



## ROBERTA KWALL: REMIX JUDAISM

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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.

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**JH:** Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast. I very much look forward to sharing with you a conversation with Professor Roberta Kwall. Roberta Rosenthal Kwall is the Raymond P. Niro Professor at DePaul University, College of Law. Kwall is an internationally-renowned scholar and lecturer, and she has published on Jewish Law, Culture and Intellectual property. Her long list of publications includes *The Myth of the Cultural Jew: Culture and Law in Jewish Tradition*, *The Soul of Creativity*, and her newest book is *Remix Judaism: Preserving Tradition in a Diverse World*, which came out in 2020 and will come out again in an updated edition in February of '22. And it will be the subject of our conversation today, which I really look forward to kicking off. So welcome, Professor Kwall, I look forward to our conversation.

**Roberta Kwall:** Oh, thank you so much for having me. I'm really honored to be here.

**JH:** I'd like to begin with the new part of the updated edition, which cites, among other things, the more recent 2020 Pew Report on Jewish-Americans. And you cite one of the salient statistics and I'll recited here to refresh our listeners memories, "76% of American Jews say that being Jewish is either somewhat or very important to them." But I think you'll agree, not necessarily in traditional ways. And a key to the spirit of your book is that you engage deeply with Jewish tradition and specifically Jewish law, but

you also go out of your way to recognize that most Jews don't relate to Jewish law as a definitive or even primary authority for their behaviors and attitudes. What is the rich and productive tension between those two approaches to the tradition?

**RK:** It is perceived as a tension, I would agree, but I think it does not necessarily have to be perceived as a tension, particularly for communities that are not living according to Jewish law. So in other words, who are not living Halakha lifestyle, which is the majority of American Jews. Roughly 80% of American Jews are not necessarily living, they're not at all living according to Jewish law, and Pew makes that very, very clear. In fact, in that question that Pew asks about elements of Jewish identity, where Pew offers about 10 or 11 examples, observing Jewish law, [chuckle] is the least popular. Having said that, however, I think what Remix Judaism seeks to do is to bring awareness to the fact that although Jewish tradition and even Jewish culture, I would argue, is steeped in Jewish law, what's important for religiously liberal Jews, and I define that as really Jews who identify with movements such as the Conservative movement, Reform Judaism, reconstructing Judaism, all the way, all the way to the left.

**RK:** I think what's important for Jews in these groups to realize, is that Jewish tradition and Jewish law do not have to necessarily be completely aligned. And so therefore, what remix Judaism seeks to do is to provide a path, it's a guidebook for how to deepen your connection to Jewish tradition, both for your own personal development and your own personal sense of value and growth. But also for the sake of transmission. But that celebrating Jewish tradition does not necessarily have to be strongly tied to the strict observance of Jewish law. And by that, I mean observing the law by dotting the I's and crossing the T's. But what it does require is an increased attention to observance of Jewish tradition and the celebration, I would say, of Jewish tradition.

**JH:** You write that in 21st century America, meaningful Jewish identity must be actively cultivated if it is to continue. Meaning, as I read it, that being Jewish or Jewishness or Judaism is a pursuit, not a status. The 2020 Pew Report aside, however, hasn't this always been the case, or at least always in our lifetimes and much of the 20th century?

**RK:** That's an excellent question, and it's something that I've actually thought a lot about. What is different about this moment in time from, let's say, the decades prior, the '50s, the '60s, the '70s?

**JH:** Or maybe the 2nd century BCE, when the Jews were having a civil war because of Hanukkah and the Hasmoneans wanted a certain kind of religiosity and the Hellenizing, Greek-speaking Jews wanted a different kind.

**RK:** Sure, sure, absolutely. So I think that's an important question to kind of drill down on. As a prelude to my response, I will share with you that over this winter, I am editing the Oxford Handbook of Jewish law, co-editing with two other scholars. And I am writing the essay on law making and the conservative movement. So as a result, this past winter, I spent a lot of time with the proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly, and particularly the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. I know that the Reform movement also has an analogous committee that deals with law, and this is the Conservative Movements Committee, and I found some fascinating language. So the data I was looking at goes back to the 1940s, and I read a paragraph to my husband, it was a Shabbat afternoon, and we were both sitting in our living room reading. And basically, it was one of the rabbis on the Law Committee saying, our congregants are not going to synagogue and they're not observing the rules of Kashrut.

**RK:** And I said to my husband, "When do you think this was written?" And my husband said, "Well, I don't know, maybe a couple of years ago. Maybe this year." I said, "Yes, exactly." So that is true. There's certainly truth to your question. But, I do think we are at a different time right now, and so what are the differences? For one thing, the United States as a whole is becoming increasingly secular, this isn't just affecting the Jewish religion. There's a lot of data to support the fact that our country as a whole, there is less interest in religion. Generally, there's less interest in religious tradition. We have the rise of what is called the nones, N-O-N-E-S, not the N-U-N-S, in fact quite the opposite.

**RK:** And many, many articles have been coming out about that. The research of Gen Z, the cohort that's now sitting in my classrooms, and possibly even in your institution as well, studying. These are people born between 1995 and 2010, give or take. Again, decreasing interest in religion, tradition, and that's affecting how they view Judaism, those who are Jewish. There's not a lot of interest in joining, there's... They're spiritual, but not necessarily religious, we hear that frequently. And there's less attachment to Judaism and the Jewish people, and certainly to Israel as well, and Pew substantiates that specifically for the Jewish community. I think you also have to keep in mind, that as Jews in the United States and other parts of the diaspora, we are living as a cultural religious minority. That has always been the case, that has never changed. But, I think when the society surrounding us is becoming increasingly secularized, that has an impact on the American Jewish community who is also becoming increasingly secularized.

**RK:** And, to state the obvious, the Pew also talks about substantially, we have the rate of intermarriage now for non-Orthodox Jews is roughly 72%. And if you look to the

youngest cohort that was, again, examined under Pew, roughly corresponding with Gen Z, that I spoke of before. You see the future, which is perhaps even an increase in that number. That was not the case in the decades of the '50s, the '60s and the '70s, that did not... Intermarriage rate do not start to really rise until the early '70s. Now, I wanna be clear, in Remix Judaism, I have a chapter on marriage, and that chapter discusses intermarriage fully. I speak to organizations that are composed of rabbis and others who are servicing the interfaith community. And my book is designed, in part, to be used by Jews who are in interfaith relationships. But I think it's important to underscore that the effort that it requires to transmit in a society that A is increasingly secular to begin with, and B, the Jewish community is increasingly inter-married, it's not like we can just sort of sit back and assume that we're gonna have Judaism and we're gonna have Jewish tradition outside of the communities that are strictly religiously observant.

**JH:** I wanna pick up on the sociological tenor of your observations just now. Not by talking more about intermarriage, although it's important obviously for all the reasons you said it. But, more sociologically in the sense of being Jewish as participating in some kind of Jewish community. Does that strike you as a useful measure for success of the Jewish project? Meaning, maybe you feel so Jewish, maybe you don't feel so Jewish, but you're still a member of a JCC or you're still a member of a synagogue. Is that going to be a dead end for us in the future, as many people would say?

**RK:** I hear two separate questions. I mean, there's... Is that gonna be a dead end? Meaning are Jewish institutions not gonna continue to thrive in the same way that they have? And then there's also the question of, is community observance, is that a necessary part of Remix Judaism? So, I'll start with the second one, is community observance part of the Remix equation. I think it is for sure. Remix Judaism, the book itself is not focused on the institutional piece of Judaism, that was an intentional choice I made. It's not that I don't think it's important, certainly the chapter and education deals a lot with Jewish institutions and the epilogue deals with Emergent Jewish institutions and how things are being done a little differently in certain locations and in certain communities.

**RK:** But the focus of Remix Judaism is really more home and family. But that isn't to say that I don't think Jewish community is vital for the continuation of Judaism. And, it's interesting because over the past year and a half, I've actually spoken at so many synagogues. All of whom have either been Reform, Conservative, Reconstructing, Judaism, and yet, some of them have been in very small towns. And the concerns are really the same, community is important, because at base, Judaism is a communal religion, there's so much of it that is community-based. However, however, from the

standpoint of transmission, you really need the home piece of it as well. Because what kids learn is through consistency. If you celebrate Shabbat, even again, if you're not dotting the I's, crossing the T's, whatever, but you have certain aspects of your Shabbat celebration, that are consistent, that's how kids learn, not only to appreciate, but to love, to love Jewish tradition.

**RK:** And camps, camps are another vital piece of Jewish communal tradition. That's really, mostly how kids in religiously liberal communities can exercise that community piece for themselves. It's not that they like, they don't necessarily love staying at services, but they do love what goes on in camp. As particularly if it's a camp that's Jewishly affiliated, where there are, what I call, thicker cultural norms. In other words, there's a meaningful presence to the camp. And so, yes, I think that that is really important. So the second question, I think, is a question that the Jewish institutional communal structure really needs to think about very carefully. Because I think there's a synergy, a connection, between the level of tradition that is being perpetuated and the long-term health of Jewish communal institutions.

**RK:** And without a deepening of the cultural-religious tradition, along the lines of what Remix Judaism is advocating and teaching about how to achieve, I don't see our communal structures necessarily being present for us in the form that they currently are, or even in a form that's likely to perpetuate Jewish tradition outside of the most observant communities, and that's what keeps me up at night. And I think that's also something we don't talk about enough. And so I would love to do more communal discussion of these concepts. Usually, I talk to synagogues, sometimes to JUFs, JCCs occasionally. But I think that larger issue of what is the Jewish communal structure gonna look like, I think that's something that is not necessarily sufficiently appreciated across the board.

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**JH:** The College Commons Podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union Colleges online platform for continuing education. HUC Connect features four programs, webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers, on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion, and redefining allyship. Community Connect, offering ready-made lesson plans for synagogue and community learning. Masterclasses, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty, exclusively for our alumni. And of course, the College Commons Podcast, in-depth conversations with Judaism's 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:** In one of your publications, *The Myth of the Cultural Jew*, you write of the dangers of cultural, "coalescence" between the American identity and the Jewish identity. I wanna ask you to define coalescence in relation to another key or even hot button term like a simulation or maybe acculturation.

**RK:** Sure. Well, the concern with coalescence and assimilation is that what is Jewish and what is American, because we're talking about the United States obviously. It becomes so interwoven that we can't necessarily separate the two and that people are not necessarily separating the two. And we see a lot of that today, actually. It comes up in politics. It comes up in lots of different discourses. I think a good example is Tikkun Olam, and Tikkun Olam is usually touted as being, "Well, it's Jewish values, and this is how we exercise our Judaism." And I write about Tikkun Olam in *Remix Judaism*, I have a whole chapter on that. And of course, Tikkun Olam is important, and I talk about where in our sources Tikkun Olam comes from. But the thing about Tikkun Olam that I think is important, and it goes to your question really, is that Tikkun Olam is predicated on Jewish tradition and Jewish sources.

**RK:** The concept of Tikkun Olam, as it is currently exercised, is very universalist in its nature. So for example, at least prior to COVID, my family and I really enjoyed working in the soup kitchens in Chicago. But every time we did that... And usually our trips were organized more by the Chicago Federation. But whenever we went, there was always a church group that was also serving with us and it's great and it's wonderful. But the point of it is that is not particularistically Jewish. And so what worries me is that with the kind of coalescence that you're talking about, Jewish tradition has the tendency to be more universalized in its interpretation and its discussion. And there's not enough observance of that which is particular to Jewish tradition, and I think that's the danger of the coalescence that you mentioned before.

**JH:** I think the exponents of Tikkun Olam in my universe of Reform Judaism would agree that there can be a shallow engagement with Tikkun Olam, which doesn't plumb the depths of the Jewish tradition and therefore risks, kind of getting lost in the mix of general social justice and losing our particularity and the particular contribution of Judaism to social justice. However, I think it's also fair to note that by virtue of the Hebrew term, Tikkun Olam, there is a branding of social justice as a Jewish enterprise, which then folds back and re-ignites Jewish pride in that work and could actually advance the work of *Remix Judaism* by, in some way, naming and, by naming it as a Jewish thing, re-appropriating it for the re-Judaization of what could be generic social justice.

**RK:** Yeah, aspirationally, I think that's true. When you just talked about the re-appropriation, it reminded me of a joke that my rabbi once told from the pulpit about Tikkun Olam. He spoke of an American visiting Israel for the first time, his Israeli cousin picks him up at the... At Ben Gurion. And they're talking and the American says to his Israeli cousin, "So how do you say Tikkun Olam in Hebrew?" [chuckle] And you know what? Like anything else, it's funny because there's some truth to that. So yeah, I think, aspirationally, what you said is true, for sure, but again, Jewish tradition is about more than Tikkun Olam. Jewish tradition without Shabbat, for example, it's hard to imagine continuity. And even the dietary laws, one of my favorite books that I read and used tremendously as I was writing *Remix Judaism* was a book by the CCAR Press, the Reform movement's press called *The Sacred table*.

**RK:** That is a phenomenal book. It's an anthology of essays, I think everybody who participated is a Reform rabbi, if I'm not mistaken. And it was a wonderful attempt to sort of create an ethic of Kashrut that works for the Reform movement. And some of those essays were just remarkable, and I made such wonderful use of those essays, that I in fact, wrote to the editor, Mary Zamora and told her how much I loved that project, and I talk about it, particularly when I speak before a Reform synagogue, but even for others as well. But that's the kind of thing I think we need to be thinking about more and doing more, and encouraging people to do more, because again, it's about relying and evoking our tradition in ways that have meaning for us as individuals. Maybe not the traditional meaning, but meaning for us, because if it has meaning for us, we're gonna do it. And that's really the key point.

**JH:** And I can't help but plug another interview on the College Commons podcast with our rabbi Barry Block, who just edited a social justice Torah commentary, which tries to get that Judiac depth back into Tikkun Olam in the spirit of what we're talking about. That, we wanna promote it and we wanna promote it in the context of Jewish richness. I will say this, I hope without defensiveness that it is my experience that in the Reform movement, when Tikkun Olam is practiced, when it's programmatized, when it's really elevated in ways that are sometimes lampooned or over-simplified, in fact, it's getting programmatized very much in the context of Shabbat or Jewish ritual. And so it's not quite as blandly universalized as sometimes we caricature it.

**RK:** I would agree with you, but I think the key to what you just said is within the Reform movement. So what does that mean? Within the Reform movement means you're dealing with people who are, at some level affiliated with Reform institutions. I will tell you very candidly, that the differences among the people I have been speaking to, the

differences between a conservative and a Reform synagogue on any given night is negligible. And that's a point I actually also wrote about it in the preface. The only difference really is that in a conservative synagogue, if it was a night-time lecture, usually there's an evening minyan before, okay. Other than that, the people, very similar, their concerns are very similar. But there in lies the problem, because what we're talking about, a group of people that are affiliated, which represents a very small percentage of American Jews at this point, even though the Reform movement is still the largest, it's still not having as broader reach as would be optimal. And the concern then becomes, well, what about the younger generations? Those who might have been raised Reform, are they joining? Not so much. Even the same is true in the conservative movement.

**RK:** So that's really where our challenge is. The challenge isn't the people who are affiliated with Reform Judaism, the people that I talk to are committed, Reform, and conservative, and reconstructing Jews, and they get that this is a concern. But the question is, what about the next generation? How do we reach out to them? And that has to also start with conversations at the institutional level in synagogues, as well as in JCC's as well as in other kinds of Jewish organizations.

**JH:** I wanna pick up on this theme of Jewish depth, particularly in relation to Jewish knowledge. In an article in JTA, you write of a friend whose son's Bar Mitzvah was derailed or transformed by COVID. The subject of the article said, "The only thing that brings me comfort these days is listening to David practice his Torah portion." Although she didn't completely understand why, listening to her sons practicing Torah gave her a reassuring sense of continuity. And I wanna ask you if that gut feeling, that kind of atavistic pull on our sensibilities is sufficient for a sustainable connection with our civilization and our tradition and our religion? Or do we need to have a higher level of comprehension? Does there need to be greater knowledge base behind any given activity in this case, Torah reading, for it to be genuine and sustainable?

**RK:** That's a great question. Well, I was speaking actually of a friend of mine in that article, though I changed the names, of course, but that was the context of that. So, again, you can't look at something just in a vacuum, you have to kinda look at what is going on. That situation was a fairly typical situation in which, Judaism is a value in that particular home, but it's not the only value, and so it's like a pie. Like there's a pie, Judaism is a slice of the pie. Could it be a bigger slice of the pie? Sure. Are you dealing with an affiliated family? Yes. Are you dealing with a family that goes to services on the high holidays and celebrates Passover? Yes. Are you dealing with a family where there's Shabbat candles being lit? Not so much, right? So this is like, this is still in the



middle of what we could be seeing, but by in the middle, I mean we're not at the fringes of connection. It's pretty typical of, I would say, families that have kids who are in the Bar Mitzvah age group. So parents who are maybe Gen-Xers with children who are in their teens to some degree.

**RK:** Again, a little bit more on the connected side, but certainly not as connected as could be. So, do I think that that's enough? It depends. That particular child has grandparents that revere Judaism, for whom it's very important. They are somewhat educated, and the kids know that. That's a plus, right? I come from the perspective, personally, that the best thing we can do when it comes to transmission is to create a positive environment where our children and our grandchildren are excited about Judaism. Okay, they don't necessarily have to have as deep a pool of knowledge as we might otherwise like, but what they have to have is a feeling in their heart, in their neshamah, in their soul. And a feeling that they want to see this perpetuated. You can start inculcating that from the time a child is one, and get those values across. And ideally you wanna build on it, ideally you want them to absorb a greater degree of knowledge. But we have to be realistic about the world in which people live. Parents are busy. If they can squeeze out a slice for Judaism we're in good shape for most of them. The kids are busy, but what you want them to have is a positive feeling about Jewish tradition, and that's easy to do, with a commitment to consistency, it really is easy to do.

**RK:** But it takes some effort and it takes some planning. It's not just gonna happen, which goes back to my other comment. I think people can build on that and deepen that pool and deepen that knowledge base in their own times, in their own circumstances. For many people, the interest and ability to do that doesn't come till the time they're in their 50s. But they're not even gonna do that in their 50s if they don't have the positive feeling toward Jewish tradition. The other thing is, you want to make sure that from a continuity standpoint, those experiences are positive, so they can be recreated by kids when they're in a position to have children of their own. But that's where consistency is so important. It's not gonna happen with just lighting the Hanukkah candles and attending a Passover Seder. That's why Shabbat is so important. So, I think these are things that we don't talk enough about. Again, we don't talk about them enough necessarily in synagogues, we don't talk about them enough in smaller groups, but I think it really does need to be a focus of what our discourse has to be if we want to see a Jewish tradition again, that's going to be sustainable and transmissible in anything other than an orthodox community.

**JH:** I wanna close with some thoughts about Israel, and specifically with gratitude to you for including Israel in Remix Judaism. It meant a lot to me, and I think it's particularly

important in that you chose to articulate specific lessons from the Israeli-Jewish experience and the American Jewish experience that can inform looking forward. I found them really interesting, and I wanted to ask you to pick up on one of these lessons and share it with us.

**RK:** For most of the time I was writing *Remix Judaism*, I was really thinking that what I had to say would not be relevant at all to an Israeli audience. Because they live in a place where their Judaism is completely in the air. Even if you're not religious, being secular in... Israeli secular is completely different from diaspora secular. It's a completely different phenomenon. What I found on my last trip to Israel, which was the spring before COVID, and I was teaching at IDC and IDC, that's Radzyner Law School, so one of the more secular law schools in Israel. I think I saw maybe, all the years I was there, two or three kippot, not a whole lot. But what I... I realized two things that I thought were really interesting. The first thing I realized is that basically they are doing *Remix Judaism*. They all care, they care about Judaism. They feel, most of the ones, people that I spoke to, they feel a little bit of pressure and negativity towards the rabbinate, which kind of interferes with their view of Jewish tradition, there's a coercion element. That's something that's totally absent here in the United States, we can't really relate to that phenomenon, unless you've been there and you understand what that's about.

**RK:** But in terms of their attitude toward Jewish tradition, they care about Jewish tradition. And that is something that I wish we could bottle that and sort of share that water, if you will, with American Jews. Because there is a love of Judaism and there's a love of Jewish tradition. So, I think the biggest comparison that we can make that illustrates this, is that when researchers ask Israeli Jews what is your religion? The answer is, formally, it's Jewish. This whole idea of Jewish without religion, Jews but of no religion, it is completely foreign to the Israeli mentality. Alright? Does that mean they're all religious? Of course, they're not all religious, but they have this feeling about Judaism and they want their grandkids to be Jewish. They are clear about that, and they have no doubt that they will be. We can't say that here in the United States. If you want your grandkids to be Jewish, you gotta work hard at it, and especially if you're not in an orthodox community, you gotta work even a little harder. Because the norms of your non-Jewish world are basically at tension, at war with the Jewish world. And we know which way that war...

**JH:** At least in, at least in competition...

**RK:** In competition, right. In competition, and oftentimes prevailing [chuckle] in that competition. So yeah, that's why it does take more work here than it does in Israel. There's no question about that.

**JH:** Well, Professor Roberta Kwall, I wanna thank you for the pleasure of your company and the time that you gave us for this rich conversation. And, of course, for Remix Judaism, which will be coming out in an updated edition this February 2022.

**RK:** Thank you so much.

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