DR. JONATHAN SARNA:
COMPETING OR COMPLEMENTARY? AMERICANS AND JEWS

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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. Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, and this episode where we will have the pleasure of a conversation with Professor Jonathan Sarna. Jonathan D Sarna is University Professor and Joseph H and Bell R Braun Professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, where he directs the Schusterman Center for Israel studies. He also chairs the Academic Advisory and editorial board of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish archives of the Hebrew Union College. And he also served as Chief Historian of the National Museum of American Jewish history in Philadelphia. Author or editor of more than 30 books on American Jewish history, Dr. Sarna counts among our pre-eminent scholars in the field. And he has joined us to discuss his new book, Coming to Terms with America from the Jewish Publication Society. Jonathan Sarna thank you so much for joining us on the Commons Podcast.

Jonathan Sarna: Thank you. Really a joy to be with you.

JH: To frame our conversation, I'd like to begin where you begin the book itself, that is wrestling with the idea that there is no "Coming to Terms with America" to be had at all. Rather, the idea that our very notion of Americanism and our very idea of Judaism are in fact both defined such that one need never come at the expense of the other. And what I'd like to ask you is this, would you agree that most of us are raised with that idea as an axiom, even if, as we'll talk about in a minute, scholarly analysis reveals a more complicated reality.

JS: I think many American Jews were raised with the notion well articulated even by Louis Brandeis, that there is no contradiction between being a Jew and being an American, that if you are a better Jew, you are thereby a better American. That was a very comforting notion. It certainly has important elements of truth in it, but at the same time, it is, I think, very important to understand that there is a tension between being Jewish and being American. And every American Jew who is honest with him or herself has felt that tension.

JS: Yom Kippur, at the day of atonement pulled me in one direction, and my job or something else similar pulled me in the other direction. These are tensions that are commonplace to Jews, and rather than pretending they didn't exist, part of what I've tried to do in this book is indeed talk about collisions between America and Jew, between Jews and Christians. How do we live in two worlds? And yet I've also tried to suggest that we're also greatly strengthened by these challenges that over and over again, we emerge from struggles of this kind stronger than before.

JS: It may not be literally possible to achieve the ideal synthesis between American and Jew that we would like, but there's no harm in making the effort. And even as we know that it won't fully succeed, and of course, it has become easier and easier to live in two worlds, just think of the impact of the five-day week and how much easier that made it for all Jews to observe the Jewish Sabbath. It had this major impact and ended what had been several hundred years where many Jews had to struggle within themselves. "Do I observe the Sabbath at the risk of losing my job or do I work on Saturday?" Once we had a five-day week, those issues changed and the tension that had been so important ceased to be, but the notion of tension and the reality of tension is I think an important one for Jews to think about. And it's easy to show how throughout American Jewish history Jews have had to grapple with the complexities of living both as Jews and as Americans.

JH: Let's take some of those directions from the historians perspective. Judaism has in some way tested the enlightenment proposition that citizenship can be defined in ways that obviate the religious test and rely rather on criteria such as location of birth, rule of law, national loyalty, sometimes language, etcetera. From the historical perch, share an example of how the American Jewish experience has lived up to that ideal. And another example of how it has failed to do so.

JS: When one looks at many of our leading American Jews, one can often see both. Let's take the first American Jew who really thinks that he can make it politically. He's American-born, he has big aspirations. Some may know the name, Mordecai Manuel Noah. He once had an idea for a Jewish colony near Grand Island, New York, that got him into history books, but he's very significant. He runs for office, he's editor of major newspapers, he produces very important theater, he's an important Jacksonian Era politician, but at the same time we know that when Mordecai Noah did run for sheriff, he wasn't only opposed for political reasons by opponents who said, "No, we disagree with his policies. We think that he'll be too strict as a sheriff or incompetent." No. They attacked him as a Jew.

JS: Maybe as sheriff, he will have to hang Christians. And what would it mean they asked, if a Jew were hanging a Christian. Mordecai Noah, by the way, had a good comeback. He said, "What kind of Christian needs to be hung at all?" But leaving that aside, what is interesting is that the Jewish issue that was brought in as if to observe this man as an outsider, he's not a good Christian like you and me.

JS: I could also give examples with Louis Brandeis, the great lawyer known from one side of the country to the other as "The People's Attorney", but when he is appointed by Woodrow Wilson to the Supreme Court, it is easy to see antisemitism in the responses to him and some of the discussion connected to his confirmation and in some of the private correspondence of major lawyers and law professors of the time. So it's both. One the one hand, yes a Jew can... In Brandeis's case, ascend to the Supreme Court, what an amazing thing and what a role model he was. And let's remember a Jew who in the middle of his life had become deeply committed to Zionism and to the Zionist idea and to saving the Jewish people through Zionism. And at the same time, he certainly... Throughout his life, even before his confirmation, he knew that he suffered as a Jew. There were various clubs in the Boston area that blackballed him, not because they thought he was a bad lawyer or incompetent, but simply on account of his religion.

JH: On the positive note, let's remember that Noah was indeed elected. He managed to recumb those accusations that he had.

JS: Yes, Noah is elected and Noah certainly was very successful. And what's very interesting about Noah, I wrote a book once about him, is that whereas some in the enlightenment in Europe really thought that in order to succeed, you would have to be a Jew at home and a person on the street, meaning your Judaism was totally private. Actually everybody knew that Noah was Jewish. He never changed his name with a name like Mordecai Noah, but more importantly, he was a leader of the synagogue, he was the head for years of leading Jewish philanthropic organizations in New York, he was toastmaster at various Jewish events, he gave major Jewish addresses.

JS: He was both. And he didn't feel that he had to just be a Jew at home. And I would say that one of the most interesting elements of America has been the fact that increasingly, non-Jews are happy when they see Jews being Jewish. Think of the amazing fact that the first Jew nominated as vice president, Joseph Lieberman, was well known as an Orthodox Jew and talked a lot about his religion. Not everyone liked Joe Lieberman, but what interested me was the visibility of his Jewishness from the very moment that he was nominated. So different from the model of, be a Jew at home, let's keep religion in the private domain and the public domain, we're all human beings together and religious displays are forbidden.

JS: By the way, to this day, that is a difference say between how the French view the relationship of religion and state, where it is very much that religion should be a private affair, that's one of the reasons that they didn't like head scarves worn in the street, and the American view, which has never legally accepted that idea, and which indeed was willing to accept religion in the public square, and indeed some of the Supreme Courts decisions concerning the Hanukkah menorah saying that menorahs and Christmas trees, of course, were permitted in the public square were very different than the model of keeping religion totally private.

JS: So those are different models, and it took American Jews a long time, I think, to come and appreciate some of the differences of America, and it's a constant negotiation. New issues arise and new debates arise, and those end up redefining America, and sometimes, as in the case of Hanukkah, also redefining American Jewish life and American Judaism. Hanukkah was a much

less important holiday to our ancestors than it is today, and that has something to do with the fact that Hanukkah could stand opposite Christmas in the American calendar and give Jewish children the sense that I'm different, but I'm also similar. I'm part of the great winter celebrations, but I'm also apart from the Christian students who celebrate and observe Christmas.

JH: I have to ask you since I have you, about Louis Brandeis who in some traditionally anti-Semitic context, when he received some award and had a bully pulpit for a moment, is reported to have said he regrets having been born a Jew, to which everyone applauded thinking that he was renouncing his Judaism, and then he continued, "Because I was denied the privilege of converting to it." Have you heard that story? Is it apocryphal?

JS: I do not remember it in the case of Brandeis, but the same quote is attributed to quite a few people. So the quote may well have happened and it's later applied to various people. The beauty of the quote was that we should view it as a privilege in the best sense, a privilege that comes with obligations, but yes, a privilege to be Jewish. And just like many of us remember when African-American leaders, "Black is Beautiful," they said, they wanted young African-Americans to be proud of who they were, so I think we have succeeded in making lots of American Jews proud of being Jewish. And one of the most striking features of the Pew Report is that vast numbers of Jews were proud to be Jewish.

JS: Just contrast that to what was the case in the 1920s, we have one of the most famous Jewish scholars of the 20th century, Harry Wolfson, the great professor at Harvard University. But as a young man, he wrote in the Menorah Journal, "Some people are born blind, some deaf, some lame, some Jewish," as if Judaism is a disability rather than something to be proud of. I actually think that American Jews can trace how much easier it is to be a Jew in America today, and how much progress we, in a sense, have made by the fact that it's almost unimaginable today for someone to echo that Wolfson quote, that Jewish, it's as if I'm blind or deaf or lame. And I think an earlier generation did sometimes view it as a misfortune generation after generation. That's an ongoing obligation to make sure that Jews are both proud of it and understand what that heritage means.

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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 to one of your chapters on your hometown of Boston, which is an interesting interlude into American Jewish history, one that I think most, at least non-Bostonian Jews don't necessarily think about. You raise an interesting point, an argument, namely that as a city, Boston's leadership in establishing superior institutions of learning inspired concomitant ambition among Boston's Jews. And so is it too much to say that the Boston Jewish experience

is seminal to our American Jewish sense of being a proverbial model minority when it comes to education?

JS: One of the things that made Boston comfortable for Jews was its enormous stress on learning. It was the Athens of America. Bostonians were very, very proud of that stress on learning. And there was a great library, and there was Harvard, and there was Boston Latin School. And it's easy to show how the same was true in the Jewish community. We mentioned Louis Brandeis. One of the reasons that Louis Brandeis was revered among Boston Jews was that he was so incredibly smart. He had the highest average ever at Harvard University, even though he was really one of its youngest graduates. And that was something Jews resonated to. And similarly, Jewish education in Boston focused in the same way, on learning and on educating the smartest. And it's no accident. I teach at Brandeis University. The Brandeis University was founded in Boston. There was a sense that the values of Boston would make Brandeis succeed in the Boston area in a way that it might not have been able to succeed in certain other locales.

JS: So I call that chapter reconciling Athens and Jerusalem, Athens being the values of Athens, Jerusalem being the Jewish values. And how many in Boston tried to bring together learning and secular learning and the ideas that were associated with being a great Bostonian with Jewish learning and Jewish values? And I would say for those not living in Boston, I'm struck how many American-Jewish communities have local cultures. And you can see how the local culture of the community shaped Jewish life. That's true in Cincinnati, where I also have a chapter, and it's true in Philadelphia, and it's true in San Francisco. And true in many other communities where the culture of place shaped Jewish culture as well. And it's a reminder that Jews are part of the place. Jews are affected by their surroundings. We can't just understand American Jews through a Jewish lens, we need to understand them from an American lens as well. And I've really spent my whole life really insisting that no matter what you study, you discover that you end up looking at both the American lens and the Jewish lens, and learning from both literatures. I hope that really comes through in the volume.

JH: So I'd like to revert to the question of intellectual life in particular. This podcast is produced, as our listeners know, by the Hebrew Union College, which was the first Jewish seminary in the United States, which was followed relatively in short order by the Jewish Theological Seminary, which you describe at length in this book. Now, both seminaries were founded in the late 19th century when another great movement, namely Modern Zionism was also taking shape. And so I wanted to ask if you think that the intellectual ambition of the late 19th century, which aimed to elevate the United States to an intellectual center for Judaism, did it compete at all with Ahad Ha'am's contemporary movement of cultural Zionism, which aimed to move that center of gravity to the land of Israel?

JS: It's really a wonderful question. What's I think so fascinating is that both of these developments were, as you say, going on at the same time. And both at the Hebrew Union College and even more the Jewish Theological Seminary, there certainly were significant scholars who were Zionists. And then as I mentioned here, Louis Brandeis, who was a leader of American Zionism. And there are a few things to remember. The most important, which we rarely point out is that everybody knew that there was deep anti-immigrant feeling in America.

And you had a series of immigrant restrictive laws culminating in the Johnson Act of 1924, but that was only the last of a series. And what that meant is that everybody understood that vast numbers of Jews could never make it to America. And that's why you had this curious outsider's phenomena, "American Jews support Zionism? But they don't make aliyah. They don't move there themselves. Louis Brandeis visited once."

JS: Isn't that hypocritical? No, "We were lucky," they said. "We made it to America, we won the lottery." But that doesn't mean that we forget about the millions of other Jews left behind, who were suffering, who were persecuted, who can't come to America. And the Zionist project for many of them was indeed for those other Jews. Now, the Zionist project, especially in its European context, talked about Zion becoming the homeland for all Jews, and that everyone should come to Zion, and negated as they said the diaspora. But what is so striking, is how little of that is found in American Zionism.

JS: Go through the most important Zionist organization, which actually is Hadassah, and it's the women's organization, you won't find a lot of talk that all the women should get ready to move to Zion. Yes, Henrietta Szold and a few others did, but it's mostly we have to support Zionism for other people, and to save other people, to help other people, it's almost like Christian missionaries, for the less fortunate. And that's really what American Zionism was largely about, a philanthropic project, also was a cultural project, I think there was an idea that the intellectual religious center to be built in Zion, would positively impact upon America, but it is worth recalling that another great Jewish thinker, Simon Rawidowicz, who actually taught at my university, argued for a different model than classical Zionism.

JS: He argued for a two-center model, a Babylon and Jerusalem, just like in the Rabbinic period, it was Bavel and Yerushalayim, Babylon and Jerusalem, so he argued we need a great diaspora center, America, and a great Zion center perhaps in Jerusalem, and that the interplay between these two centers, each influencing, fructifying, competing in the best sense with the other, would be the best possible result for the Jewish people. The amazing thing is, Rawidowicz has been dead for 60 years, but today his model is closer to realization than it ever was before.

JS: More than 80% of world Jewry, do live either in the land of Israel or in North America, and the great cultural centers are in those two places, and his two-center model, I think, is a model that has emerged and is continuing to strengthen as we see lesser centers of Jewish life, in Europe, in Latin America, as we see them fade. By the way, Rawidowicz said something else, which was very smart, which is that every Jewish community should imagine that the whole fate of the Jewish people rests on its shoulders, historians later will say, "Nah, actually it was on every community, that others did it." But if every community assumes it's our responsibility, that he said, would really ensure that Jewish life would continue. And the amazing thing is, even in our day, there are all sorts of wonderful Jewish ideas that come from fairly obscure corners of the world.

JS: Limmud came from London, Moishe House came from Santa Barbra, places you wouldn't imagine gave us ideas that have shaped the contemporary American Jewish community. I always think of Rawidowicz's notion, every Jewish community can make an impact on the whole of Jewish life.

JH: I wanna close with a broader question by going out of the United States to Israel Zangwill, who coined the term "melting pot", in relation specifically to the Jewish-American experience, even though the term melting pot actually outgrew the Jewish experience to reflect the American identity itself in some ways. And as such, I think Zangwill illustrates the unique power of the outsider's insight, a little bit like a kind of Jewish Tocqueville. So though not central to your book, have non-American Jewish perspectives on the American Jewish experience, shaped your understanding or framed some of your questions, not perhaps just in this book, but throughout your career?

JS: First of all, I'm glad you recall Zangwill. Of course, he knew America very well as you point out, because the Jewish Publication Society really published his first bestseller. It was actually the first Jewish bestseller in American history, and The Children of the Ghetto, and Melting pot. I think some of those ideas go back to another foreigner, Crevecoeur. Crevecoeur and his letters to an American farmer right after the American Revolution, expresses some of the same ideas. But Zangwill gives them a term and creates a play that everybody knows. And as you point out, I think, Horace Kallen perhaps less well known than Zangwill but his notion of cultural pluralism is closer to the view that most Americans, at least most American Jews have today. Not that we're all going to melt into something else and lose our identity, but that we can be a symphony. Meaning we retain our own identity, but we are more beautiful, we sound better when we play with lots of other groups in a great symphony of America.

JS: Now have I personally been influenced? Absolutely. I was very fortunate to have a dual training in American History. I have a PhD in American History from Yale but I also had a very strong Jewish training and have an MA in Jewish studies from Brandeis and from the Hebrew College and Mercaz HaRav Kook in Jerusalem. And I don't think I could do what I do were I not the heir of both traditions. And I have frequently found that knowing both and the ability to draw both from Jewish sources and from American sources really enriched my scholarship and allowed me to understand things that I never would have been able to understand had I just been trained in American history or just been trained in Jewish studies.

JS: I could give examples, I once worked on How Matzah Became Square. Unfortunately, it didn't fit into this book, hopefully in the next book but it's published elsewhere. But the story of machine-made Matzah and how it won acceptance not only in America, but worldwide. And the role of Manoshevitz. Well I needed Jewish history to understand that and Jewish law. But it's a very American story, not so different in some ways to other brands, say Procter & Gamble and I have to draw on both sets. I have a new article coming out with Professor Zeb Ellis on the history of the etrog, the citron trade.

JS: Well that's a Jewish story. Jews use citrons and etrogim for the holiday of Sukkot. But it's an economic story and it's an agricultural story. Where do etrogim grow and how do they move and how did war cut off a certain import and so on? And so one really needed to use both. And I do think that, first of all, scholars need a dual training in addition I think American Jews need to think about how they are part of both of those stories and how these stories intersect.

JH: The story of Matzah leads me to a volume edited by my colleague, Professor Leah Hochman here at the Hebrew Union College called Tastes of Faith. And one of the articles by our colleague and friend, Rabbi Jeffrey Marx is called Eating Up: The Origins of Bagels and Lox, which raises all kinds of similar questions. It's a delight unto itself about the American experience of what we call Jewish food but that's a plug for people to follow up on. Please also pick up the book Coming to terms with America from our guest, Dr. Jonathan Sarna with whom it was an absolute pleasure to talk. Jonathan, thank you so much for taking the time and for the conversation which was as pleasurable as it was illuminating.

JS: Well thank you. Thank you for inviting me and really a delight to be with you.

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