

**TORAH IN THE TIME OF PLAGUE:  
HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY JEWISH RESPONSES**

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our Acclaimed Author series brought to you by HUC Connect, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, dean of HUC's Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our special Acclaimed Author series in partnership with the Jewish Book Council.

JH: I'm very pleased to welcome Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler. She is the Dean of Students and the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat Rabbinical School, where she teaches Hasidism and Pastoral Torah. She just won the 2021 National Jewish Book Award in Modern Jewish Thought and Experience for a collection, *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Reflections* from Ben Yehuda Press. It's a collection of essays engaging our global pandemic in relation to Jewish thought, spirituality and history. Dr. Leib Smokler, mazel tov on your award, and thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Erin Leib Smokler: Thank you so much for having me.

JH: I'd like to begin, against all reason, at the very beginning of your book. In your introduction, you develop an idea coined as theological vertigo, a kind of dizzy destabilization caused by COVID. Can you elaborate a bit on this lyrical but troubling idea?

ES: Theological vertigo is a phrase that I really absorbed from Dr. Avivah Zornberg, who writes an essay, herself, about the experience of Sarah, our foremother, and what it must have felt like for her to be the onlooker, or the bystander to a world coming undone. In her case, in the form of her son's near-binding Akedah.

ES: Building off of a midrash and a commentary from the Maharal of Prague, it is noticed that Sarah dies on account of the near-death of her son. Not the death but the near-death. And that's

a kind of curious point to see that there are reverberations. Powerful, painful, dangerous reverberations for being in proximity to pain, being in proximity to uncertainty, bearing witness, again, not only to one's own demise, but to the destabilization of the world as one has known it.

ES: And that just seems so very resonant for me, confronting the world that we're living in. Of course, there's the absolute pain and suffering of those who have been touched by this pandemic physically, emotionally, psychologically, financially, etcetera.

ES: And all of us have suffered an additional pain and that is what I consider to be this notion of theological vertigo. Having to deal with tremendous amounts of instability, of everything that we took to be true and stable, coming really undone. And I think this is felt, obviously, in the realm of our physical well-being, but I also wanted to give language for the spiritual condition. The really existential, spiritual condition of living in the midst of such rapid change, and so very much uncertainty.

JH: I wanna pick up on precisely that theme. And having begun at the beginning, let's bookend this conversation by going all the way to the end of the book. Continuing this thought, with the final essay by Michael Fishbane, titled, Aging in Place: A Spiritual Fact of Life. I wanna focus Fishbane's many thoughts in relation to what you brought to the table as theological vertigo. Fishbane cites an interpretation by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitza on the book of Ecclesiastes. And in this interpretation, Abraham views his pending mortality as an opportunity for growth.

JH: Fishbane writes that. In this reading Abraham's "central concern was not to focus on the quantity of mortal days left to him, but to seek their spiritual quality." And Fishbane further... He points out that this vortex of life crises, or as you may put it, this theological vertigo, can actually give us the opportunity to live life more deeply, to get past the limitations that we normally allow to govern us in day-to-day life. And so I wanna ask you, where have you found the opportunities that we gain from either theological vertigo or the vortex of this particular life crisis?

ES: This is a good question. I think Professor Fishbane's perspective is a beautiful rumination, and meditation on precisely this phenomenon of coming to terms with one's days. As a personal reflection, if you're asking me, I think that one of the difficult contributions of this time period has been putting into relief for us in a very visceral way, what is otherwise a truth that is in the background of our lives. And that is the importance of the present moment. The way in which we do not control our lives, our universes and those around us.

ES: So in my experience, there has been a real quieting of background noise and a re-centering on things that matter, which for me are my family, those I love. The tradition I love as well. That has been a source of great healing for me. So I think that, if I'm to wed together a little bit of Michael Fishbane's own really beautiful essay and my own reflections on this moment, I guess I would really just say that the sharp focus that we have when confronted with our own mortality is not gifted to us usually until the end of our days. And we don't ever know when that is going to

be. What the pandemic has done is forced us all into that kind of consciousness. And I think, as he himself is pointing out, that's Fishbane, it can really be received as an opportunity and as a gift. And that's something that I wanted to do in this project was to kind of name that and to give people space to be conscious, to be reflective, to kind of seize this moment to actually, yeah, meditate on the meaning of our lives as they appear to us in this ephemeral but really sharp kind of a way.

JH: You talk about the focus turning toward our relationships. And I want to turn now to the essay by Yitz Landes titled *Praying Away the Plague*, which discusses Abraham Catalano's book titled *Olam Hafuk*, which means *The World Turned Upside Down*, describing a plague in the city of Padua, Italy in the year 1630. And as reported to us by Landes, this 17th century author, Catalano, describes the effort to sustain the comfort and solidarity of communal prayer so central Judaism, while at the same time respecting the risks of contagion.

JH: Catalano writes, 400 years ago, "And then we decreed on all unmarried men to come and pray outside the synagogue of the Ashkenazim in the courtyard of the synagogue, so that there would be space between those praying." Eerily reminiscent, I think we would agree, of what we today call social distancing. This pre-modern case captures this human tension of our desire to wrestle with reality, if we have to, for the sake of being in each other's presence. I wanna ask you how these historical examples have maybe re-shaped your understanding of our contemporary experience.

ES: Great question. There are at least two, maybe more, but at least two essays in this book that are very explicitly historical reflections. Yitz Landes' is one, and Josh Teplitsky also wrote an essay. And both of these do a wonderful job of pointing out the similarities of our contemporary experiences and the historical ones of the past, and also points to those very, very human desires that continue to surface no matter the circumstances.

ES: So I found it greatly comforting to read aspects of the historical record indicating, as you said, a desire to come together as a group come what may. In the Teplitsky piece, there's also really interesting archival material questions that were asked to rabbis about family life under these conditions, and even sexual life under these conditions. And it was just so human to see the ways that we continue to need each other. We continue to need our bodies. We continue to need really the most mundane things and even under pressing circumstances.

ES: I mentioned archives before, regarding the work of Josh Teplitsky, a historian. And I want to share with this audience that part of the hope of this book is that it serve as a kind of archive, a contemporary archive for the experience of Covid-19 in the Jewish community. And so when we read about the stories of Jews gathering to pray centuries ago, I hope that we can reflect on that with really contemporary eyes to see that their experiences are like ours.

ES: And that part of the kind of broader sociological phenomenon of Covid-19, I think, is a feeling of the return to history. Those of us who have been blessed to grow up privileged,

frankly, Jewishly privileged, but also privileged to feel ourselves living with security and without scarcity. I think this pandemic has really thrown us back into the long arc of human history and Jewish history to remind us that we are as vulnerable as our ancestors were, and that we're also capable as they were of resilience and of healing through community.

ES: I know that my synagogue met outside through the winter, more than one winter. We met every single week in the snow, in the rain, on ice. We showed up in our snowsuits. We brought our children. It was really quite a testament to this deep human need to gather. And we can see it from the past, and we know it now. And I hope we can thereby feel all the more connected to our ancestors and to their own resilience in getting through this all.

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.

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JH: I want to take that plank of our power of our desire for community and shift it a little bit to our desire to connect with God to talk a little bit about Gordon Tucker's contribution, theodicy and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in which Tucker raises, arguably at least for some the highest stakes questions, such as; is God good? And if God is good, why does God create such terrible stuff such as plagues. And he frames it in the context of this idea of theodicy. So I'm gonna ask this in a two part question. First of all, remind us if you would, what is theodicy?

ES: Theodicy tries to make sense of a God who might be good, who might be generous, and who might be all knowing, beneficent, benevolent and omniscient, who nevertheless somehow also allows a world of evil. So there's a long philosophical tradition outside of Judaism that has tried to wrestle with that question. And Jewish theology has also contributed quite a bit with the book of Job being perhaps our first statement on the matter.

JH: So Tucker, going back to the article, he asks the question, is it irreligious, is it in impious, is it chutzpadik to study theodicy to ask the questions that theodicy asks to try to justify God in the face of calamity. I'm not so concerned as to whether or not it is irreligious or impious to ask the question of theodicy, but rather is it relevant? Is it relevant to so many of us who don't have such a pious notion of God in the first place?

[chuckle]

ES: I do recognize that the kind of religious approach to, to theodicy might itself not resonate for a contemporary population. That being said, the grounding impetus for those questions, this sense of unfairness, the sense of meaninglessness, returning to the theological vertigo for a moment, I will say that the term... Leave theology out of it for a moment and just focus on vertigo. Vertigo is a word that might be familiar to some from Sartre, from the existential philosophical tradition, referring to a kind of dizziness born of being thrown into a world that seems meaningless.

ES: So I guess I wonder whether the theo part of the theodicy the theos meaning God. I recognize that that frame might not be the right one for everyone. And yet, I'm gonna stick with the though as one that I do think very intuitively rings true for so many people. The idea of a world that is predictable and a world that offers us firm grounding is something that I do think most people require to get on with life [chuckle] And I think that the destabilization of that, that has characterized the past number of years is its own kind of theodicy, its own kind of internal discomfort as we try to find our way through all of this. The question or the challenge of theodicy has been a deeply personal one for me and a scholarly academic one, if you will.

ES: I wrote my own PhD Dissertation on theodicy in the writings of the Piaseczno, Rabbi, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was known as the Rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto and he lived and preached and ultimately died during the Holocaust. And so what he offered in the form of homilies that he would give weekly and write down his notes afterwards he left in a milk can for ultimately Polish construction workers to find. He left these homilies that were given week after week inside of the ghetto.

ES: And through the language of Jewish tradition and with no references, interestingly, to his own historical circumstances, no direct references to Nazis for example. He nevertheless goes through his own reckoning with this question of theodicy and in the depths of despair as he lost his own family and as his community, you know, was totally decimated. The Rabbi himself moved from a stance of justification that is the theodicy to one of anti-theodicy, which is not anti-religious or anti-God. But I think somewhat similar, perhaps to what you're suggesting, is a stance that says the question itself is not...

ES: It's not right to be asked, not because it's impious, but actually because it's so beyond our grasp. Now, I don't think that the average American Jew is necessarily, let's say offended by the question of theodicy for the reasons that The Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto might have been, but I do think that the desire to find some kind of reckoning between the world that we expected and the world as it is, is something that rings true across time and place.

JH: It does ring true, and it does resonate with a world that has changed precipitously from what we expected, to what we have. And so, I want to end this interview with a perspective from you of surprise, not the surprise of all of us being broad-sighted by a global pandemic, but a surprise, perhaps a delightful surprise that you encountered in reading and editing these pieces.

ES: Part of what motivated me to gather these voices together was, I suppose a loneliness that I was feeling in the early months of pandemic. Literally and metaphorically we were quarantined and isolated from one another, and I reached out to friends and colleagues and tried to find my way toward connection. One of the ways I tried to find toward connection was through the sharing of ideas, through a sharing of experience, and through sharing of this writing project. So one of the great delights, I think of quarantine isolation was this book, and was a reminder that we can connect to one another in ways not necessarily spatial, but emotional, psychological, spiritual, etcetera.

ES: And that I could gather the presence of other people in the form of their words and in the form of the back and forths that this book required. I felt like I was able to build a small community from among so many isolated parts, and so I do think that a great gift to me from this whole time period was the opportunity to really work closely, and I mean that figuratively, but to work closely with friends and colleagues, people I admire greatly, who can help buoy one another through a time of great challenge. So I suppose I can leave it at that.

JH: Well, speaking of delights, it's been a delight for me to speak with you, to talk about your incredible book, to give you congratulations on your well-deserved award, and to thank you for spending the time.

ES: Thank you so very much.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcast. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit [huc.edu/hucconnect...](http://huc.edu/hucconnect...)

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