WARM AND WELCOMING?
INSTITUTIONALIZED BIASES AND BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

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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, a conversation with Warren Hoffman and Miriam Steinberg-Egeth. Warren Hoffman is the Executive Director of the Association for Jewish Studies, after having served in JCCs and Federations to bring change, innovation and new ideas to legacy organizations. He holds a PhD in American Literature from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and is the author of two books, The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture, and The Great White Way: Race in the Broadway Musical. Miriam Steinberg-Egeth's roles have included Director of the Center City Kehillah, Administrator for the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia, and Director of Hillel of Greater Philadelphia's Jewish Graduate Student Network. She is currently the strategic manager at Hadar, and writes a weekly advice column called Miriam's Advice Well. She has been a leader in providing inter-denominational and inter-generational opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds to connect with communal experiences that work for them.

JH: Warren, Miriam, thank you both for joining me on The College Commons Podcast.

Miriam Steinberg-Egeth: Thanks so much for having us.

JH: We're going to discuss the book you edited together, titled Warm and Welcoming: How the Jewish Community Can Become Truly Diverse and Inclusive in the 21st Century. To kick us off, I'd like to ask you, Miriam, before we introduce the book itself, to tell us the state of affairs out there in the world that motivated the book in the first place. What needs does the book fill?

MS: The book fills the need for Jewish communities and Jewish organizations and institutions to reflect Jews themselves. So our organization should look like the Jewish community that they

are made to serve, and we know that that's not always the case. My desire as a Jewish professional and someone who really have devoted my life to working in the Jewish community is to make our Jewish institutions as fully inclusive and reflective of the people who want to seek out Jewish community as possible. And so both Warren and I have worked in many different institutions and settings over the years, and this book really reflects our desire to take what we've learned out in the field of Jewish communal work, and to have Jewish organizations be able to learn from some of our experiences, and learn certainly from the experiences of the contributors just how vast the differences and needs are that are not always reflected, and sort of honored within the current state of our institutions.

JH: Okay, we're gonna have the opportunity to get into some of those details. For now, Warren, you wrote the introduction, so tell us what the book does and how it does it.

Warren Hoffman: It starts off with my own personal experiences in the Jewish community, both as a professional, but also just as a participant, and some moments in which I myself didn't always feel welcomed by certain communities. And the book very much comes... From each of the contributors from a very personal point of view, because we want readers to really understand and put themselves in the shoes of lots of different people who, for any number of given reasons, have not felt that certain Jewish organizations have been a home for them, or have been truly warm and welcoming spaces. But the book is much more than just personal reflections. It's full of strategies and tools for engagement and best practices in a number of different areas and topics, from individuals with disabilities, LGBTQ Jews, and Jews of color, to topics such as how to do arts and cultural programming, or use music, or do fundraising in ways that can be more inclusive to a variety of audiences. And each of the contributors really is a leader in their field, and has just wonderful advice and insights to give readers on so many topics that I think are really going to make a difference for all the readers who get a chance to look at this book.

JH: And I wanna echo your sense of it being not only really thoughtful and engaging, but also very practical. And so some of the questions we're gonna have in a few minutes will go in that direction. For now, I'd like to start with the relatively recent past, which Rabbi Sid Schwarz invoked in his foreword to the book. Specifically, he refers to this thing called the "Jewish Emergent Network," as one attempt to encourage communitarian solutions to some of the problems that you've named already. So let's start with you, Warren. First, just tell us what is the Jewish Emergent Network?

WH: So the Jewish Emergent Network is this new-ish network of different synagogue type organizations that have really been trying to redefine what Jewish life and community can look like, and some of these organizations include Sixth & I. They include Romemu. They include Mishkan Chicago. I know I'm forgetting some of them, and I apologize, but these are different organizations, most of them which would identify as synagogue or synagogue-like, and are really trying to build community in new, very inclusive ways.

JH: Can you give us one example of an initiative undertaken by one of these member synagogues in the network to illustrate the point of tackling these problems of inclusivity?

WH: A great example is IKAR, a... Again, a synagogue-type organization in LA, and Gamal Palmer who writes the chapter about Jews of color, talks about IKAR in his chapter, and he talks about the very thoughtful and intentional ways in which IKAR went to really think about how to bring Jews of color into the community, not just to simply say, "Hey, everybody is welcome, come on in," but to think about what sort of training does everybody, from the highest leadership in the board, right down to security guards who might be greeting people at their entry... How do you think about what it means to bring people into this space? And he describes how IKAR did several days worth of trainings for different aspects of their community, and the result was that it really did create a space where Gamal said that as a Jew of color, he really feels comfortable being in their space as they welcome him, and the content that comes out from the Rabbi, from the Bima, and the other programming that they're doing... Again, the thoughtfulness and time that they took really pays off, and that's something that we really talk about in our book at large is that this work of inclusion is hard. It takes time. It does not happen overnight, and people need to be committed to spending some effort in making this happen.

JH: Miriam, I wanna ask you about the state of the member institutions in the Jewish Emergent Network today, now that there have been some years under their belt, Are they aging into the synagogue equivalent of 2.5 kids, a mortgage, and a labradoodle? Or to paraphrase Rabbi Schwartz's own words, in his foreword, have the emergent communities simply displaced the legacy ones?

MS: I'm happy to answer this question with a caveat that I have never spent time myself in any of these communities that are part of the emergent network, and while I respect them and have learned about them a bit professionally, I'm not sure that I have all of the expertise to answer your question exactly. So I'll do my best and you can see if this is getting at what you're looking for. I think that what has made the communities that are part of the Jewish Emergent Network, as well as communities elsewhere who are successfully bridging this particular moment in time, are the ones that can do both. So I don't think that it is an either-or. I really do think it is a both-and, that these organizations are able to welcome people in across sort of ages and stages of their lives, as well as bringing new people in. So legacy institutions may be concerned when new synagogues and new institutions pop up, but I think that what's really crucial to remember is that there are so many Jews who are not engaged in any aspect of institutional life, so it's really not a question in my mind of displacing legacy organizations. It's about finding the place where the people who want to be part of Jewish communities are able to be part of communities.

MS: So if the members of the Jewish Emergent Networks are able to welcome people in with the kids and the dog and more established people, while also welcoming in people who are in their 20s and 30s, people who may be Jews by choice, people who are new to a city and just finding their way... By doing that, I think these emergent communities are actually able to push

legacy institutions to figure out how they can do that better, and this really is a case of "more is more." The last thing I would ever want our book to do is to feel like it's putting Jewish institutions in competition with each other. This is really an opportunity for all institutions that care about serving the Jewish community to learn from and with each other and to lift each other up. If one community is doing something well, certainly our hope through this book is that other communities can learn from it and be able to emulate the parts that are working well, and to help bring people in in that regard as well.

JH: Warren, your contributors tackle so many urgent issues of our day: Race, class, Israel/Palestine, and really the list goes on. But I'd like to draw you out on Rebecca Barr's chapter titled, "Millennials and Gen Z," and the perennial... Really, eternal question of the generation gap. And here's what I'm interested in. Echoing the overall orientation of your book, Barr's chapter specifically and explicitly adopts design thinking as a way to reach more young people, and Barr does us the favor of defining design thinking as, quote, "A human-centered approach to innovation, to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for success," close-quote. Is there a productive tension between being human-centered, as defined by Rebecca Barr, which could risk feeling very consumerist on the one hand, and being community-centered, which presupposes that the collective experience and memory have a claim on us regardless of our individual needs, on the other hand?

WH: That's a great question. And to me, those things are not mutually exclusive. One thing that Rebecca talks about is how these younger generations, millennials and Gen Z, are... I'm not sure if we would use the word maybe "consumerists," but generations of individuals in which the individual... That the focus on the self, one's uniqueness, really comes to the fore. And the tension is between trying to address and be relevant and speak to the individual needs that people have, and at the same time to build a community out of that. And the problem is that if we think of community as just this big monolithic blob, which we sometimes do... Then the individual's needs can sometimes get lost in all of that. So in Rebecca's chapter... And actually throughout a number of chapters throughout the book... I also think about Rabbi Mike Uram's chapter, and Lisa Colton and Myriam Bushell's chapter on communication, talk about new methods of what community itself is. So community can be sub-groups and living in lots of different places for people to relate to each other. And so it's much harder to do the sort of one-on-one, unique individual work, but we owe it to them and to our own communities to really meet their individual needs, because otherwise the communities that, as they currently exist, won't be relevant to speak to that.

MS: To speak to the question, and echo a lot of what Warren said, I just wanna add that there was a previous time in Jewish life where the expectation was you take, and you experience what is being offered by the leadership, and that the lines between leadership and participants have broken down really in line with how the generations that are spoken about in this chapter approach the rest of their lives. And so this is not a case where it's about what the synagogue is offering, and the 20s and 30s people taking them up on it, right? It's really about empowering people to say what they want out of Jewish communal life and experiences, and to help be part

of crafting that. And that's not about centering the individual over the community, because these are people who want communal experiences. But it's about centering a different way of approaching what it is that community is offering, and what it is that the community is there for in peoples lives.

JH: Which leads us, Miriam, into the next question I wanted to ask you. If the universality and the eternity of the generation gap keeps it always on our radar, the opposite might be said of disability access and inclusion, which it seems must ceaselessly fight against invisibility. And for that alone, I wanna pause to congratulate and thank you both for your inclusion of Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer's contribution on that topic. And what I learned from her chapter is that so much of disability access and inclusion is about cognizance, knowing the numbers of disabled people in our communities, taking the time to learn their needs, and measuring the hard and soft costs of communal decisions. Do you think, Miriam, it's the case that we can apply the work of taking cognizance to all of the problems and solutions you raise in Warm and Welcoming?

MS: I really appreciate this question, because I think that what you just said is true, not just for Gabbie's chapter, but for, in fact, all the chapters, right? So I think that there are lessons about invisibility and awareness and cognizance, and also about measuring what can we accomplish with what resources? And what do we need to fundraise for? Or change the scope of what we're able to do. I think there are lessons about that in every chapter that can be applied to every other chapter, and to every other marginalized group that's out there. One of the things that I talk about in my final chapter in the book is how we are well aware that we do not cover, over the course of this book, every group or every person that may have felt or feel marginalized in the Jewish community in some way. And I say to readers... I wanna say now to listeners, we're very aware of that. If you don't see something about yourself or your experience reflected in this book, it is not a signal that it is not important, or not a crucial part of your lived experience. It is only that a book is itself finite.

MS: But to speak directly to your point, by raising up each of the issues that are discussed through the chapters in the book, I think it helps to get rid of some of that invisibility and helps to raise the level of consciousness of anyone reading it, or anyone taking in these ideas about how people might be experiencing our Jewish communal spaces. And I really do think that there are universal lessons that can be applied. To speak just for a second a little bit more specifically about the disability chapter, one of the things that speaks to me so deeply about this chapter is the idea that anyone through accident, or illness, or age, could experience disability at any time, that it is one of the conditions in this book that can come and go in a way that is different than some of the other ones. And that's not to say that that makes it more important. But I think that it is something that we can take away from that chapter, the idea that we are all one unfortunate accident away from needing a ramp to be able to access our synagogue, or needing some other accommodation that we can't envision right now. Or to put it in the context of the pandemic, one quarantine away from wanting to be able to access services via Zoom. There are really so many instances where we don't know what we don't know about needs and inclusion until it affects us personally.

MS: And so being able to learn from the author's experiences, and yes, apply them broadly, both to specific instances of someone's needs for inclusion, as well as who's not being included just because they're new to a city, or not sure about walking in the front door because they're shy? And there's all kinds of reasons why someone may feel these ways that doesn't come down to demographic issues. And so I really do think that the thoughts and the practical solutions that go into all of these chapters can be applied to any community, even one that would say, "Well we don't have anyone who's like that here." Which again, is almost definitely not true. But even in those cases, if someone really wanted to say that, there are still lessons to be learned and practical applications to make your community more welcoming.

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JH: The College Commons Podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's 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, readymade lesson plans for synagogue and community learning. The Master Class, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty, exclusively for our alumni. Enroll soon, because seats are limited. 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. And now, back to our program.

JH: I'd like to go big at this point and pick up on deeper themes that are currents or undercurrents throughout the book, but which aren't necessarily full-blown topics. And I'd like to begin with you, Warren, on the topic of tribalism. Can tribalism be seen as neutral rather than negative? As a tool for a common purpose, which could just as possibly be a noble purpose as a nefarious one? And regardless, is tribalism inevitable anyway?

WH: Tribalism is of course a complex, and charged, in many ways, term. We talk about in the book how... Let's say the... Particularly, I was thinking about the mid-20th century, when Jewish-Americans were really beginning to find their place socially and socio-economically in the US. There really was, I think, a sense of what we might term "tribalism," in that these large JCCs were built, and large suburban synagogues were built as a home and a space for Jewish Americans to build a safe and established community for them, coming out of a time when there was a lot of anti-Semitism, when Jews were not fully part of the mainstream... And this was a change.

WH: But as I use that term Jewish Americans, I'm really talking about a particular type of Jewish American. I'm talking about white, Ashkenazi, hetero-normative, heterosexual Jews, maybe Yiddish-speaking Jews... Jews of a certain socio... Let's say, middle to upper class. And so there was a sense of safety and security in building, let's say, a tribe in that way. But today, we have to realize that the tribe has to be much bigger. Maybe to use Walt Whitman, "I contain multitudes."

All of these different types of diversity and inclusion can be part of the Jewish community. So again, it doesn't have to be either/or, it's about "How do we broaden what community is and not think of it as borders and boundaries and things that close people off, but how can it be way more permeable, so that it's always shifting?"

JH: Miriam, Warren cited a term that a lot of us hear bandied about, Ashkenormativity. I think you used the word, Warren, but you certainly referred to Ashkenazim, and we know the term Ashkenormativity, and I wanna draw you out on the idea of normativity itself. Is normativity ever non-oppressive? Can it serve as the glue of human convention, whereby we agree on the terms of our socialization and, indeed, our relationships?

MS: So for people who find themselves as fitting in with the normativity, absolutely, right? When you find yourself on the inside of any experience, for a lot of people, that can feel really great, but what that means for the people who are on the outside of it can be really damaging. So a couple of examples from the book. One is... This actually comes up a few different times... Where someone might stand up in front of an audience at a Jewish film festival, or on the Bima at Shabbat services, and say that they're kvell-ing about something, right? To use a Yiddish term, or use some other kind of Yiddishism that for people who grew up hearing those Yiddish words and phrases, that might feel really comforting. That might make them feel, like, "Ah, this is a place that I belong." And for people who grew up maybe in Sephardic households, or did not grow up with Jewish parents, those terms can be really alienating. If someone stands up in front of a crowd and uses a term that you don't know, and everyone else around you sort of laughs and chuckles and, "Oh, I get it," then that's really damaging. So, it is about where those normativity clues and the cues are employed. Sometimes they can help establish a community, and sometimes they can really exclude people.

MS: So in the chapter in the book on inter-faith families, Jodi Rombert talks about the importance of having spaces that are only for inter-faith families, and I think that that is an example of finding a community and creating a different normativity. So the normativity when all of those inter-faith families are together is that common experience of having inter-faith family members, and that's sort of using that cue of, "What is normal?" to build community in that way. Again, in Gamal Palmer's chapter on Jews of color, he talks about the first time that he goes to a Hannukah party that is all Jews of color in attendance, and what that experience was like for him. And so I don't think that the point of the book... And certainly the takeaway that I would not want people to have is that everyone has to be included in everything all the time. Rather, it's about how do we make spaces that are appropriate for anyone who wants a space where they feel comfortable? And there's a real difference there.

MS: As to your specific question about whether a normativity as a concept is always oppressive or can be non-oppressive, I think, is how you phrased it? I think it is truly how those aspects of normativity are applied, and how people are made to feel if they don't fit in. So we talk about representation in the book in terms of leadership in boards and even performers in arts and culture, and things like that. If you don't ever see yourself represented in the whole of the

community, that's going to be a turn-off, but if you don't ever have opportunities to be in a space where everyone is like you also... You're also missing out on a certain kind of communal experience. There is no one-size-fits-all for what will make every person feel included and feel welcomed in the community, and at the same time, there are ways to apply these ideas of bringing people in and sameness that can be used to our advantage while also not over-applying it so that everything becomes heterogeneous in that way.

JH: I appreciate the answer. So much of everything we've been talking about really does boil down to the cognizance. It could be an intellectual cognizance of just realizing who's in your community, but so much of what you've just mentioned, Miriam, is kind of emotional cognizance and empathy, and understanding that that which suits you may not suit others about whom we care just as much. So I appreciate that. Miriam, I wanna give you the final word, since you composed the conclusion. I very much appreciated your recognition that, quote, "solving one problem can create another one." It's about priorities sometimes, and priorities are all about internalizing the fact that goal number one comes at the expense of number two, not to mention those priorities further down the line. And since we've spoken about language just now, I wanna speak about the potency of the Hebrew language in general, but also to ask you to share your thoughts on the costs and benefits of tackling that particular issue.

MS: So, I think it depends so much on context, right? So if we're talking about an Intro to Judaism class, you'd better be defining every word you use and providing everything in translation, right? Otherwise you're missing your target audience. At the same time, if you are trying to show a group of Orthodox students that they are just as welcomed at a Federation event as someone who grew up in a reform community, it's about using the language in a tactical way to signal what you're really trying to communicate to people. So you want to use the prayers and the language and the songs that's going to speak to the group that you have assembled, and that plays out in a lot of different ways. Of course, again, in the synagogue setting, communities have to choose whether they present the things in translation. One of the parts of that final chapter is actually Warren's story about the lack of transliteration in many synagogues, and I have, in fact, heard people who are more experienced with Jewish life and have had a deeper Jewish educational background saying that when things are translated, they often feel alienated, which, again, is just an example of how there is... Exactly what you said. Sometimes one solution can cause another problem.

MS: I would hope that the use of Hebrew... And I would add here, as I said before, the use of Yiddish, and in communities where it is relevant, the use of Ladino, the use of Russian, the use of other languages that are native to any group that you're talking about, that the language is really employed in a way to communicate to people what you want them to hear. And acknowledging that sometimes translation will make some people feel uncomfortable, and the lack of translation will make some people unable to access what you're saying all together. I would certainly always opt in favor of the translation so that people are able to participate, but I think it gets into a lot of sticky issues about identity more broadly.

MS: And so it's an interesting question. I think every community needs to grapple with it, both in the context of the specific program or service that they're talking about, as well as the specific group that they're serving. So again, as we were talking about, if someone's doing a kind of engagement-focused event for 20s and 30s, they might choose to employ language differently than if they're doing a book club or a speaker series for baby boomers. And to re-say something that I said that I will say as many times as anyone lets me, not every single thing has to be for every single person, but every person should have a place to where they feel like they are fully welcomed as themselves.

JH: Well, on that note, then, in the spirit of your new book, Warm and Welcoming: How the Jewish Community Can Become Truly Diverse and Inclusive in the 21st Century, I wanna thank the editors, Warren Hoffman and Miriam Steinberg-Egeth, for joining us on the Commons podcast. It's really been a pleasure to talk to you.

WH: Thank you.

MS: Thank you so much.

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