

## HUC CONNECT: INSIDE ISRAEL WITH DAVID MENDELSSON

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Joshua Holo: On behalf of the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, welcome to our special series, HUC Connect: Inside Israel, bringing you unique personal insights from Jewish leaders and educators in Israel now in real-time in the wake of October 7th.

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JH: Thank you for joining us. We're speaking today with Dr. David Mendelsson, Senior Lecturer of Israel Studies in Modern Jewish History on the Taube Family Campus of the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. Both educator and historian of education, he wrote the History of Jewish Education in England between 1944 and 1988. He's the immediate past director of HUC's Year-in-Israel Program, and he has been a scholar in residence at the University of Southern California, Brandeis University, and Michigan State University, as well as a frequent lecturer across the United States. David joins us from Jerusalem. Thank you, David, for joining us.

David Mendelsson: My pleasure.

JH: First off, how are you holding up?

DM: Well, I think the American expression is, "I'm hanging in there." Dalia and I were in England visiting my mother who's 92 years old, and she had a fall and we wanted to get to see her. So we were in the UK, and literally on the Friday we landed. And the following day, of course, we heard of the terrible events here in Israel. We wanted to book our flight home immediately, but unfortunately, we just had to continue with the original plan. So we arrived about five days after everything had begun. But we came home because we obviously want to be with our three children, two of whom are actually at the moment at home with us. My youngest, he's a student at the Hebrew University. My middle one, she works at the municipality in Jerusalem. And her, that's to say our middle one, Yael, her husband, he's an officer in the Tank Unit, so he's down by the Gaza area.

DM: When we heard that he was going to go into Gaza, that was a real moment for us where we got very, I would say, very, very anxious. Obviously my daughter was anxious, but I would say that we were also anxious. It was very concerning. And of course, my other daughter lives in Tel Aviv where rockets have been directed in her direction and she's with a little child, you know, he's a year old. They don't have a shelter in the bottom of their house, nor do they have a sealed room, so they go into the stairwell. So I would say we are sort of hanging in there. I find myself trying to maneuver and manage how much I watch television simply 'cause some of what we are hearing is just so very, very painful. And you need to know how to manage these type of situations. So trying to find balance is important.

DM: I wanna say, by the way, one of the things that has been really lovely, has really been superb, is the large, large number of former students, current students, who've reached out to us and who've asked how we are doing and asked what they can do. And that's been very, very heartwarming. I think it does really give a sense that the work that we've done over the years has cemented real relationships with people. And I'm very pleased about all that.

JH: Well, that leads me to my first question which is directed to you in your lifetime of working in the field of education. What have you learned about the particular power of teaching and learning in times of hardship?

DM: I think one of the things that's, well, that will always happen as far as I'm concerned, is that when we're in moments of crisis, the issues, the dilemmas that we often talk about become much more focused. And I think that sounds a bit ironic, but in some ways it's helpful. It means that sometimes when we talk about things, they're quite theoretical or they're quite abstract. But when you have a real dilemma, for example, some of our students of course have very close friends who are politically, let's say in the progressive camp, and they find themselves identifying with Israel and the Jewish people and they see themselves as liberal Zionists, that sharpens I think some of their tensions for them. And although that might be painful, I find students become more resilient as a result of the experience they've gone through. And I think over the many years that we've had students in Jerusalem where we've had these type of situations, obviously this one more severe than others, I do think students come away with an experience which is profound for the future rabbinate or educational field, or for the cantorial work they're going to do.

JH: "Ad astra per aspera," the hard times prepare you for great things.

DM: Josh, while I was in primary school, we had that on our hats. It was the school motto in my in my primary school. [laughter]

JH: There we go. Education at work as we're speaking. So introduce us briefly to the actual day-to-day of your work at HUC. And help us, if you would, understand something about your work that reveals Israel right now in a way that people outside of Israel wouldn't otherwise grasp or have access to.

DM: Well, at the moment, we have some of our students here in Jerusalem, and then of course others who are back in the States. So it means that our work has been divided between providing experiences in the classroom and sometimes outside of the classroom. For those who are here in Jerusalem and those who are overseas, we've used the Zoom method. I will say that the work has been interesting because clearly one of the things that we've tried to do in our Israel seminar, which is weekly, typically it was a whole day under these conditions, it can't be that. But one of the things that we've done is to go outside, of course, into the field and see sites and so on. And it was a very strange experience for us when we took our, I think eight students, and we went to Yad Vashem and Mount Herzl. And it was the most bizarre, strange experience I think I've ever had, where there was literally no visitor to be seen. No tourists, no visitors. It was simply the eight of us and my co-teacher, Jeremy Lee. And it was very profound, to be there talking about Israeli society and the Holocaust at this moment. And that I think was pretty significant.

DM: I will say... Then we went to Mount Herzl, the military cemetery, perhaps the most well-known of our military cemeteries. And I want to tell you, I go there quite regularly because of my teaching. But one of the things that I try to do when I go there is to do this non-archaeological visit of sorts, but it's certainly anthropological in the approach. So it's a bit of a cold visit, right? And it's an analysis of how things are structured. But when we came to the end of the cemetery, there were some 35 fresh graves. And you cannot go to a place like that and remain this type of distance that we do very often in academia. You are immediately drawn in to the sadness and the pain of these young people who we now know are buried and they're in front of us. And that is very profound.

DM: Another thing I'll say is one of our Zoom meetings that we had with the student state side, I was particularly impressed. We had a conversation together about how this is impacting the current situation here. And I thought that the students were very oppressive in their attempt to articulate their feelings. And you know, we often see ourselves in academic role. But one of the things that happens when you're in this type of situation is you're more reflective with the students. You want to present an empathy to their situation. And nicely, they're interested in my own situation. And I think that creates a very important dimension to the work we do at the college. We're not only, so to speak, an academic institution. We're clearly a seminary. And the seminary style, I think, comes out very strongly in our work in these types of situations.

JH: And I have no doubt that they'll carry this with them for the rest of their lives as they do the same thing for their congregants and their students and their constituencies. I want to ask you a personal question as a colleague and a friend and all of us so concerned about everyone in Israel. How have you changed as a result of this work in this moment as an Israeli, as an educator, as a Jew, as a human being?

DM: Well, I think one of the things that I'm sorry to say in a way... You know, I'm a historian. I'm not a rabbi. And I know that rabbi's role is very often to give a nechamta, to give some type of comfort even in difficult situations. And I want to be quite frank and honest with you. The situation for me is very troubling. And it's troubling personally, because I made a decision to come and live in Israel 42 years ago now. And I think I wasn't naive, but I think I was optimistic

about the belief that we could find a resolution to this historic conflict with our neighbors. And I find myself increasingly in a situation where, even though I know what the solution might look like vaguely, I worry that we can't get there. And I worry we can't get there, again, I could say partly because of some of the issues to do with our own government. I'll leave that for a moment.

DM: But I think very much that what we've seen on the 7th of October, and the study of Hamas and who this organization is, I think has led me to a very worrying type of situation. I do also have confidence, I think, that we have a sensitivity to trying to find, at the end of the day, solutions. And my heart goes out, obviously, to all of those who are immediately affected. But what I do think is very heartening in some ways is the way that the Jewish world has come together for this age-old principle of pidyon shvuyim, of freeing the hostages. The notion of Jewish peoplehood is working, I think, in this sense, that we're rallying for that.

JH: Indeed. You mentioned the idea of pidyon shvuyim, the idea of the Jewish people's sense of mutual responsibility, that when someone is in danger, that we are responsible, all of us, to help them. It is indeed another source of solace that we are here for each other and mutually responsible for each other's well-being. Have you any other last thought about hope that might be found in this otherwise very dark time?

DM: Yes. I think the most significant development for me has been the amazing outpouring of volunteerism here in Israeli society, in what we would say is the civil society, and how it's rallied to provide support for the families of those who've been taken hostage, for those who are serving in the military. There's been an amazing outpouring of support. It's been remarkable. And by the way, some of our students and faculty went out to give a little bit of a hand in terms of areas which the society has been hit, for example, in agriculture, where a lot of foreign workers who come here are not here at the moment. So we've gone to try and give a small contribution to trying to help that. That's been, I think, for me, particularly important.

DM: And today I heard a lovely, lovely story of some wonderful acts of just loving kindness. The Israeli football team was in Hungary playing against Switzerland. And a young boy spoke to his father and said, "How can we go to a football game when all of these kids whose parents are being taken hostage or who have lost loved ones? How can we do that?" And the father said, "Well, in that case, let's get organized. I'm gonna turn to all sorts of institutions and organizations to raise money that all of these kids can go to Hungary to watch the football game." And it was an amazing event. They were there to watch the game. They turned this all around very quickly. So I think it's things like that that really warm the heart.

JH: Well, David, I want to thank you. I want to thank you for joining us for this conversation, for sharing what's so much on your mind and in your heart. But I really just want to pause for a moment and thank you for the work that you're doing every day in Israel. And please know that we are sending our thoughts your way.

DM: My pleasure. And I'm deeply moved by the college's commitment to be connected to us and to be supportive of us, and to rally behind the needs that we have at this time. So thank you.

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JH: Thank you for joining us on this special College Commons Podcast series, HUC Connect: Inside Israel. We'll continue this series with regular new additions, both here and on our HUC Connect social media channels. Here's to better days soon.

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