-semitism has deep and living roots in Argentina. How do you understand the situation in Argentina in relation to anti-semitism?

**SB:** This is really so painful for all of us, but also is a new evidence about Argentina, like a country of contradictions. Because Argentina is the same country that offered to my grandparents the opportunity to have a new life, of freedom, of hope. They really succeed to escape in the last ship coming from Europe, in the time that they lose all the family in the shore. They come down to far away, this is the bottom of the wall, Argentina, but they have a huge opportunity to be free and to grow kids and future and build communities like AMIA, the story of the immigrants, the Jewish immigrants, and also the Jewish gauchos that come to the country. In the other hand, you know it's the same country that in the Second War, they offered to the Nazis a home, like Eichmann that lives in Argentina. It's the same country. The two faces of the same coin, and this is for me the challenge that we have in Argentina, is to honor the past but to build a future with justice, and we need to continue on that. For me my personal story was, it changed my life.

**SB:** The bombing of AMIA changed my life because the same day that we're receiving in the hospital our third daughter, Tally, was the morning of the bombing of the AMIA. We come into the hospital with my wife, on Friday before Shabbat, and Monday morning, we leave the hospital with the baby. And I saw in the TV, in the same time, the bombing. And then I come back home

with my wife and the newborn baby, and I left them there, and I go immediately to the bombing place, it was terrible. And my work was, I stay there for five days in the morgue, in the recognition of the bodies. Two weeks later, we start in front the Supreme Court of Argentina. Social movement, what we call Memoria Activa, active memory, and with the pasuk, "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof. Justice, justice you shall pursue," we stayed there every Monday, at the same time that we have the bombing of the AMIA, to say, "Here we are, we know that maybe we don't have any concrete result, but this is our testimony and this is our civil action," not because it's a Jewish demand, it's an Argentinian universal demand, because was an attack against the Jewish community, but in an open space, in an open country with the right that everyone have to live, and this is something that the state of Argentina need to take care about the citizens.

**SB:** And then it was really 1994, was my first step to became a social activism and to come into politics. Josh, I don't make the decision in the first minute to became a politician, I make the decision to go out to the street after the bombing. And then I was there in the public space saying that we need also to make a clear decision. That is for me, one of the flags of the reform movement, to make the decision between integration and assimilation. We want to be integrated to the society, and we really fight against assimilation, but not because we close our mind, and we close our neighbor and our institution, because we don't want to live in a mental ghetto. We want to be really open, to share with the external society our values, our vision, our philosophy, our practices, our institution, but to make from the integration, not a risk to assimilate; an opportunity to enrich the society with the Jewish component.

**JH:** I wanna close our interview by taking advantage of your forward-looking personality and your stories, and ask you what your priority is, your one action item, a priority for your new presidency, looking forward to a time when you and I will be able to see each other again and hug each other in person, and move forward with the World Union in person.

**SB:** Education and leadership. Building a virtual platform to connect every reform, liberal, progressive shoe; to outreach more people, saying that we are not only a religion. I don't believe in streams. I honor and really support the reform, liberal, progressive, reconstructive movement that is interesting, it shows that we need all these categories to say what we are. If you need to say that you are reform, liberal, progressive, reconstructionist, this is for me a good thing because we are so wide and so open that you can be more inclusive, and then our challenge is to go forward to the non-affiliated shoes, because we are a cultural civilization and not only a religion. And you can use religion and streams like the paradigm to define Jewish people, because Jewish people don't fit that. And then we need also not to define ourself in negative ways because we are not Orthodox, because we are not this. No, no, we need to say in a positive way what we are offering to the new generations and what we are offering to secular shoes, that there are really reform. And they don't know, maybe. This is our challenge.

**JH:** Well, here's to your success and our partnership at the Hebrew Union College with you and personally as well. I look forward to seeing you soon and thank you for joining us. It was a pleasure to talk to you, Sergio.

**SB:** Thank you, Josh. And really, I appreciate the HUC, it was my Jewish academical house in Jerusalem. And I am so really honored to be a partner and to really offer to all of us how the HUC can become not only a North American institution, also a global institution with all the prestige and recognition they deserve, and also with a challenge to serve the world wide

network of the reform movement.

**JH:** Hear, hear. Abrazo fuerte. Thank you so much.

**SB:** Con cariño. Gracias.

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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](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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