



THE TELLING: RE-READING THE PASSOVER HAGGADAH FOR YEAR-LONG WISDOM

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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 the pleasure of a conversation with Mark Gerson. Mark Gerson is an entrepreneur and philanthropist, as well as the author of books on Intellectual History and Education. His articles and essays on subjects ranging from Frank Sinatra to the biblical Jonah, have been published in the New Republic, Commentary, The Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. He hosts the popular podcast, The Rabbi's Husband, and recently wrote *The Telling: How Judaism's Essential Book Reveals the Meaning of Life*. Mark is married to Rabbi Eric Gerson, and we're thrilled to have you on the podcast. Thank you for joining us and congratulations on your recent book.

Mark Gerson: Thank you, Josh, great to be here.

JH: So let's start off with *The Telling*, it's awfully ambitious. The title, itself, "revealing the meaning of life." But I wanna start slightly smaller so that we can talk in bite-sized chunks, and ask you to elaborate on one of the themes from the *Haggadah* and maybe sharing one of your favorite selections.

MG: In *The Telling*, I basically go through the Magid section of the *Haggadah*, which is the section that basically, every Jew is familiar with and every gentile who's attended Seders, these are the passages that we come back to year after year. And what I do is I show how the *Haggadah* is not a holiday program or a dinner manual. We've all been to

those gala dinners where there's speaker after speaker, and we're just kind of going through the list to see how quickly it's gonna end before we can get to the food or get out of there. And that's not what the Seder is supposed to be about, it's the opposite, really.

MG: The *Haggadah* is the book, and the Seder is the venue for us to explore the great questions, within a Jewish and indeed Torah context, and the *Haggadah* encourages and allows us to ask the great questions of life at the Jewish New Year, which Pesach really is, to allow us to do an inventory of how we did the previous year, who we are now, and who we might wanna be in the coming year and how we can become that person and that people, the *Haggadah* lays all that up for us. And so in *The Telling*, what I try to do is to go through these familiar passages and to discuss how each one asks and answers a question that's both profound, deep and intensely practical and very interesting, and can be discussed at the Seder, this year or any year.

JH: So share with us one of your favorite selections.

MG: There are so many, but let's just take one, and I'll pick one that is seemingly prosaic, one that seemingly doesn't shout out, "You're about to get one of the great lessons of Judaism." But in fact is in there, and this is in the Magid section like everything in the book. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, "I am like a 70-year-old man." Now, we know from the historical record that he was about 16 or maybe 17 at the time of this great Seder in Benei Berak, so why would he say, "I am like a 70-year-old man." Clearly, he wasn't saying, "I'm like a 70-year-old man in my capacity as an athlete." He was saying, "I'm like a 70-year-old man in my capacity of wisdom."

MG: So, normally, if we asked parents or anybody else, how should we act with an adolescent who says, "I have the wisdom of a 70-year-old", we would say, "Well, let's educate that child that he shouldn't be so arrogant, that he should develop some humility and that in time, hopefully, God willing, he'll develop that wisdom, but he's not there yet." So why are we not only recording what Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, but celebrating it? Why are we teaching our children to say things like, "I am a 70-year-old man in my capacity of wisdom." Well, I think the *Haggadah*, which is derivative of the Torah, is enabling us to ask one of the great questions about one of the great concepts, which is "What is humility?"

MG: So, we know that Judaism loves humility, because it says about Moses, in Numbers, Moses was the most humble man ever to live. He was also the greatest Jew ever to live. So of course, we love humility as a concept. This passage is asking us to

consider on this great night of Jewish existential confrontation, "What is humility?" And first, we have to come, what humility is not, and the great Christian author, C. S. Lewis said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking about yourself less." And there in lies a great Jewish truth, and that we know from this passage from Moses.

MG: So Moses is the most humble man ever to live. What do we know about Moses? Moses sees an Egyptian fighting a Jew, takes matters into his own hands and saves the Jew. Moses sees seven men harassing women by the waters of Midian, what does he do? Takes matters into his own hands, saves the women. God says to Moses, at the golden calf, "I'm gonna destroy the Jewish people." Moses said, "Then blot my name out of your Torah." Moses takes it to the strongest emperor in the world at this time, the Pharaoh. This guy's humble? Well, apparently, 'cause the Bible says he's the most humble man ever to live. So one might think, "Well, these acts don't seem to be the acts of a humble man, but they must be because the Bible says he is the most humble man to ever live."

MG: And indeed he is, because humility in the Jewish context is just what C. S. Lewis said, if we're gonna be humble, then what it means is fully acknowledge the gifts that God has given us and sublimate them to the mission that God has also given us. So Moses was obviously fully aware of his many gifts, his physical gifts, his spiritual gifts, his intellectual gifts, his gifts as a leader, but whenever he was given the opportunity, and even when he wasn't, when he saw the opportunity, he always understood those gifts and used them and always used them in service of the greater good, in the service, in his case, of leading the people from slavery to being free people in the Promised Land under the sovereignty of God.

MG: So that's what it means to be humble. So what do we tell our children in the Passover Seder? We tell all our children what it means to be humble, is to fully acknowledge the gifts that God has given you. We should tell our children false humility is a sin, because if you're falsely humble, if one denies the gift that God has given him or her, then one cannot contribute that gift to the glory of God and to the betterment of His world. So why are we celebrating this 16-year-old kid saying, "I'm like a seventy-year-old man." 'Cause God gave him the gift of wisdom. And that doesn't end the conversation, that begins the conversation, he's saying, "God gave me the gift of wisdom. Now, what can I do with this, to fulfill my mission, to help make the world a joint place for God, to help make the Jewish people a kingdom of priests and a holy nation?"

MG: So the lesson for each of us, and particularly the lesson we should teach our children is, identify your gifts, acknowledge your gifts, and then think, "How can I

contribute this gift to the glory of God and to the betterment of this world?" All right here from this passage.

JH: So I see what you're saying about the spirit of your book being both to seek profundity in *Haggadah*, but also to have applicable practical lessons.

MG: Exactly.

JH: It's beautifully illustrated by your example. Thank you for that. And I wanna point out two themes that we're gonna come back to later in the interview. One is the podcast, because you have a podcast episode on humility with Benjamin Watson, and so I want to direct everybody to your podcast, *The Rabbi's Husband*. But we'll talk a little bit about the podcast in a minute. But you also mentioned C. S. Lewis, of course, who was a deeply, deeply Christian person and had a sensitivity and a sensibility that really was not particularly Jewish, but you're drawing on shared religious themes, which we'll get back to in a minute as well when we talk about some of your works in the Christian world or partnering with prominent Christian organizations. Moving in that direction, for the moment, I'd like to ask you to spend a moment telling us about your really landmark philanthropic commitments to Africa.

MG: Oh, well, thank you. I mean, it was about 20 years ago, almost 20 years ago, when my closest friend from college, Dr. Jon Fielder, who was finishing his residency at Johns Hopkins, he called me and he said, "As you know, I'm a Christian." And I said, "Yes, I know you're Christian." He said, "Well, I feel called by God to go to Africa and to serve the poor," who were then being ravaged by AIDS. He didn't say this, but what he effectively said was, "I'm gonna give up all of the luxuries, in fact, many of the necessities in the United States to answer my calling to serve," what he would have quoted, he did quote from Matthew 25, "The least among us."

MG: So he went over to Africa in 2002 as an AIDS doctor when AIDS was ravaging Africa, and he's never left. And one of the many things I've learned from him is that the greatest humanitarian problem in the world is almost certainly the lack of access to medical care for almost everybody in Africa. In that most African countries have one doctor for every 10 to 50,000 people. That doctor may or may not have had formal training. And of course, if there's one doctor for every 30,000 people, there's not gonna be a functioning hospital system. If there is a hospital or a clinic, it's not gonna have oxygen, it's not gonna have surgical capability. And without health care, there's a limit to how an individual can thrive and a society can advance.

MG: So let's say a woman in Africa needs a C-section. In Africa, only 20% of women who need C-sections get them, at least in the areas where we're very active. In places like Uganda and Burundi and lots of other places. 20%. So what happens to the 80%? They'll have the fistula, the birth injury with devastating long-term consequences. And so let's say that happens to a woman. She might die in childbirth, okay? That's obviously a tragedy in of itself. But the tragedy compounds, because let's think about the children she has at home who are now orphaned. What's gonna happen to an orphaned child with no resources? What's gonna happen to the whole community which depends upon her?

MG: For \$230, we can give her a C-section. That's what we do as often as we can. And so we believe health care is the foundation for all development. Obviously, it saves lives, but it also enables societies to prosper. Because if the society is constantly at risk of its young women dying for lack of a C-section or suffering devastating injuries and being unable to carry on their tasks, the society cannot advance.

MG: And so this is what Jon discovered in the early 2000s, was that there were these Christian missionary doctors who were working in environments that often had inconsistent power, inconsistent water, no oxygen for surgeries and other kinds of procedures, and limited everything else. And yet they were there at incredible sacrifice to themselves to serve the poor. And they had no consistent source of support, 'cause for a variety of sociological reasons, the denominations, the Christian denominations that used to support them had become weaker and poorer.

MG: So we started in 2010, African Mission Healthcare, to partner with Christian missionary doctors at Christian mission hospitals to do three things. One, to provide clinical care for the poor. Everything from AIDS care to maternal child care to surgery to everything a hospital does. We also do a lot of training. Because one of our goals... And when I say us, I include all the Christian missionary doctors in us. One of our goals is that the next generation of Africans will have vastly better health care than the current generation. So we invest a lot of human and financial resources in training, and then infrastructure.

JH: Well, first and foremost, kol hakavod, congratulations on a remarkable gift and support of really... What I'm learning from you now is a really global vision. Global within healthcare, I mean. You're looking at all of the angles, and it seems really remarkably impactful. Before we get to Jewish themes again and circle back to them, I wanna pick up on the theme of Christianity in the mind of the Jewish population. In reporting about

your gift, much was made of the fact that the recipient organization was not really merely Christian, but a Christian missionary organization.

MG: Right.

JH: Looking at you and your professional personality, and your podcast, and of some of the Christian themes which loom large in your work, what does Christian-Jewish partnership add to your work or your perspective?

MG: It's a very important part of my work. And Erica graduated from HUC in 2007, so we're deeply involved with Christian missionary doctors through African Mission Healthcare. In fact, one of our great honors is, and this happens several times a year, is when one of the Christian missionary doctors comes back from Africa for a home leave, which they typically do once every five years or so. And when they come through New York, they come to our home. Now we want them coming to our home rather than going out. It may seem like, "What does it matter whether they go out or come to your home?" Because we have four kids, and by introducing our kids to these Christian missionary doctors, our children have an opportunity to learn what true greatness in faith is.

MG: They learn what it means to devote oneself fully to the stranger, what it means to really love the stranger, which is a Jewish imperative. They're able to see that and to learn that from getting to know these Christian missionary doctors. I'm also very involved with Eagle's Wings. Erica and I are very involved with Eagle's Wings. What Eagle's Wings does is identify, by now, thousands of Christian leaders, and has brought them to Israel, has educated them about Judaism, has educated them about Israel, has created this incredible community of faith of these really magnificent people, these Christian pastors who are now... They developed a deep love of all things Jewish. They love it, the Jewish state, they love the Jewish religion, they love Jewish customs, and it's all through Eagle's Wings.

MG: And I actually teach Torah every Tuesday at noon to primarily evangelical pastors put together by Eagle's Wings. So, in terms of Jewish-Christian partnership, I think we're living in rather extraordinary times. There are so many examples of this. We did a partnership with CBN, Christian Broadcast Network. This is 2018, Erica and I met Gordon Robertson who's the CEO of CBN. And we told Gordon about our work with missionaries. And he said he was a missionary too as a younger man. And in the course of this conversation, he was saying where he agrees with the Rambam over the Rambam and Rosh. I said, "Great." There are a lot of rabbis who don't have this level of knowledge and you didn't even... It wasn't like we were coming together to talk about

texts. We were coming together just to meet. But he's just so fired up with the love of all things Jewish. He loves Judaism. He loves the Jewish religion. He said he studies the Jewish Bible everyday.

MG: This is the first time this has ever happened in human history. This flowering of Christian love and Christian friendship for all things Jewish, extending from the Jewish day to the Jewish religion, to Jewish teachings, to Jewish holidays. I get emails from Christian broadcasts alerting me to Jewish holidays I barely heard of, but calling their Christian audience to celebrate them. This has never happened before. And so this great friendship, which is flowering and growing in our day is just incredible to be holding and to participate in. And when my book *The Telling* came out in March, the book tour was all on Zoom, which was great because it meant that I could do five to seven groups a day. And they were geographically diverse. More than half of them are Christian.

MG: A lot of church groups, some non-church groups, but a lot of church groups, the different churches from around the world, from Kenya to California who wanted to learn about the *Haggadah*, about the Seder, about the Exodus story. And when I say learn, I mean learning the spirit of love. If we could have told our grandparents that I would be discussing the Seder, and the Torah, and Judaism in general with Christians who loved Judaism, the Seder, Torah, and the Jewish state as much as they did, it would have been inconceivable. But it's true. It's happening in our day.

JH: I wanna follow up on your grandparents, not just your grandparents, but people today as well. I think you know many, many Jews have deeply ambivalent or downright negative feelings about Christian organizations. I'm not speaking about individual relationships with Christians.

MG: Right.

JH: What I mean about Christian organizations and specifically, Christian missionarying. I'd like to ask you how you understand Jewish reservations about Christianity's public expressions or shall we say expressions in the public square and how you respond to those reservations.

MG: Yeah. First, I would say that if most Jews had the relationships that we had or even just could come over to our apartment on so many evenings and meet some of the Christians that come through, minds might change. We work with Christian missionary doctors all the time. And I've asked so many of these doctors, "What does it mean to be

a missionary in your world because you define yourself as a missionary?" And they said, "Well, it means that I am on a mission to live as Jesus would live if he were in my circumstance today, and therefore I'm called to go serve in Africa, therefore, I'm on a mission." And then I remember I was in Tanzania and I asked this wonderful doctor who then had been serving for a little over 30 years in Tanzania and I said, "I've been with you for two days and I haven't heard anything from you or seen anything from you that one would typically associate with a missionary."

MG: And he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, you didn't talk about converting anybody?" And he said, "Oh, those conversations only come up in one limited circumstance." I said, "What's that?" He said, "They only come up when someone says to you, 'Why do you care so much?'" And in other words, in his context when people say, "You could be anywhere but you're here. Why do you care so much? Why do you have so much?" He said, "Then I can talk to them about those kinds of things, but then that doesn't happen that often, but God willing, maybe it would happen more often because these people they do care so much and they do offer so much and they have so much to share." But I think what the reservation about Christian missionaries, at least missionary doctors, and the devout Christians that you talked about that some Jews have, I'll just describe what we've seen from so much personal experience in so many relationships with these Christians is they love Judaism.

MG: They love Jews. They're fired up with this love of all things Jewish and they always refer to the root and the branch. What they would say is you're the root, we're the branch. In order to understand who we really are, we have to understand our roots, and therefore, can we learn together? That's why Eagle's Wings has me as a devout Jew teach Torah in an entirely Jewish context, of course, to evangelical pastors every Tuesday. It's because these Christians wanna understand the roots of their Jewish faith. And of course, there are... I was reading The Jerusalem Post the other day that there are some horrible examples of people who were served as imposters of rabbis to convert people, which the Christians that I know would condemn every bit as much as we would. And our Christian friends and we often talk about the notion of being best friends.

MG: Best friends can be separate. We all agree, our Christian friends and Eric and me, we agree that Jews should be great Jews, Christians should be great Christians, and we can be great friends without becoming each other, in that, we can each approach God, understand God, develop a relationship with God within our different faith systems and become best friends in the process, but not mixing the two.

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JH: You host a podcast called *The Rabbi's Husband*, in which you discuss many things, but largely biblical and spiritual themes with rabbis and Christian leaders, and I wanna ask what the podcast has meant to you in your own personal development. It seems like a lot of these themes have really shaped your life.

MG: I study the Torah every day, and then in the course of my study and discussing the Bible with lots of people, I realized just how many people have a deep love for the Bible, and certainly one part of the Bible that's especially meaningful to them. These are Jews and Christians. I started the podcast, *The Rabbi's Husband*, where I have guests who have included everybody from congressmen, senators, and business leaders, and doctors and humanitarians, and athletes, and all kinds of people to discuss the biblical passage that's most meaningful to them. The guests on *The Rabbi's Husband* will just tell me in advance what passage they wanna discuss, anything from what we call the Hebrew Bible, and the Christians call the Old Testaments good and we discuss it for about 30 to 45 minutes, and it's been really enjoyable just sharing my love of the Bible with others who love the Bible, and those who wanna listen and learn.

JH: I'd like to close the interview by returning to your new book, *The Telling*, and ask you what surprised you in researching the *Haggadah*, which otherwise is a very familiar text for us? What did you walk away from with as a gift, a new little nugget of learning?

MG: Well, I think the word you used is so precisely right. Familiar. There's a problem with familiarity. When something's familiar, it ceases to be special all too often. Judaism is, in large parts, a rebellion against the familiar and wants to keep things that are distinct as special so that we continue to appreciate them. I think we see that

manifested with the *Haggadah*, and that so many people, just every year, whether you have one or two Seders, just open it up, read through it and don't realize that what they're holding in their hands is what I call in the book, the greatest hits of Jewish thought.

MG: And it's really the distilled compilation of Jewish practical wisdom that's gonna help them lead a happier, better and more meaningful life in the year to come. The greatest discovery in the process of my study was just the *Haggadah* is actually the greatest book ever written, number one, written by a person. Let's say the Torah was not written by a person, but was at least divinely inspired. The *Haggadah* was certainly written by a person, in fact, people, and therefore it is the greatest book ever written. Why is it? Because it basically distills the Torah to help us live a happier and better life in the new year. Because Pesach is the original and authentic Jewish New Year, not Rosh Hashanah. Pesach is the real Jewish New Year...

JH: If I can interrupt, I wanna share with the listeners what you're referring to, the fact that we celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the new year in the month of Tishrei is in fact the seventh month of the year. Tishrei is not the first year of the month. The first year of the month is in the spring, and it is the month of Nisan, the miraculous month, the month of Passover. And we have four New Years in the course of the Jewish year, one of them being Rosh Hashanah, but another one of them being Nisan and Pesach. So I wanna clarify for everyone what you mean when you talk about it being the real New Year. It's certainly one of the real Jewish...

MG: It's the biblically authentic New Year. We can only understand the *Haggadah* and Pesach in the context of the New Year, because how do we feel in the spring... As you said, Pesach has to occur in the spring. We orient the entire Jewish calendar, including leap months seven of every 17 years, so the Pesach occurs in the spring because the spring is the season we all feel renewed, rejuvenated, we're literally going outside again. It's this feeling of newness because it's the New Year. That's why we have the New Year at that time...

JH: Indeed. Indeed.

MG: And *Haggadah* is there to help us do just that we do at our January 1st New Year, is we make commitments, we make New Year's resolutions, and we do so with the help of the Torah, which is distilled into the *Haggadah*. The greatest thing to have learned about the *Haggadah* is that it is, in fact, the greatest book ever written in the sense that it's also the most practical book ever written. It's the first and best ever self-help book.

My attempt in *The Telling* is to show people that this is a treasure they're holding in their hands, and it can help them to live the kinds of life they wanna live and to be the kinds of people they wanna be.

JH: And to add, that *The Telling* is the best translation of the word *Haggadah* that there ever was. It's exactly right. It means, "The Telling," and that's what it's all about, that's why you chose the section of the *Haggadah*, which is the telling itself, the Maggid. All together, beautifully put together, packaged and thank you for the lessons and the insights. And thank you, especially for the time and the pleasure of your company. It's been a great discussion.

MG: Thank you. What a wonderful discussion. Thank you so much, Josh.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And remember to check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about HUC Connect and all it has to offer, visit huc.edu/huc.

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