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## **RABBI KARI TULING: THINKING ABOUT GOD IN JEWISH TERMS**

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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 HUCs Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where we will have a conversation with Rabbi Kari Tuling. Kari Hofmaister Tuling received rabbinic ordination in 2004 and earned her PhD in Jewish Thought in 2013, both from the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion. And she currently serves as the Rabbi of Congregation Kol Haverim in Glastonbury, Connecticut. Amidst her many publications, her first book, 'Thinking About God: Jewish Views' was published in 2020 by JPS, University of Nebraska Press. Rabbi Tuling, thank you so much for joining us. It's a pleasure to have you on the College Commons Podcast.

Kari Tuling: It's a pleasure to be here.

Joshua Holo: Before we get to Thinking About God, which is a theological exploration, I'd like to talk to you a little bit about your work in the rabbinate. In 2018, you wrote an article in the Forward titled, 'Wanna Help Women Rabbis get the Respect They Deserve? Here's a List.' And it's actually a very practical list of things that we can all do to make sure that women Rabbis do indeed get the respect they deserve. And I wanna ask you if you think that reform and other liberal expressions of Judaism pose the very particular problem of resting on our laurels, that our notable successes in developing and advancing feminist Judaism may actually sometimes mask and in a way perpetuate certain persistent undercurrents of sexism.

Kari Tuling: I think that's a fair assessment of what's happened. We have done some things very, very well for the first movement to have ordained a woman with a accredited and formal seminary, and we're the first to have women reach certain levels such as in senior leadership roles in the movement in congregations and the like. And so we can look to that and say, "Hey, it's awesome that we've done really well." And we've also been really good at heeding the feminist critique of theology and of the prayer books, of things like Judith Plaskow's 'Standing Again at Sinai.' You can see the influence of that work on our prayer book, for example, and Mishkan T'filah, as the editor, she was responsible for seeing to it that it was gender neutral.

Kari Tuling: And so those things we've done really, really well. There's other aspects that where it's not been as good and that is women do still experience various forms of sexual aggression in the rabbinic role, and that was part of the list. It was about both gender and sexual aggression, of not being referred to by title, not being given the same opportunities for advancement as men and not being given the ability to be treated as an equal or to be recognized for our expertise. So I think that's a real thing.

Kari Tuling: The good news in all of this is I think that the movement wants to do the right thing, and in a lot of ways, we're breaking new ground. And so that's part of the problem. Sometimes you might think something's solved or you might think we're in a good place and not realize that, "No, actually, it's still a problem for women to say... Find the time and space to being a nursing mother while also a congregational rabbi," for example.

Joshua Holo: I wanted to just give a note of appreciation for the article, which I cited. It was an artful and gracious way to work through the risk of complacency as an inhibitor to progress. The book that I wanna spend most of our time talking about, however, is straight up theology. And one of the aspects of the book that makes it so attractive and readily readable and usable is its comprehensiveness. And you really cover so much of the gamuts of Jewish history and Jewish text in relation to our civilizational attempt to understand and articulate our feelings about God. And above that comprehensiveness, one of the organizing principles that you bring to that comprehensiveness so that we can make sense of it and weave it together, is the idea of intertextuality among texts and generations of texts and eras of culture that we weave together to make our Jewish understanding of God. So I'd like to ask you how you understand intertextuality in relation to our Jewish understanding of God and what you do with intertextuality to help us weave it all together.

Kari Tuling: That's a great question. And what happens is, a lot of times when we talk about theology and when we write books about theology, we'll talk about this idiosyncratic thinker and that idiosyncratic thinker and we'll study, usually he's, usually male, usually Ashkenazi, his idea of what God is and we don't necessarily connect it to the larger project of how the tradition itself has this open-ended and ongoing conversation, and each one of us participates in that in a real way. When you make your own decisions about what the nature of reality is, of how to relate to God, of whether or not to go to a prayer service, of whether or not to use this address of God or that address of God, you're making theological decisions and you're doing so ideally, anyway, in response to a whole culture and tradition, not just any one thinker's idea of what we should say or what we should do.

Kari Tuling: And so what I wanted to do is express that. How the book arose in the first place was I was teaching and I was asked by University of Cincinnati to teach Jewish God concepts. They're like, "You can do what you want." They're like, "You can create this course, make it happen." And what I did with that is I said, "Hey, it would be more interesting and more useful if we organized the course around questions." And happily, the department was totally onboard with that. And so that's where the genesis of this book is, is in the idea of, "How about we organize it around questions and we take a slice from different eras to look at it as a way to be able to show how the conversation proceeds."

Kari Tuling: I didn't think that the undergraduates needed to know what X thinker thinks about chosen-ness. That's great if they know it, and it's a good question to ask on an exam, but what I really wanted to know is how does that fit into the larger project of thinking about God? It was Barry Schwartz who heard about what I had done. We were talking about a different book, in fact, and he's like, "I want that. That's a new way of putting this together."

Joshua Holo: In relation to the character of the Jewish approach to God, would it be fair to understand it in one way, that intertextuality is the ultimate bulwark against fundamentalism?

Kari Tuling: I think that's actually a fair assessment, and it didn't start the book with that assumption. When I started the book, we were thinking in terms of being really fair and covering a lot of different kinds of voices. So you see, for example, Chabad's in there, and you see salvation's in there. So it wasn't an explicitly liberal book in that way, but one of the things that came out in the process of talking about covenant and the different kinds of voices that address it, is that fundamentalism isn't native. When I was

researching it, I came across the work of Leora Batnitzky, and she had done a really good job of documenting how fundamentalism had crept into Jewish thought in the last, about 100 years or so, and I found that really convincing. So that's why it shows up in one of the chapters, is this idea that we've actually, we meaning Jews, have been open-ended in our search for God and I credit Maimonides, among others, for this.

Kari Tuling: We're not as prone to that sort of fundamentalism because a honest reading of the tradition, in my opinion, of course, is to have this awareness that there are a lot of different ways we can look at this, that the two Jews, three opinions, is a real thing, that we're a people that will keep the minority voice present on the margins of the text and will not assume that just because in this era, this voice, this majority decided one way, that that's gonna be the decision.

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Joshua Holo: 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). 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.

Joshua Holo: God, of course, is hard to wrap one's mind around, and in the first section of Thinking About God, you cover appropriately, you begin at the beginning, and you talk about God's act of creation, of creating the universe. And we know that later post-Biblical Jewish tradition has tackled this particular divine act, that is to say the creation of the universe, as one of the most impenetrable mysteries of existence, and the rabbis in particular are both fascinated by, and I think they're also worried about how to understand this mystery. What is it about creation and God's part in creation that generates so much theological turbulence?

Kari Tuling: I think some of the reason why the rabbis were so concerned was one of the newest trends that have been coming through is all this Hellenism and the ideas of the Greeks, and this question of whether or not the world was eternal and we now, because it's not a hot question in the same way, we have different questions that are hot, have trouble understanding why that was so worrisome for them. But I think it's a better way if you think of it this way, is that when we look for things like climate change,

for example, one of the problems that people have is, there's a belief that the world could be any different than it is now, and getting through to that and getting people to understand that just because it looks this way right now, it doesn't mean it's always going to continue on that path, and that in fact, there are different futures that are possible, some which are horrific and some which are not.

Kari Tuling: What happens with that is that with the rabbis, they had a similar kind of problem in that because Hellenism was so triumphant, because it was the science of the day, because it was what everybody was doing, they had this problem of trying to penetrate that in some way and say, "The world is created, there is a Creator, you're going to be held to account." And may I suggest that actually, it matters what we do. I think that's why it's a hot question for them. We see it in questions of faith now, when science and faith come into conflict. It's more common in our dominant culture than in the Jewish culture, again, because of Maimonides. I think his influence is part of why we don't get this stuck on things like evolution or on the questions of Big Bang versus this is what the Bible says. But we have a similar kind of problem in the sense of we're projecting or suggesting or working from a different frame of reference than what the dominant culture is saying, and we want people to take it seriously.

Kari Tuling: I literally just came back from the 6 Points Sci-Tech camp, and you got kids who are like, I believe in the Big Bang and I don't believe in the Bible, and it's the same problem in a way, if that makes sense. You have to be willing to believe that the world could have come from a different place than it is, and you have to be willing to believe that it could go to a different place than it is now, that what we see here and now is not eternal.

Joshua Holo: I just wanna clarify for our listeners that your reference to Maimonides derives from the fact, if I understood you correctly, that Maimonides' great project, or one of his great projects, was to harmonize philosophy and religion or revelation, specifically Jewish revelation. But when we talk about philosophy in the Middle Ages, not unlike the Hellenism to which you referred, what we actually mean is science, 'cause philosophy has a lot of that valence in the pre-modern world, empirical analysis and thinking and rational breakdown of problems, as opposed to truth from God in the Jewish context from Sinai. So Maimonides carried a lot of water for our entire civilization by making it okay to do both.

Kari Tuling: Right, he suggested that if science and the Bible are in conflict, then the Torah is speaking metaphorically, and that's a gift. That's a genuine gift.

Joshua Holo: So I'd like, in closing, to circle back to feminism, this time as a framework for understanding God in the spirit of your book, and I wanna ask the following. Most of us liberal Jews who are "churched Jews," meaning that we're Jews who were raised with some conscious, often formal, but often informal Jewish education, most of us today, I think it's fair to say, were raised on the medieval Jewish argument that God has no gender and no sex. I wanna expand that conversation and ask you, as a general proposition, what does our tradition have to say about God's gender or sex?

Kari Tuling: Quite a lot. I mean, a lot of the Rabbinic literature imagines God as a person and that person is male. Maimonides again makes the argument that God has no body, has no gender, makes God absolutely non-corporeal, yet what happens with us when we look at the prayer book, at least the traditional prayer book, the language that's used and the images, the imagery is overwhelmingly male. And so one of the chapters in the book and my favorite chapter, to be honest, is the one about gender, and it basically asks the question, when we valorize one gender over the other, what have we done, and are we saying that anyone who is male must necessarily be God-like in these ways? Are we saying that there's something essentially that is male versus something that's essentially female? 'Cause that was one of the problems that people had when we first started thinking about gender in the prayer book, is do we now valorize nurturing and mothering and that sort of thing, or have we just simply painted women into a corner again?

Kari Tuling: So that's a rather long-winded way of saying that I think that God has no gender, and I think that gender is in fact a social construct to a large degree, if not completely, but for us to worship and to engage in conversation and to talk about God without using gender is hard on us 'cause we are so used to thinking in those terms. What I'd like to see happen is that you can be God-like regardless of your gender representation, and that you could be partaking of the divine in the sense of trying to live up to those expectations without it having to be filtered through the lens of who's a soldier and who's a mother, and who's a father and who's a warrior. So I hope that answered your question.

Joshua Holo: It does, and it raises many more, which I think is appropriate.

Kari Tuling: [laughter] And well, I'm a good rabbi, that's... [laughter]

Joshua Holo: That's right, that's right, that's right. That's what you're paid for. I get it, I get it.

Kari Tuling: It's what I do.

Joshua Holo: So as a parting shot, share with us something you learned in writing *Thinking About God*, something special that stuck with you, something that was a surprise, something that was a gift of your research and this project.

Kari Tuling: Oh, what a wonderful question. Actually, I learned three things. The first is I learned that Mordecai Kaplan was a lot more influential than I had realized. When you look at him as an individual thinker, he doesn't stand out 'cause he's not particularly systematic and he's not particularly like the... It's not a good chewy text, and you're like, "Hmm, okay," but when you look at the conversation, you see he moved it forward, in large part by his life and his example, even more so than his written work. Number two, I've become a lot more aware of how theology is able to excuse or address or somehow make okay the suffering of others and why that's a real problem, that what we need to be on guard for is that we not allow our theology to make other people's suffering make our system make sense. I mostly discovered this in the context of working on stuff for [...]. My primary criticism of him is that women have to be subordinate in his system in order for his system to work, and that's not okay. But we also do that with other systems as well, so it's something to keep an eye on.

Kari Tuling: And the third thing I learned is that how powerful and flexible this idea of covenant is, and how we should be talking more in terms of covenant in the liberal movements, not as a literal covenant, but using it as a powerful and organizing metaphor. So some of these things will eventually become other books, but those were the things I had learned so far.

Joshua Holo: Well, Rabbi Kari Tuling, I wanna thank you for a great book, *Thinking about God: Jewish views*, which is rich and filled with just fascinating questions and engrossing responses, by which I do not mean definitive or ex-cathedra responses, but food for thought, and most of all, for the pleasure of your conversation and taking the time to join us on the podcast. Thank you.

Kari Tuling: My pleasure.

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