

THE WRONG KIND OF JEW?

(Begin audio)

[music]

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, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Hen Mazzig. Hen Mazzig is an award-winning Israeli author, writer, and speaker, he was named as one of the Algemeiner's top 100 people, positively influencing Jewish Life, a top 50 online pro-Israel influencer, and a top 50 LGBTQ+ influencer. In 2022, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East reporting and analysis chose Hen to be its Portrait and Courage Award Laureate. His first book, 'The Wrong Kind of Jew', was released in 2022. Hen, welcome and thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Hen Mazzig: Hello, Josh. Thank you so much for having me.

JH: You begin your book 'The Wrong Kind of Jew' by saying that you don't fit people's expectations of what Jewish is. Explain what you mean.

HM: Yeah. I start with really expressing how surprised I was when I moved to America about 10 years ago, and I lived in Seattle, and what being Jewish meant for a lot of the people that I met there was very foreign to me. And what people expected me to be was not really who I am. When people say Jewish, they usually mean Sarah Silverman, or they're speaking about Jewish food, so they mean Gefilte fish and bagels. And for me personally, I didn't grow up with this culture or, this food. While I did try it, it wasn't part of my Jewish upbringing, and I feel very strongly about my Jewish identity. So it was quite a surprise for me and I find that surprisingly what being Jewish is has a very narrow meaning and it's been preserved. And every time I spoke up, I find that people from within our community and outside of our community had an issue with me sharing the stories of my family, my identity, and trying to expand what being Jewish means.

JH: In your title and introduction, you refer to this feeling of being, obviously, "The wrong kind of Jew." I wanna pick up on your response to being called that, which really caught my attention. You right, "And sometimes I get it. I'm bad at calling out antisemitism when it's politically useful.

When the right is happy with me, I call out bigotry among their ranks, and when I have finally proven I'm liberal enough, I put a spotlight on how progressive movements exclude Jews." I think I understand what you mean by calling out both the left and the right and we'll have more opportunity to talk about that. What do you mean when you point out or admit that you don't call out anti-Semitism enough?

HM: I was referring to those litmus tests that I'm constantly have to face within progressive movement and on the right as well. I feel like I'm definitely more progressive and I'm more to the left politically. That just my political ideology. But I'm constantly being judged because I don't fit neatly into what being a brown, gay Jewish lefty is. And you would often expect a person in the intersection of my identities to have very specific views on Israel, on Zionism. I don't fit into the pat narratives that people have about Israel, about the Middle East, and about Jews as a whole. Being Jewish is a central part of my identity. Just like being gay is and being Mizrahi and being a Zionist, and I call out racism and hatred and LGBTQ phobia wherever I see it.

HM: But when I call out antisemitism, people would expect me only to call out what's white supremacists and Republicans. Which I think there's a real issue with people that are conservatives and their opinions and their views on Jews specifically in the West. Some of those politicians, some of those voices have some opinions and some political ideologies that I can get behind. And I do call out, but I also find that progressives and voices that are on the left that would otherwise support every part of my identity and will speak up for bigotry and hatred that other parts of my identity are facing would be mum or would do very little to address antisemitism and hatred of Jews that is on the rise in America. And it's a big part of what I'm trying to advocate for. And I think there's... As we are not able as a community to use one unified voice to call out hatred and bigotry towards us, no matter where it comes from, we have to depoliticize antisemitism.

HM: And that's something that I'm trying to do in my work. Also based on my family's history my family came to Israel from Iraq and Tunisia, the sort of antisemitism that they faced. The people that burned their villages were not white supremacists, they weren't Nazis. I'm speaking about brown people attacking my family that are also brown. And that doesn't fit into the narrative that people in the progressive movement in America know of or are able to comprehend. I find a lot of the times, and that is a big challenge for me when I speak about this issue, is the reason that it's so heartbreaking or so challenging for me is because I speak up for, not just for myself. I speak up for my family out of my mom's 12 brothers and sisters, and my dad's 16 brothers and sisters. I'm the only one that is able to express himself in English in the way that I can. None of them speak English well enough to speak about these issues and the stories of my family. So I feel like I have a big responsibility for my family to speak up for them where they're being ignored or in worse, even silenced.

JH: I'm touched by what you're saying as an American political participant. I think that we've made progress in the Jewish community in naming and acknowledging antisemitism both on the left and the right. But I think we've made less clear headway in disentangling the strands of our identity in a way that you described about yourself and your family. There's a strong tradition in American Ashkenazi culture of not perceiving ourselves as white, and yet the whiteness of the

Ashkenazi experience is so central and a counterpoint to your experience in Israel and here in America as you just described. Can you weigh in on your impressions of not just Ashkenazi non-whiteness, but the complexity of Jewishness as a category far beyond intersectionality. Jewishness itself has all kinds of streams and counter streams in it.

HM: Yeah, that's such an important point. And I think that the core of all of it is the confusion around what being Jewish is and our people's experience in the diaspora. We had one of the longest diaspora of any people in the world, and we were out of our homeland, and we weren't allowed to go back. And every time we tried to go back, we were exiled again. And we forgot that Judaism is not a religion in the same way that Christianity is a religion and Islam is a religion. It has a different elements to it. And I think that's really where you see the FBI report in America about violence against Jews or antisemitism being the largest form of religious hatred in America. I'm sitting there thinking, wait, but it's not really religious form, because they're targeting Jews not only based on our religion. Even if we convert, we are still Jews.

HM: And it's because Judaism is not just a religion, it's also an ethnicity. And regardless of if a person practice Jewish religion, we know that they're still Jewish because it's a heritage and it's history, and it's a culture. And I think that people who paint Judaism as only a religion, are trying to deny the ways that Jews are being prosecuted. Antisemitism is about eradication, and they don't want Jews to continue existing. And it doesn't matter if you are a black Jew, or if you're a Jew of color, or if you are a Jew with pale skin that just has pale eyes and is ultra-orthodox and is visibly Jewish, if they find out that you're Jewish, you would face this hatred.

HM: And I think that's what a lot of people in America fail to realize in the conversation about race. That first of all, not everything is about race. Racism is terrible, and it's something that we all must stand up to and fight, and I fight racism in our societies. But with that being said, antisemitism is just very different. To see Jews only as a faith, is meant to hurt our connection to one another as people and our connection to Israel. And just to finalize, it's, Jews are a religion, are a heritage, a culture and ethnicity, and we are also a people. And we have always been all of those things at once, and we always will be.

JH: I wanna pick up on this tone and quality of your book in which you express profound Israeli pride and commitment, and also profound conscience to critique Israel when it deserves to be criticized. And from the American Jewish perspective, I wanna ask this question, how well or poorly does your particular form of Israeli pride map onto what we here in the United States might call liberal Zionism?

HM: I think it's a bit of an oxymoron because Zionism, for me is a liberal 'cause... And I think that Zionism is about liberation of the Jewish land, means that Jews have the right to live in our ancient homeland, just like the Armenians have a right to live in Armenia, their ancient homeland. And just like the Kurds have a right to live in Kurdistan. But I think that we have done such a good job with Zionism and with Israel, and we reclaiming our homeland and our indigenous homeland, where we started and reviving our language, and we... That's... We did such a great job that it's very hard for people to see us, as what we are as an indigenous religious minority. My love to the country is very... I don't doubt it. And even when I have

criticism, I speak up and I never have to think twice if people would see that as something that I shouldn't do. But I had an interview a few months ago with the pro-Israel lobby, with AIPAC. They wanted to interview me for a podcast that they did, and they asked me, "How can you be so critical of Israel and still say that you love it so much?" My answer is that I love my mom so much, and I'm very critical of her. [laughter]

HM: I voice some of this criticism in the book as well, that she calls me too much and I... Every day, three times a day, it's...

[laughter]

HM: And I still love her. And I don't feel like my love to her is ever at risk or that she might think that I don't love her if I have criticism of her. And it's the same with Israel. It's my country. I know that I have nowhere else, and I know what happened to my grandparents when we were stateless, and I know that this is my home. I feel like my connection to Israel is so strong, and I feel like my connection is not just religious as a secular Jew, as someone that is still keeping kosher as much as I can. And I... It's very important for me to participate in Jewish identity because that's my culture. But I see my culture and the religious aspect of it as a manifestation of my connection to my homeland. When we sing for the angels of peace, the spirits that we invite to our homes, or when we face Jerusalem when we pray, or in Sukkot when we wave for species of vegetables to six directions of the wind, that's all very indigenous practices that indigenous people, native people do all over.

HM: So for me, my Jewish religious rituals that I participate in are just a manifestation of my connection to Israel. The idea itself of Zionism is older than the word itself. And I think that there's so many different definitions and labels that have been put on it, that people have forgot that this is a very legitimate claim to our homeland and for Jews to be free. And that's why my love to Israel is where it's at. And I can be very critical of its government, and I can be very critical of its policies, and I can support, and I think everyone should support a Palestinian state because Palestinians are people as well that have legitimate claims for national homeland for themselves. And you can't support Zionism while we reject their rights for a homeland. With all of this in mind, I can still... I still love my country, and I still love my people. And I lead myself. Everything I do is really coming out of love. Even this book, it was... While it was very hard to write it, it was very much a work of love and a plea for my people from a place of love. I want to improve our story, and I think we are all writing it now. So it was just a small part of our Jewish story that I was... I hope that I contributed to.

JH: The College Commons Podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclasses for HUC alumni with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the Arts to Civil Society, Israel, and much more. Check us out at huc.edu/hucconnect. Now back to our interview.

JH: You make the point in your book about distinguishing Arabic-speaking Jews, both from Arab non-Jews, and from one another. Zooming out in the way we talk in general, do you think that

there's a problem in using umbrella terms like Mizrahi or Sephardi, that elided or risk stereotyping very different cultures and languages, or do you think that those umbrella terms are justified because of their political usefulness?

HM: Why not both? I think that it's both important to use umbrella terms, because that gives people political power. And when you have similar experience, you can come together as a union, and I'm taking this, of course, I'm borrowing it from the LGBTQ community. We know that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, have very different experiences. And I know that some voices are advocating to separate them, but I think, I can be gay and I can be part of the LGBTQ community. I can be queer as well, the same way that I can be Jewish and Mizrahi. I think also the term Jewish is an umbrella term that we all use to share an experience that is very similar. But within those groups, you understand that there's subgroups and there's a difference between Iraqi Jews and Moroccan Jews. And even within Iraqi Jews, if you ask my grandmother that she was from Baghdad, she would tell you that Jews from Basra, a different city in Iraq, are much less cultured than she is as a Baghdadian Jew. And she really looks down at them, which is funny.

HM: They're both Iraqi Jews and they share almost the same culture. But even within those, communities, you have this hierarchy and punching down. But I do think that while Iraqi Jews or as they would probably consider themselves as my grandmother considers herself a Babylonian Jew, have very similar story to the one that Jews in the Magrab had, because all of them lived under the Islamic rule and they all were oppressed in the same way and forced out in the same way. And they speak some sort of Arabic because of the Arab imperialism of the Middle East, which is another thing that is very hard for us to comprehend that, imperialism doesn't just come in white and there's different colors of imperialism and colonialism. And the result of Arab imperialism is the Middle East today. And I can see that from my Iraqi mother and from my Tunisian father, how their experience in the diaspora is so similar, and they were oppressed because of the same powers. They were both expelled from the '40s all the way to the '50s from their land.

HM: Their story was never recognized. Their land was never retrieved to them. There was never any form of compensation for what happened to them. And the amount that was taken from Jews from the Middle East and North Africa is equal to \$300 billion. The land that was taken from them is equal to five times the size of the state of Israel, according to a special committee that former minister of Justice in Canada, Irwin Kotler was leading, that researched those figures and found all of this. And yet they came to Israel and they had the same experience of being still oppressed minority, although they are majority. So all of this, I think, really brings together their story and helps move this narrative ahead and advocate for those communities to be recognized, and be heard. And if I was fighting only for Iraqi and Tunisian Jews because my mom is Iraqi and my dad is Tunisian, I would miss a whole other group of people that have so much alike with me.

HM: And if I only fought for Mizrahi Jews, and not only for Ashkenazi Jews and Mizrahi Jews when it comes to antisemitism, I would miss a whole lot of people that could support me in the same way when I fight for LGBTQ Jews and when I fight against racism. So all of this is really

different intersections of identities and different powers that are at play and that we need to use whatever tools we have and come together as communities to tackle them, and it doesn't negate from any other cause, and the importance of any other community.

JH: This book is premised largely on the need to inform an English-speaking audience about the true cultural diversity of Israel and the epistery of world Judaism. At the same time, I think it's fair to say that many American Jews and certainly many scholars of Jewish studies do in fact have a sense, or at least an awareness of the fact of Mizrahi Jews in Israel and outside of Israel as well. And I think many of us even know of their cultural and political influence in Israel, where I think many of us remain woefully ignorant and widely so, is about the experience of an Ashkenazic communities during the Holocaust. Tell us if you would in brief, what you think we need to know about that.

HM: I think that we need to recognise that Mizrahi Jews were oppressed in their respective countries. And during the Holocaust, my grandparents from my mother's side faced the Farhud. Those two days of violent attacks against the Jews of Iraq took place. During Shabbat on June 1st and June 2nd, 1941 years before the establishment of the state of Israel and 100s of Jews were killed 1,000s were injured. Jewish shops and stores and synagogues were shattered and burnt. And during those two days that were incited by Nazi agents that came to Germany and worked with their leaders in Iraq, the Iraqi Jewish community realized that this is going to be the end of their time as Dhimmi, which means they're protected minority in Iraq, and that they would have to start planning a way out the same but different happened in North Africa with the French colonialism in North Africa, where when the Vichy regime was a Nazi regime in France affected also those colonies in North Africa.

HM: And my grandparents had to work in forced labour camp in Tunisia. And my grandmother had to serve Nazi agents. And about 5,000 Jews were sent to death camps from North Africa. My grandfather was supposed to be sent to a Death camp in Europe, and at the last moment he was saved and the war was over. But those experiences are very similar. And of course, there's different levels of violence that jews in Europe face and the one in the Middle East, but the long arm of the Nazis, they were trying to reach every Jew around the world and it wasn't just exclusive to Europe. And this approach did not just end there. In 1945, the Tunisian government decided to ban any Jewish association in the country. They completely destroyed the Jewish quarter in Tunis, and they imposed rules on Jews that after the Vichy regime even left Tunisia, they continued with the oppression of the Jewish community.

HM: The same happened in Iraq in the '60s. There were public execution of Jews in the '50s. The law allowing Iraqi Jews to give up their citizenship and move to Israel was passed in the Iraqi government. So all of this is just to share some of how the years following the Holocaust that affected those Jewish communities have contributed to antisemitism in all of those Muslim countries. That I don't think any of those countries have really done reckoning. I know that Morocco was more open to having a conversation about that, but it's a far cry from genuine engagement with their past. And I think that until they will be able to do that, we won't have a genuine peace between the people in the Middle East.

JH: So Much of the emergence of the Israeli Mizrahi identity in Israeli politics is associated with the campaign of Menachem Begin in the late '70s and early '80s. And this shift in Israeli politics, if I guess your age correctly, that was probably the political generation of your parents. And I wonder what the family story of that moment is in Israeli politics and your family life.

HM: It's that moment that continues to affect them until today. And I do explore that in the book. It is the, as you guess correctly, my parent's age. My parents' experience where they were for a long time excluded from specific jobs in Israel, even in the Israeli army. My father told me how he wanted to get into one of the better units to be a pilot or to do something with computers. And he ended up being a truck driver, although he did not want to do that. And then after that, later on, he got a job as a truck driver so all of... Since the army time, it was really leading him to doing something very specific. And then after that he was trying to get some better education or to look into getting other jobs, but to get a job in specific associations, you had to be a member of labour and labour didn't really accept a non-ashkenazim.

HM: And it only if you had this red passport, you could get a job in professions that were more desirable by Israelis. And I guess with Menachem Begin and Likud coming into power, Mizrahi Jews for the first time felt equal. And it's interesting that Mizrahim in Israel... The reason that my book is also in English, and I haven't translated it to Hebrew, is because I feel like Mizrahim are not ready to have this conversation in Israel. I don't know if they would ever be ready, but when you speak to them about what their political needs are, what they want to do, they would say that they want to be equal, and they want to see the whole country together. They don't want to feel like Mizrahim are separate people or to be categorized separately. They want unity. And I think that's when Menachem Begin was offering for the first time he was speaking to Mizrahim.

HM: But not only Mizrahim to all Jews in Israel as one people, and saw us as one family. And that what was so appealing for Mizrahim. And after he took power in the '60s, my father told me how he got a job in the aerospace industry because it wasn't just exclusive for Mapai and labour members. It was also for Likud members. And he was able to really make more success in his life. And the most important thing was for them to be treated equally as people. They felt like they were always looked down upon. And that's why it's so important for my dad that he is a very strong Likud supporter to continue supporting them while I have much disagreement. Our Friday dinners we shout a lot but with love, and I think that for my dad and for my mom that meant everything, that they were seen.

HM: My mom worked in Bank Hapoalim, which was the Mapai Bank. And after Likud won she felt like she'd gotten many more opportunities to move upwards. Mizrahim was much more open. And it remains until today that they are such astound supporters of Likud and right wing parties because they feel like those are the parties that represent them. I think that the left can, in Israel, that's where their blind spot is when they can see how Mizrahim were excluded and remembering this history that was passed on from my parents' generation to us, and realise that...

HM: This community can be a massive force to bring a left wing and liberal government to Israel. But it's just a matter of seeing them the same way that Menachem Begin saw them. And

while the situation is much better today, as I mentioned earlier, there's a lot of work to be done to improve the representation of Mizrahim, but also in Israel, to not look down at Middle Eastern culture and accept and celebrate it. Of course it's, with Mizrahi communities, it's not looked down upon. And it's something that we partake in and in Arabic and Middle Eastern food is something that we celebrate. But within Ashkenazi left circles that I was part of when I lived in Israel, it's a wide brush, but I feel like left Ashkenazi Jews in Israel were always looking down upon our culture. I think that once they would be able to see us as one people and as equals, it would make many more Mizrahim vote liberal and left because they would feel like they're being respected as brothers and sisters.

JH: In your book you describe serious cases of being shut down in American or Western European contexts and having even unsavory political conflict at times. But despite that challenge, you've spent a lot of time in Western Europe and the United States, and I wonder if there's something about our democratic culture that has inspired you as an Israeli activist. And on the other hand, have you seen aspects of Israeli democratic culture provide inspiration to those of us in Europe or the United States?

HM: Oh yeah, absolutely. You are really hitting the nail on the head here. And that goes also to the reason why my book is in English, living in America and living in Western Europe. I found words to describe my experience when I was reading about critical race theory or when I read about political activists fighting for equality and justice in America. I felt like those words that they were using and the experiences that they were sharing was something that I felt that I could really connect to and see myself in. When Obama won, I still remember how I was in tears because I thought, "Wow, this man that was part of a community that was oppressed and still oppressed for so long was able to make it." And I remember thinking to myself, "I wish one day we'll have a Mizrahi prime minister in Israel that will have someone from my community being represented." Because it's so important to see yourself in the faces and in the experiences of your leaders. And while I can see the Jewish part within the leaders like Netanyahu and Lapid and Bennett, I still don't see the Mizrahi part in it.

HM: And that's something that is very missing for me, and seeing Obama and seeing the political activism in America and the reckoning around racism in America just recently with Black Lives Matter really inspired me and gave me the tools and the words to describe my experience to fight for a better future for my people. And it goes back to the reason that I'm doing all of this. I'm not doing it because I want Mizrahim to get anything more or less than equality.

HM: And I want our people to be stronger. And I do think that if we are seeing each other as equal humans and we listen to one another and we expand the Jewish story. The Jewish story and our experiences is not just a pool that has just room for a few swimmers. There's room for everyone. And the more we expand this Jewish story, the better it becomes, the better we are seen as people in America and when they see that Jews are a diverse people, that we come in every color, and that we are a tribe, and that Mizrahi Jews exist in Israel and it would just make Jewish experience and the Jewish story so much better. So I'm in the business of improving the Jewish story and expanding it and making it better for all of us. And I truly, truly hope that people would read my book and specifically Americans that love Israel so much, and they say that they

love our food and they love our music and they love the warmth and the directness of the people and everything they're speaking about that they love about Israel is very much Mizrahi.

HM: I see that young Jews are becoming more distant from Israel and from Zionism. And I think that it's because they aren't familiar with the Mizrahi and how big of a part we play in Israel and they become more desensitized to Jewish identity and they favor Arabs in the Middle East rather than favoring their Jewish brothers and sisters that are also of Arab countries and have this experience. So I think just to recognize Mizrahim and seeing us will just improve the Jewish story, but also will improve the world we live in and will make much more advance towards peace, which we all want.

JH: Hen Mazzig. Thank you very much for joining us on the College Commons podcast. It was a real pleasure to talk to you.

HM: Thanks so much for having me. The pleasure was all mine.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts 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.

[music]

(End of audio)