



## RABBI HELEN PLOTKIN: LEARNING JEWISH/BEING JEWISH

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**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast: passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, dean of HUC's Skirball Campus, and your host.

**JH:** Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast where we're going to have a conversation with Rabbi Helen Plotkin. Rabbi Plotkin is co-founder of the Beit Midrash at Swarthmore College, where she taught courses in biblical Hebrew and classical Hebrew texts for 20 years. She's the Founder and Director of Mekom Torah, a learning project committed to a vision of Judaism as a culture of learning in which study is not a preparation for Jewish life, it is Jewish life. And she teaches courses at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, writes for online journals including Tablet Magazine, and she's editor and annotator of the recent book, *In This Hour*, Heschel's Writings in Nazi Germany and London Exile, which came out in 2019 from the Jewish publication society. Rabbi Plotkin, thank you for joining us on the Commons Podcast.

**Helen Plotkin:** Thank you for having me.

**JH:** I'd like to begin our conversation by setting the stage for *In This Hour*. Heschel wrote these thought pieces and vignettes in a very particular context. What was going on in history and in his life, and what does that mean for our understanding of the writings themselves?

**HP:** These writings, for the most part, were written in Berlin in 1936 and 1937 when the Nazis were rising to power very rapidly and when Jewish life was well nigh impossible. Heschel wrote these for a Jewish newspaper, the *Gemeindeblatt*, that had the ear of the Jewish community. And he framed a lot of his columns in that newspaper as historical pieces teaching about ancient Jewish topics. Some things about holidays and how to

practice them, but the main section of this book is a set of essays about ancient rabbis of Talmudic times. So you might ask, "What was Heschel doing writing about that in this particular historical moment?"

**HP:** Well, he had been involved in creating something called the Lehrhaus with Rosenzweig and Buber and teaching in this Lehrhaus, the House of Learning. And he drew a parallel between the House of Learning in Germany and the Beit Midrash in the time of the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem and the re-invention of Judaism around that. He was involved in this because he and his colleagues felt that the Jewish community could only be saved if it reclaimed its Jewish culture and its Jewish text and learning culture in particular. At the same time as he was worrying about the wellbeing of his community and realizing how tragic and difficult it was, he felt that it was very important not to let go of and find modern and understandable ways to connect with the ancient traditions as well, so those are some of the articles that we've published in this book.

**JH:** I love the description of Mekom Torah, the learning project that you founded, as being, "Built around a radically ancient vision of Jewish learning. Participation in learning is not a preparation for Jewish life, it is Jewish life." And I love it, because frankly, it suits me well, I'm a professor, and it's pretty obvious. But more importantly, it suits Heschel, who says, "The pursuit of Jewish texts and shared learning and the path to one's own Jewish life are a function of life, a question of Jews being or not being." What does he mean, and what does that credo mean to you?

**HP:** That quote is really at the heart of this book and at the heart of my work. The Jewish world has encountered upheaval countless times, and what has always remained constant is shared learning, the commitment to making the ancient texts current. It has happened in every generation. Where Heschel begins his book is with a version of that that happened in the first century CE. Everything you could possibly have understood as Judaism was destroyed, was overthrown. The temple was the center, the beating heart of Judaism. And what Heschel looks back at in the essays on the rabbis that make up the core of this book, he actually talks about the myth of learnedness, that they said Judaism is not going to be about sacrifice any more. Why? Because it can't be, because the temple has been destroyed. So what are we gonna do that is the new center? We're going to interact with the texts, we're going to study the texts together, we're going to figure out how to kind of wear the texts as the clothing of our lives. Everything about Halakha is really about acting out...

**HP:** Text, acting out the Torah, acting out the Talmud, acting out Jewish learning, but it's the learning that's really the core and it's the shared learning that's really the core. And when he describes the invention of that in the first century, he describes it in a way that makes it so clear that he's hoping to create that same kind of relationship with the text in the world he lives in. So he's in Nazi Germany, the Judaism of the Jews around him has become thin. But what he tries to do is say, Look what we have to do as a community is stand in our current situation where we are and learn the text from that point of view, learn them with authenticity and with love, and with companionship and in havruta, in partnership with other learners, and we will invent a new Judaism through doing that, and we will put on the texts as our own clothing through doing that. That's what he sees his role to be, and then what is so astounding is that he had a great deal of trouble getting a visa to get out of Germany, had a job waiting at HUC in Cincinnati but he couldn't get there because he didn't have a visa, and so he finally got out and he could get to London where his brother lived, and he was in London for a total of, I think nine months. And in that time, he already set up an institute of Jewish learning in London, because he thought, This is what needs to happen wherever he goes.

**HP:** He's gonna go around the world and create venues, and create inroads, ways for people to find authentic connection to Jewish texts. Here's a quote from the essay at the beginning: "For us, Jewish literature is not a dead past, but an immediate present. We are not indebted to the archaeologists for the Biblical writings that we read today, they did not first have to be excavated like a collapsed temple out of the rubble of antiquity. Ever since they were written down throughout our entire history, we have stood in engagement with them," and it's that standing in engagement with them that Heschel was so committed to and he was aware that he was living in a time of upheaval, he writes about the upheaval of the destruction of the temple, and in the biography of Ravenel he writes about the destruction of Spanish and Portuguese jewelry. And before the Holocaust, those were the two candidates for the most disruptive and destructive moments in Jewish history. And he talks about how commitment to learning is what helps create a brand new version of Jewish reality.

**HP:** And I think the upcoming Holocaust was one version of... One thing you might identify as the upheaval, but of course, it hadn't really happened in its worst form yet when he wrote these pieces. And I think that there's another upheaval that was very, very clear to him that was part of his study, and that is the attack on Judaism that came from the focus on history, on the study of history, on historical research in the 19th and 20th centuries, that the new scholarship that he was very, very educated in, the Wissenschaft Scholarship had just changed the way people saw the Jewish past. Just as you couldn't go on with the old Judaism after the destruction of the temple, you just

couldn't go on with the same relationship to the ancient texts once your eyes were open to the kind of historical information that became available. And so I think that when he reformulates Talmudic discussions, Talmudic bits and pieces, Talmudic lore as history, as biography, that's not an accident, that's a way of saying, I'm gonna try to put this in a framework that makes it accessible to my audience. And so I think that's an example of what he's calling for, which is reading the text with authenticity, but from the standpoint of the world that you live in.

**JH:** That's a very compelling description of the primacy of learning in the mind and activity of Heschel. And in the spirit of rabbinic debate, I'd like to follow up with a potential counterpoint or a possible one. I wanna ask if it's fair to qualify the primacy of learning in Judaism by speaking not only of a radical ancient vision of Jewish learning, such as you echoed in your description of Mokuntura and the spirit of Heschel, but also perhaps an ancient controversy or debate about the primacy of Jewish learning, as some of the rabbis of antiquity in the Middle Ages argued that action takes precedence over study. Is that a fair counterpoint?

**HP:** I think it is, and then I think that Heschel has been actually criticized in that way. But then he's the one who marched with Martin Luther King, and so I think that what he would say is the same thing that those ancient Talmudic rabbis say, which is, study is more important, and study leads to action. I think that without the grounding of study, action can be less than direct, it can be less than we want it to be, it can miss its mark. And so I think that the idea, when it's done right, with real authenticity, is that study and action are so intimately connected that even the act of study, you study with a partner, you study with a hoog, a group. That group becomes an action unit. You can't but live in a better way when you are beholden to the people that you study with. I think that the fact that it isn't abstract university-style study, but connected action, connected study, that makes it so that it doesn't have to be separated from action.

**JH:** So in that same vein, I'd like to ask you about Heschel's mini biography of Isaac Abravanel, the philosopher, commentator, courtier, Jewish communal leader and exile from Spain in 1492, who was also the consummate politician. Heschel writes of Abravanel, "What moved him most was not mystical beatitude within God, but the historical reformation of mankind." What do we learn either from Heschel or from Abravanel or both of them, about the religious spirit as an animating spirit for politics?

**HP:** I'd like to deflect that question a little bit and answer a different question that I think might be related, and that is the question, if history, the existence of history in the historical mindset, if that was for Heschel, the challenge that seems like it created such

an upheaval in Judaism that we needed to begin again in our interpretation of texts, in our reading of texts, what are the real upheavals right now? I think most people in our communities, yours and mine, are way past the question of, Did it really happen? And can we be Jews if we're not sure if the things in the Torah really happened? How do we read the texts from the point of view of living in that world and still do that in a way that is positive and that is loving readings? I think that we are in the middle of a number of upheavals right now that make it very difficult to keep our old relationship with Jewish texts authentic. And those are gender, the complete opening up of what gender means and what gender is, that is really challenging to a lot of what goes on in Jewish text. Globalization, the unimaginable, even in Heschel's time, breaking down of boundaries between groups, the separateness of the Jews is such a big part of what we find in Jewish text and in some of the layers of interpretation that surround Jewish texts. Democratization.

**HP:** We aren't good at having authority figures in the way that a lot of eras in Jewish history assumed, we don't respect authority in the same way. And on the other hand, we have the Internet, we have Sefaria and a million other amazing resources that democratize access to the texts. These are the things that create an entirely different way of approaching the texts. We are standing in a brand new environment, one that if you just looked at it on the surface, you would say, it doesn't leave room for Judaism as we know it. But it turns out that we can read the text from that position, from that set of situations, and find in the texts what to nourish ourselves with even now, and especially now. And I think that circling back to your question about how to act in the world and how to behave, I'm not gonna say that the texts tell you what position to take and whether to be a Democrat or a Republican, but I think that studying the texts can... With authenticity, and with honesty, and with people who are true seekers, I think the whole idea is to make you more aware of what it is to be a moral human being. And if that doesn't affect how you interact with politics, I don't know what does.

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leading thinkers. For more information about HUC Connect and all it has to offer, visit [huc.edu/hucconnect](http://huc.edu/hucconnect). And now, back to our program.

**JH:** I wanna refer back to one of your articles for Tablet Magazine, the one about Sodom and Gomorrah, in the course of which you point out that the rabbis of antiquity read texts and scripture, really, very differently from us. They asked different questions of scripture and of the tradition. Now, sometimes, as I think we know, those questions put us off with their misogyny or classism, among other isms. Other times, they simply bore us by perseverating literally for volumes on topics that feel impenetrable or irrelevant to us, but sometimes the rabbis read the tradition, they read scripture in such a way as to crack open a vista onto the world that utterly changes our perspective and offers a gem of insight and understanding. And I wanna ask you, Rabbi Plotkin, to share one such rabbinic reading that has changed your perspective and enriched your life.

**HP:** The question in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is what could make a place so terrible that it simply needs to be destroyed? And we have that famous argument when Abraham says, But what if there's 50 good people in the town, are you still gonna destroy it? Won't you save it for the sake of the 50? And of course, God says, Yeah, I'd save it for the sake of 50 righteous people. And he goes all the way down to 10, and God says, Yes, I'd save it for the sake of 10 righteous people, of course. And Abraham doesn't ask any more, and the question is why? And the answer turns out to be, because if you don't have at least 10 righteous people, you can't really have any righteous people, because it turns out that Lot, Abraham's nephew has been trying to be a righteous person, but look at his life, he turns into somebody who offers his daughters to visitors for who knows what purposes. So the classical answer to what happened in Sodom that was so terrible that many people assume, is that, Oh, there was sodomy, we've invented a word for it, there were men who wanted to sleep with other men, that must be the problem.

**HP:** Well, the rabbis could not have cared less about that question, they thought that the problem was that everybody wanted to use everybody else for their own purposes. That that was the real problem. And the way they tell us that is they invent a story about a little girl, she secretly tries to give some food to her friend who's starving, and people find out about it in the town, and it turns out that's illegal. It's illegal to give food to your friend, 'cause you're supposed to be selfish, that's the value there, is selfishness. Well, they end up putting her to death and God hears her outcry, that's the outcry that finally he realizes, No, there's no room for righteous people to live in this town, righteousness is punishable by death. And so he gets Lot and his immediate family which is a lot less than 10 people out into a safe place, and this is the rabbis' way of saying, you cannot

just say the rule of law is what creates morality, you have to have moral law. The law itself has to be a good law. I look at something like the free market, the free market is a way of saying, selfishness is good, if everybody follows their own selfish desires, everything's gonna work out great, and it'll be good for everybody. I think that might be a little like what destroyed Sodom.

**HP:** So I find that kind of Midrash to be extremely powerful. And one other thing to say about that, I could never have understood that Midrash, except that I have been steeping myself with joy in the language of Hebrew for many years, because when the rabbis make up a story like that, they don't just make it up, they hook it onto very clear and particular linguistic peculiarities in the text. And this is a technique that is so deeply Jewish and allows us to have this back and forth with the text. I'd like to read a couple of lines from Heschel's description of Rabbi Akiva. He said... Rabbi Akiva is the one who... They say he drashed the little crowns, he gave interpretive meaning to the little crowns that are written, attached to the letters when a scribe writes a Torah, and the smallest details of grammar, he'd say, Oh, this is something we can interpret, so then he would interpret into... A lot of people would say, read into the text whatever he wants, but it's not whatever he wants. So Heschel says, To a certain degree, he altered the very texture of the Bible, the frozen words began to thaw, to flow, and alongside the explicit readings, unsuspected meanings and intuitive traditions bubbled forth.

**HP:** He sensed that its words are containers for un-divulged teachings, and that the Torah is full of signs and hints, and his goal was to fathom these signs and to interpret them revealing new layers of the Bible. And so I'm on this mission to teach people Biblical Hebrew, it's doable, and it gives you access to the thought process that these commentators, everyone from the most ancient, intra-Biblical interpretive discoveries to the Talmudic and early Midrash, through the medieval commentators, into the world of the Hasidim and the Hasidic interpreters, all of them are reveling in the terseness, clarity, mystery of the Hebrew language. And it's just so exciting to see lay people, not to mention liberal rabbis, taking up the challenge of learning some of this language.

**JH:** Well, Rabbi Helen Plotkin, I wanna thank you for taking the time for a really rich and far-reaching conversation about Heschel, and about the war years, but most importantly about the role of learning in Judaism. Thank you so much.

**HP:** Thank you, it's been really a pleasure to speak with you.

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