

## HUC CONNECT: INSIDE ISRAEL WITH MICHAEL MARMUR

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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.

JH: Welcome to HUC Connect special series inside Israel with Professor Michael Marmur. Michael Marmur is associate professor of Jewish Theology at Hebrew Union College and Jewish Institute of Religion on the Toby Family Campus in Jerusalem. Until 2018, he served as the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Provost at HUC-JIR, having previously served as dean of the Jerusalem campus. After some 20 years in administrative capacities, he now concentrates his energies on teaching and writing. In 2016, he wrote *Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Sources of Wonder*, which came out from the University of Toronto Press. He then co-edited with David Allenson, a beloved memory, *American Jewish thought since 1934 from Brandeis*. And his forthcoming book coming out in 2024 is titled *Elements of a Jewish Theology* from Palgrave Macmillan. My friend and colleague Michael Marmur, thank you for joining us on the special series inside Israel.

Michael Marmur: It's good to be with you.

JH: In your point of view, has this war sparked a spiritual communal expression among Israelis that you have sensed in your work?

MM: Yes. I think the technical way to describe our current situation is impossible and unbearable. Impossible, meaning we are caught on the horns of a terrible dilemma between trying to act in a way that will secure the future of our state and our society whilst trying to act in a way that stays within the bounds of humanity, decency, dignity. It means trying to believe in the government of one's country because one wants to believe that public servants are acting in service of the public whilst not closing one's eyes to the signal failures and disappointments within the government. This is not from a party political point of view, just an observation. What I do think it would be fair to say has happened in Israeli society since October 7th has been a sort of parallel rise of society and social solidarity and cohesion alongside a collapse of elementary fundamental government functions that you would expect from the government of the society that you live in.

MM: So what I'm trying to say is government has had a terrible couple of months. Society has had an extremely strong couple of months, civil society, volunteer society, people finding within themselves resources to provide a support, solidarity, food, history is not best written at firsthand in real time. It's very difficult to know, but I think it's already clear that the scale and the scope of this, it's greater than anything that's happened in the 40 years that I've lived in this country. And it bears comparison with the upheavals of '67 and '73. It's a big deal. And in those cases, we know that there was a whole set of intended and unintended social and spiritual consequences, which sparked off as a result of the event. And I am sure that we'll see some of the things, some of them will be to my liking and some of them will not.

JH: Brain for us, if you would, in the context of your daily work as a professor at the Hebrew Union College, what this moment is revealing about Israel that people outside of Israel might not otherwise know.

MM: When the war began, I was in the middle of a sabbatical semester, so I wasn't doing my regular teaching work. I was meant to be sitting in my book-lined study thinking abstract, theological thoughts, but it became a little impossible to try and carry that off when so much extreme stuff was happening just outside my door. It's worth saying that the college in Jerusalem has not been on the frontline of this war. Not only geographically, but also because many of our programs have been working at a limited level, but seeing through the eyes of members of our team and the various programs we conduct. It's not a bad way to put your finger on some of these developments, which may not be immediately apparent. I'd start actually with my friend and colleague, Michal Muszkat Barkan who runs our education, professional development department, who has developed over the last several years a kind of theory that she describes as pedagogy of responsibility, asking the question of what does it mean to teach in a socially engaged and political way?

MM: That doesn't mean arguing for one or other political party, but it does mean doing Jewish education is not just about heartwarming homily, it's about the festivals. It's also about what it means to be an engaged citizen. And when you are the citizen of a state that describes itself as a Jewish state, that becomes a Jewish question right there. So Micha—not in her capacity as a professor—her war story begins not on October 7th, but almost a year ago with the rise of the democracy struggle as various judicial reforms or changes were mooted by our government. And she's been one of the women that spearheaded the Jerusalem branch of the pro-democracy demonstrations, and it's been an extraordinary process.

MM: Most of us predicted that after a month or two of these protests, the thing would burn out. Under the weight of all the different voices, some of us are left-wing and some of us are right-wing and some of us want to talk about the occupation of the West Bank and some of us don't want to mention it at all and somehow or other this protest movement has prevailed and become an enormous factor on the Israeli political and social scene. Now you might wonder what that's got to do with a war. After all, that's an argument about the judiciary and the Supreme Court and to some degree you might say wasn't that put on a hold or put on ice?

MM: One of the things that happened was that amongst the first people to realize the gravity and the extent of this crisis in Israeli society were precisely those people who'd been leading, who'd been spearheading the pro-democracy demonstrations and on the first day, on October 7th and in the two or three days following pivoted and used the infrastructure and the social capital they created for the protests and translated them into the civil command centers. Hamal is the Hebrew acronym that's used. And our organization, the Jerusalem branch, protecting our common home, they became lead partners together with other important significant players in creating an unbelievable infrastructure.

MM: It's difficult to describe. You wouldn't quite believe it unless you actually could see it. A theater school offered a five-storey building for the use of this and within a week really of the war started this amazing organism had sprung up 300 to 350,000 people were called up more or less overnight. There were lots of lacunae, both for the standing army and for all of the residents. So they took that on, but there was also a huge social thing going on. Tens of thousands and ultimately hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated both from the south and from the north and cities like Jerusalem had the job of integrating them and at the beginning, again, I mentioned to you, the government kind of collapsed, society really stepped up, and here was a good example.

MM: The army brought many of these evacuees to hotels in Jerusalem and other towns, but nobody much had a sense of what was meant to happen to these folks once they'd arrived, how their kids were gonna get educated, what they were going to wear. Many of them had left without a chance to even take any stuff with them. And overnight more or less, Michal and her friends created here in Jerusalem, to give you a sense of the scale, they have something like 6000 volunteers. These are all young, very tech-savvy people who worked out, okay, we've got this pool of several thousand people. We're gonna take in about a 1000 volunteers a day. So they created a rota system.

MM: You guys are gonna be responsible for providing food and provisions for the civilian stuff, you for the military stuff. You guys are gonna be doing transportation. I've got stuff I need to get from this city to that city or from this neighborhood to that. You people are gonna be doing translations. It's basically an organism that would have taken a management consultant about a year to design, happened in a day. That aspect of the response to this crisis is remarkable, it seems to me, by any account. And if you go down the list of the various programs that the college offers in Jerusalem, they do speak to aspects of the crisis that we're in.

MM: We have a program, the Teachers' Lounge, that began in Jerusalem and it's now spread, actually. Jews from across the denominational spectrum and Palestinian Arabs, both Muslim and Christian, what they have in common is that they're teachers, they're educators, and they come together around the educational task. But this war is a crisis in relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel, not to mention Palestinians on the West Bank and elsewhere.

MM: Enormous strain has been put on the fabric of civil society. Whenever it was a couple of years ago when we had a much less severe instance of encounter with Hamas, there was blood

on the streets in Israel's mixed cities. And so far, thanks to superhuman efforts, that has largely been avoided. The work of a program like Teachers' Lounge will come into play when the artillery stops and when the war reaches some kind of a pause, how we are all going to find a way together of living in a shared society. And if you go down the list of the Blaustein Center that specializes through Ruhama Weiss in pastoral and other work, they've started from the beginning of the war.

MM: Ruhama has been running a remarkable Batei Midrash of Meaning, Batei Midrash Mashmout, where people who have participated in Blaustein's programs, that means a lot of folks in the therapeutic community and others, where leaders in the area of trauma and post-trauma came to give some of their insights into how society grapples with the enormity of an upheaval such as this. In our Israeli rabbinical program, where studies originally were put on hold and then we've gradually been coming back, a number of our students are enlisted in the army and are therefore unable to participate in their regular studies, others just trying to grapple with the realities of having young children who, depending on where they live, some of our students have been evacuated from the kibbutzim or the towns in which they live and have to find some other solution, and we've been doing whatever we can to allow as much as possible for learning and for community and support and solidarity to take place.

MM: In the case of our, even Israel program, and North American students, a number of them in the initial days of the war left the country, and a number of others stuck around that decided that they felt secure enough to be able to see through the situation from here. And we tried very, very hard to provide as much support as we can to those students and the other ones too. They're all due to be back for the beginning of the next semester in January. And it's been remarkable to see some of them have been finding ways to volunteer. They represented this kind of analysis, the whole Israel, North America dimension of this. Right?

MM: This on the one hand, is an event that really accentuates the difference between me sitting where I am in this room and you sitting where you are. And the question now becomes, okay, there is that difference, but what are the commonalities? What are the mutual interests and concerns? And to what extent can we take the slogans of us being one people and all together? And how do we translate them? I'll mention just one more program. It's not a program of HUC, but it happens on our campus. In normal times there are lots of folks who don't look like your average HUC student.

MM: I'm talking about East Jerusalem residents, a lot of Palestinians, also a range of people from around the world who come to study on a program that physically takes place on our campuses and all PUNT program where they study Hebrew. In the initial days of the war, that crisis of relations between the Jews and Arabs also kind of paralyzed our ability to host that program. But as far as I understand, it's come back to normal operation. That doesn't mean that every East Jerusalem resident, every Palestinian feels confident coming over to West Jerusalem. The fear and the uncertainty is on all sides of this. HUC is situated on the cusp between East and West, between modernity and tradition, between one world and the other, between Israel and the diaspora, and an event of this magnitude kind of brings into relief all of that complexity.

JH: Looking at yourself and your own experience and appreciating your welcome insistence on emphasizing nuance and complexity, how has this experience changed you personally in your Jewish personality and your professorial personality as you manage this difficult time?

MM: One of the things that was remarkable about when I went and toured around the Hamal this civilian command center to see what Mahal was doing and to try and provide some support, you could have put together an extremely impressive academic faculty of Jerusalem based professors based on the people who were manning the telephones and packing the boxes. And this one, a professor of Talmud and this one a lecturer in history. So to some extent, one's professorial personality has been overwritten by other questions. Sometimes you have to put aside your pipe and your elbow patches, and you have to get involved. So that's one answer to your question. I'm very involved in a personal capacity in an organization called Rabbis for Human Rights. We are, again, not party political, but we are very political.

MM: I think we have a huge challenge ahead of us, which is that this war, apart from the horrors in at present, and those horrors are palpable and continuing and also the war ominously points to the possibility of the release of all kind of Jewish messianic dreams, which, for example, will encourage some folks to call for the banishment of Palestinians from large swaths of the as a strip, or we'll show a lack of compassion for the plight of hundreds of thousands of people whose lives are plunged into hell. It isn't actually a competition between one narrative of suffering and another. Life does teach us that suffering is one of those endless resources, that there's enough to go round.

JH: In that regard it's a lot like blame.

MM: It's a lot like, yes, it's like blame, it's like guilt. If we could only run the national grid on those resources, we would solve all environmental problems forever. So I'm saying that there is the rise, it's been rising for decades, but it's now being encouraged even more of a certain kind of worldview in the name of Judaism and Jewish values, which will both excuse and encourage a kind of theological brutality, is what I would call it that I think we have to find ways to resist. This is much bigger than the denominational question of whether you bat for this team or that team, or whether you call yourself conservative or modern orthodox or whatever.

MM: But all those who value as part of their Jewish identities, what I would consider to be fundamental questions of humanity and empathy and solidarity, will need to speak that Judaism very loud and very clear, because there will be opposite opposing that voice, a Judaism of absolute certainty, a vengeful, purifying, all that stuff and that is extremely concerning. And for me in my professorial capacity and for me as a human being, that really engages me. I'll say one more thing. Anyone, it seems to me, who gets through this war completely unchanged in all of their opinions about everything, one should be a little suspicious of that. So I do think that we're all being encouraged to look honestly at our assumptions.

MM: I can't tell you my fundamental views both pragmatic and moral about what needs to happen in this country and in this region for us to secure a good Jewish future and a good future

for everyone. I can't tell you that my fundamental worldview has altered as a result of this war. The people who thought that the only path is that of war and resistance are vindicated in their views. And the people like me, who think that we have to change the paradigm fundamentally are also vindicated in their view. And everybody points to the evidence that they want to. But look at October 7th, much crumbled on that day, a certain belief and a kind of conception of security, a certain credulity about what security the state would provide.

MM: And one of the things that's come through very strongly since that event is there's a kind of agendad aspect to this. There were women who were sent off to be the eyes of the country as we called them, who were warning the folks above them in the military hierarchy. And essentially being told, well, don't you bother your heads about that, Thank you very much for your concern, but we have this and we didn't have this. And I think that that kind of shock is palpable. The question also of who our Palestinian partners can be and need to be in building a possible future for Jews and Arabs. All of that has been put up in the air. I am still fundamentally convinced that we will need to take bold steps to try and get ourselves out of this loop rather than be caught in this kind of vortex of blood and suffering indefinitely.

JH: In the height of COVID, I was walking through a parking lot one day and a car swung around and almost hit me. And in that moment, there was a pause as if time stopped. And then when the reel caught up with reality the driver instead of simply waving and saying, sorry, opened his door, jumped out of his car and came up to me and begged forgiveness and said, I'm so sorry. And I, of course, was inspired by this person's graciousness and 'cause they don't even give it a second thought. I totally understand it, whatever. And in that moment, it was clear to me that in the height of our being locked down and the stresses that this man was doubling down on compassion and solidarity and kindness as if to counteract all of the negative things that were going on. I wanna ask if you have a vignette of a mere interaction that has pointed in the direction of hope, despite your insistence on our appreciation of how dire the moment is, or in fact because of it.

MM: That's a good question. I have one thought which gave me cause for hope. I was at the funeral of a brother of a close friend who lived on kibbutz Be'eri and was one of the many people killed on that kibbutz. And at the funeral of this man the son gave a speech. His situation was that he was at the funeral of his father, he did not yet know the fate of his mother. His mother's funeral in the end happened a week later because it took them several days to identify the bodies. And he gave a remarkable speech during this funeral in which he played to some extent with the Hebrew language, which is something I always like to do.

MM: And he said that a lot of people are using the Hebrew expression [Hebrew], which is the root word for revenge, for vengeance. And he said he refuses to read that word that way. And he suggests instead, rather than read [Hebrew], we read [Hebrew], we will rise, we will prevail, we will get through this. And rather than some kind of platitude in a statement from this young man in the throes of this absolute nightmare, along with his parents, both of whom were slain, he lost other family members. And another seven family members were taken hostage into Gaza, a number of whom have since returned. He, in the midst of all of this absolute horror, could find a way of reading the word not as a call for vengeance, but as a prediction that

somehow it's some way not in a Pollyannish kind of a way, but that somehow it will be possible to rise. That does give me some tentative cause for hope in the midst of all of this.

JH: Well, Michael Marmor, thank you for sharing your thoughts and your stories and joining us on HUC Connect Inside Israel.

MM: Thank you.

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 editions, both here and on our HUC Connect social media channels. Here's to better days, soon.

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