DR. JOEL DIMSDALE: BRAINWASHING IN HISTORY (AND TODAY)

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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.

JH: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our episode with Dr. Joel Dimsdale. Dr. Joel Dimsdale is the Regent Edward A. Dickinson Emeritus Professor and distinguished Professor of Psychiatry Emeritus at the University of California, San Diego. He is editor-in-chief Emeritus of psychosomatic medicine, and he's been a consultant to the president's commission on mental health among any number of other national commissions. He's the author of over 500 publications including 'Anatomy of Malice, The Enigma of the Nazi War Criminals', which came out in 2016. And the topic of our discussion today, 'Dark Persuasion; The History of Brainwashing from Pavlov to Social Media', which came out this year in 2021, and both of these books came out from Yale University Press. Dr. Dimsdale, thank you so much for joining us on the Commons Podcast.

Joel Dimsdale: Thank you very much.

JH: I wanna start off with just an acknowledgement that brainwashing is a fascinating and mysterious topic. Tell us what brainwashing is and what it isn't, as you understand it.

JD: Brainwashing is a lurid, flamboyant term that conjures up all sorts of magic. It seems musty, cold war oriented, and somehow has a patina of bad science associated with it. That's partially true, and it has to do with the nature of the term more than its history. The term was actually coined in 1950 by a retired OSS propaganda agent, referring to what was going on during the Korean War. And all along experts have distrusted the term immensely. The rival term, and I think the better term, is coercive persuasion. But that's a little bit of a mouthful, so as a shorthand, I'll use the term brainwashing. I guess the essence of brainwashing is that it is a special variant of persuasion. There's a pronounced coercive element to the persuasion. I might persuade you to see a movie, or maybe I'll persuade you to read my book, but there's a voluntary aspect of that. I'm not trying to have you do something that is against your best interest. It may be in my interest, but it's not against your best interest as the target of the persuasion.

JD: When you look at the history and the key cases of brainwashing, at least to the 20th century, you see that it's invariably associated with some degree of isolation of the victim. The victim may be, in some cases a hostage, may be imprisoned, may have been sequestered away from his or her friends or family or other viewpoints. Today you find increasingly, people are isolating themselves through social media only consorting within their own bubble. So, they are relatively isolated from other viewpoints by definition. A second quality to brainwashing is that it is surreptitious. The person doing the coercion will resort to doing this in a indirect fashion. Where the person, the target, may not even be aware what's going on. Another clear manifestation that is commonly found in brainwashing is that it occurs under great stress.

JD: The progenitor of brainwashing was Pavlov during the Russian Revolution. Pavlov was a consummate shaper of behavior in his dogs. He was enormously skilled. He could train a dog to respond to a tone of C, but to ignore a tone of C-Sharp. It turned out that in the early part of the 20th century, the Neva River in St. Petersburg flooded, and Pavlov's dog labs were in the basement right next to the river. Now, I'm going off on a little bit of a tangent, but what I'd like to make clear is the impact of trauma and stress in the setting of behavior. In the context of the flood, the waters rose up so high in the basement that the dogs' crates were floating in the water and the water kept rising so that the dogs were barely able to keep their nostrils above the water level and they were clearly panicked. They were rescued at the last moment.

JD: And Pavlov observed something very peculiar. They were never the same after that. They had forgotten all of the careful behavioral conditioning that Pavlov had performed on them with such meticulous care. And secondly, their dispositions themselves changed, those that were previously aggressive became submissive, etcetera. So, Pavlov started getting very interested in issues of trauma on behavior and memory. So, I think what you find in most instances of coercive persuasion that there is a profound degree of threat or trauma involved in the situation and finally, there is a degree of sleep manipulation. Contemporary research has done a lot on the effects of sleep deprivation on behavior and thinking, and it doesn't have to be total sleep deprivation, even partial or four hours a night sleep deprivation is enough to make clear differences in our thinking abilities. So these are ingredients that are frequently found in a setting of coercive persuasion.

JH: You begin your history of brain washing proper with Pavlov as you just indicated, and we'll return to him in a minute, but of particular interest to this podcast, which often delves into Jewish history, is the unholy relationship between torture, coercion, coercive persuasion, or if indeed appropriate brainwashing, as you're proposing for shorthand, this troubling relationship among those things in the history of ideological and religious conversion. I think it's fair to say that the poster child for this kind of brainwashing in the pre-modern period is the inquisition. And so, I'd like to ask you to tell us a little bit about the inquisitions techniques and how they relate to pre-Pavlovian coercion and persuasion?

JD: If one looks at the antecedence of coercive persuasion, there are two paths that unfortunately intersect and that is religious conversion and torture. When one looks at the inquisition, it's regrettably the case of there are many inquisitions and it's difficult to say, "Okay, the inquisition did this." It depended on the inquisitor, the country, the time. What's clear,

however, is that there were techniques used in the inquisition that are intriguingly sophisticated. I always thought the inquisition was hot irons and ripping of flesh and dislocating shoulders, etcetera. That was part of the inquisition, but an enormous part of the inquisition was the terror and uncertainty and remorselessness of the effort. Good inquisitors are not impatient. Indeed, they would summon someone in for questioning and then release them, but the person knew herself that she was a target, so that she would do her own psychological torture in her own marinating of anxiety wondering when the inquisition would call her back, what they were calling her about. Frequently, the inquisition wouldn't even do that, wouldn't even inform people what they were charged with.

JH: So, the inquisition typically used a great amount of patience with people. I guess in terms of conversion and torture, that's a kind of a interesting, and again, complex situation. You can torture someone, but does that change his belief? You may be able to extract information from a torture victim, although there's a fair amount of unreliability about that, but does that really change the way the person believes. I think when one thinks of brainwashing, the sense is that one is changing the victim's belief about something, forcing the victim to adopt a new perspective. There is continuing debate about whether torture, per se, changes opinions or belief. Furthermore, some people are refractory to torture, they have very high pain tolerance, and some people will say anything to avoid the torture and that's a problem for the interrogator, because someone may confess to something, someone may start telling outlandish stories just trying to guess what will extract him from the torturer's grip.

JH: Before we move on to some of the more contemporary questions, I'd like to linger a bit in the past or more broadly in the human condition. I'd like to take a step back from the coercive persuasion itself, the act, and ask you just to muse for a moment on a broader human question, which is, what does it say about a religion or any ideological proposition if it feels the need, internally motivated, to persuade at all? I can understand why in a war, you capture someone and you may wanna persuade them and you may coerce because it's a war and there's information. But fundamentally, what does it say about us that we're willing to deploy some of these related techniques that are so harmful to persuade someone of something which fundamentally doesn't impinge on us?

JD: So, when you think of conversion efforts and the responses to conversion efforts, it's very interesting historically. Some people will resist any effort on pain of their own death at conversion, some people will convert solely out of expediency, some people are only nominally religious in the first place, so converting to one aspect of outward behavior to a different one of outward behavior isn't particularly troublesome to them. Then there are the people who are converted, who truly do change their religious belief, they find... A new belief seems to suit them better. So, why do we try to convert people or not try to convert people? Historically, when ideas of church and state were tightly intertwined, it was just natural, you did what the ruler did, you believed what he told you to believe. Going back to Constantine, it's pretty clear that the state-mandated conversions were taking place all the time. Did it make any difference to Constantine? What did he in his inner marrow think he was doing when he converted his empire to Christianity? I don't know how we can answer that. What does it mean today when one group tries to convert another group, state politics aside?

JD: I believe there are some groups that have it in their inner core religious beliefs that they must convert. If you look at Jehovah's Witnesses, they believe that they must go out and confront any number of adversities to bring their views to strangers' understanding and to convert them. But I think there's a second quality of motivation, and that is when we are a little uncertain ourselves, we try to amplify our religious beliefs and we may be trying even harder to reach out and change others to our own religious beliefs, partly because of our own anxieties and uncertainties about the nature of our religious conviction.

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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 wanna move forward in time, launch ourselves into the 20th century and really begin where you begin in the meat of the matter, which is as you referred to earlier in the interview, the personality and the career of Pavlov. So, tell us a little bit about Pavlov. Why do we associate him in popular culture with salivating dogs, and what does that have to do with brainwashing?

JD: Pavlov was a Nobel Laureate in Medicine and Physiology. His genius was to understand the inside inner workings of the body and how those inner workings of digestion in particular were influenced by behavior and learning. Pavlov was a brilliant feisty physician. He was actually rather apolitical, he had no patience for tsarist Russia, but he also had no great love for the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks put up with him because he was Russia's only Nobel Laureate in Medicine and he was extraordinarily world-renowned, they were afraid he might flee Russia, which would be a terrible propaganda loss for Russia, but also there were certain aspects of Soviet ideology which were oddly consonant with Pavlov. Pavlov was a materialist. He didn't believe in the soul, he didn't believe there was some deity. He thought our lives were lived, we responded, we were no different from a dog or any other animal, and he also believed that behavior could be shaped, that it wasn't immutable.

JD: This letter aspect greatly appealed to Lennon. Lennon made a site visit to Pavlov and it wasn't just a photo-op. He stayed visiting with Pavlov for hours and asking Pavlov if it was possible to apply his techniques to help the Communist Party shape the new Russian people so that they would flourish in the context of communism and Pavlov said, "Yes, it was possible." And with that Lennon, essentially blessed Pavlov, gave him an institute and staffed the institute with 357 people working with Pavlov. And you have to keep in mind, this was in the early days of Soviet Union when famine was striking Russia, where poverty was so extreme. Lennon and later Stalin were very supportive of Pavlov, they felt that somehow the work he was doing would help them promote the successful communist state.

JH: Did Pavlov scruple at this lavishing of resources, either on the human basis of getting things that other people weren't getting or on the ideological basis of supporting a government he didn't really support?

JD: I think Pavlov, like any successful researcher today who was very artful at grantsmanship, and I suspect he made his peace with his institute and all his postdocs and all his staff and all the wealth that was lavished upon his research enterprise. To his dying day, he wasn't an ardent communist in any way, but he kept his mouth shut and his work continued. I think where it gets interesting is looking for evidence that Stalin really listened to what Pavlov was doing, and here the historical record is very hazy. When one looks at the show trials, one sees hints of what Pavlov was studying, one sees hints of sleep deprivation of the old Bolsheviks while they were awaiting trial. One sees the terror, of course, that was always present in any torture situation. One sees the isolation of the victim, and one sees certainly profound, almost ecstatic religious renunciations of past sins that were ludicrous that you'd have cabinet ministers confessing to things that it couldn't have been possible and begging to be shot, that they don't deserve to share oxygen with the great Soviet people and wishing to be punished. So one certainly saw extremely unusual behavior on the part of the show trial victims, but can you prove that that's Pavlov? I think that's a tall order. The issue is more, what are the circumstances that render somebody more liable to such profound behavior change, and that brings me back to the circumstances that seem to be involved in coercive persuasion.

JH: Some of those circumstances are absent in some of the aspects of brain washing that you consider looking to the future. In the last chapter of your book, you think about what the future holds. And so I wanna ask you what you see is some of the most probable scenarios for coercive persuasion or influence peddling that we're likely to see roughly in our lifetimes.

JD: Well, here we are, we have finished the first 20% of the 21th century and certainly, the things that strike me are the advances in neuroscience and the developments in social media. And I suspect that these two streams of progress will certainly inform future efforts in coercive persuasion, they can't help but do that. So what do I mean about changes in neuroscience? Many of the ideas in coercive persuasion research that were developed in the late '50s and early '60s revolved around concepts of brain and behavior, even to the extent of direct neural stimulation. In the 1960s, in New Orleans, a psychiatrist, Dr. Heath was brilliant, famous and sometimes regarded as notorious for his work on brain stimulation. He took, basically, hopelessly ill patients and tried to change the way they thought and responded to the world. In one case, there was a man with severe narcolepsy in which he was unable to work because he had these sudden sleeping spells where he would just collapse to the ground and his life was in shambles.

JD: So he instrumented various parts of his brain and gave the patient a little stimulator so that he could try out for himself whether stimulation of any of these areas in his brain could help him with wakefulness. The patient pushed one button, and it resulted in something so aversively painful, that the patient actually broke the button to make sure that he never would push that

button again. But then he discovered the patient pushed another button, and found it so intensely pleasurable that he alerted and became awake. And whenever he felt a narcoleptic about to hit, he would push that button, which was able to abort the sleep attack, and he was able to work. Now, all of this work was done in the 1960s. The surgery was arduous, relatively coarse, somewhat risky, and needless to say, in 60 years, the surgical techniques have gotten much better. We use these deep brain stimulators as a matter of routine for certain conditions. People with severe Parkinson's disease get some relief from the motor spasm by electrodes implanted in a certain part of the brain. It is possible that one could imagine more a governmental brainwashing or coercive persuasion efforts that would target certain areas of the brain in an effort to try to extract information or to persuade people to take on another view. From a viewpoint of persuading and changing, one can see that there are some opportunities in direct brain stimulation.

JD: I think, obviously, the question is, is that reasonable? Is that ethical? Those are challenging questions. Science has a checkered history in terms of its ability to keep ethical concerns in the forefront. There are many other areas in neuroscience that suggests some directions that one might follow or slip into unwittingly in the areas of coercive persuasion. But I think for me, I'm perhaps more exercised and alarmed by the potentials in social media. The amount of disinformation and bullying that is going on on social media is breathtaking. And there is a surreptitious quality to social media in terms of the algorithms that the sites put forward. The way they shape our behavior put us in touch with other people who share that behavior, feed us information that supports our ideas already. This starts to be certainly coercive and certainly surreptitious. Now, is social media used in the context of massive stress and trauma the way Pavlov argued was necessary in brainwashing? We're probably not. But if one starts through social media to believe all sorts of conspiracy theories that sound very threatening, there is a profound amount of stress and trauma that the conspiracy holders have. I think there's some big challenges that await us as a culture.

JD: Social media is like a new addicting drug, and cultures have always been vulnerable to contagions from new drugs. It takes a long time for us to learn how to regulate. We're still struggling with drinking and driving, and drinking has been around for a long, long time. I think we're struggling with this issue of social media. And it's interesting to see that we're struggling with it no matter what one's political convictions are.

JH: Tell us one thing or lesson that you learned in writing this book that completely surprised and engrossed you.

JD: Brainwashing is not something musty and old. Coercive persuasion goes on all the time. You see it in forced confessions. You see it in cults. Indeed, maybe what got me started on this was that my neighbors killed themselves in a massive suicide cult called Heaven's Gate. When cults do some awful thing long ago and far away, it's relatively easy to closet that off, sequester that, ignore it, but when it happens in your neighborhood, it makes you stand up and pay attention. People ask me, well, how does this relate to my other book, which was about the Nuremberg war criminals, and interestingly, in the book, 'Anatomy of Malice', what I tried to do was to understand the behaviors, not so much of the perpetrators, but of the orchestrators of Nazi Germany. And I started getting interested in this question of, "Well, what about the German

people? What about all those people who were taken in? Was that all propaganda? Were they inherently fanatics about anti-Semitism or were they in some way brainwashed?"

JD: And then I started musing about, "What a crazy term brainwashing is, and where did it come from?" And so that's what I got involved in, that's the genesis of this project. I still believe that brainwashing is not musty, not old, not necessarily bad science or bad scientists, it's something that we have to confront for the rest of this century.

JH: Well, I wanna thank you for highlighting the ongoing relevance of this issue, particularly in the social contexts of very, very pertinent issues we face such as you yourself cited with forced confessions, a matter for human rights, but also the fabric of a democracy and social media, also touching on key democratic and social issues. And in general, for sharing your time with us on this fascinating conversation. Joel Dimsdale, it was really a pleasure, thank you.

JD: Thank you very much for your interest.

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