

HUC CONNECT: INSIDE ISRAEL WITH MICHAL MUSZKAT-BARKAN

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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: Welcome to this episode of HUC Connect: Inside Israel. We are joined by Dr. Michal Muszkat-Barkan, Professor of Jewish Education, and the Director of the Department of Education and Professional Development at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. She heads the RIKMA M. A. Program specializing in Community and Pluralistic Jewish Education, in collaboration with the Melton Centre for Jewish Education of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She spearheaded and is the academic head of Teachers' Lounge, in memory of Shira Banki. For the past 11 months, Dr. Muszkat-Barkan has been one of the leaders in protest movement to protect Israeli democracy. Michal, Dr. Muszkat-Barkan, it's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us on this special series, Inside Israel.

Michal Muszkat-Barkan: Thank you for inviting me.

JH: I want to begin by asking you, have you found that the war has sparked a new or heightened perhaps, spiritual expression among Israelis?

MM: We are still in this war, so it's hard to talk about high-level perspectives. We are struggling every day with loss, with trauma of very close people. We can't sleep at night. I will talk about myself, but I know that I'm not the only one. So I will get back to your question, but before I wanna say it's not usual time for me, for my family, for my friends. We are afraid to go asleep when we know that we might in the morning found that some of our beloved people were killed in the war. We can't sleep at night because when we read the testament of the people who have been part of what happened in the South, reading testaments of people who have been there and what happened to them, we can't sleep. And I can't go to sleep without reading the news and without reading testaments. And I'm going to Shivas, and I'm afraid for my friend whose son is still a hostage in Gaza. So of course there are many moments of spiritual feelings, but first I just wanna share with you that feeling that it is part of the way we see each other with very sad eyes.

MM: When we see each other and asking, "How are you?", the answer is not easy. We're not okay. We're not okay. We don't feel safe. We are not okay. Missiles can come every day to our homes. So talking about spirituality and changes has to be based on perspectives that I feel we don't have yet. But yet, I will go back to this question and say that at this time, I think it's really hard to believe in God. And I was talking yesterday to my husband before getting to sleep, saying to him, "I don't know if I can say that I feel love from God." No, it's hard to say that. And then I went further and said to myself, "It's hard to believe in human being at this time," not only in God, because we've been witnessing the rudeness and the cruelty of people. So it's hard to believe in people, in human being. We've been witnessing so much violence all around.

MM: And at the same time, I would say that I witnessed so much dedication and love from people to people that they've never known before, so much willing to just be there and help in many ways. It's hard to mention... There's so many initiatives that are running around, of people who are buying things from the Otef, the area around Gaza, of people who are delivering things, who are cooking, who are going to work in agriculture, who are willing to host people from the South and from the North. You have to understand that we have in Jerusalem 60,000 people from North and South who does not live in their homes for two months.

MM: And so many people from Jerusalem and from all over the country are just giving and trying to help and welcoming in so many ways, that I think I can believe in human being. I have to believe in human being. And this is the better way to live while you see people around who are trying their best to really give some strength to their friend. I have a friend who three of her sons are now in Gaza at the reserves. She can't sleep at night, but every day she sends to all her friends a poem that can give us some strength every day. And I wanna go back to this. If I say that I prefer to believe in human being, I think I may find a way to believe in God.

JH: It's important for us to hear these perspectives. And I wanna return to perhaps some things that are less well-known to those of us outside of Israel. And in particular, if there are aspects of your daily work that can help reveal realities in Israel right now that those of us outside of Israel may not be aware of.

MM: For the first month of this war, from day to night, I was part of the partners that created an operation center room in Jerusalem. I was there every day from morning to night trying to gather all the requests from both evacuated people and soldiers who were called to the army, and trying to give some help in many areas. We had like 5000 volunteers trying to help both in the hotels and in bringing food and supply and helping with the donations and with the purchasing. So I was part of establishing this. And after a month, we decided at HUC that we want to bring our students back to the campus because no one is studying now at the higher education. The universities did not start at the year because 40% of the students in the Hebrew University are now in the army, students and professors. But some of us are not in the army. So we decided that we wanna bring the students to study together and to empower them, because each of them is now an educator in the field, volunteering and leading many things. And they also need something for themselves.

MM: So every Wednesday, which is the learning day of us, we are gathering in the campus, studying together, we went volunteering in agriculture. We will go tomorrow to do a Hanukkah party in one of the hotels. And we did the beth midrash. So this is something that we decided we have to do for our own students. And we're now going to launch a new program for teachers as part of helping teachers to navigate with the students with uncertainty, with the issues of Jewish and Democratic state. So we are planning this program.

MM: The Teachers' Lounge brings together Jewish and Arab teachers for a professional development program, which we have already like 400 graduates from all over the country. And we were supposed to start it right after [Hebrew], but of course we couldn't because of the war. I don't know if people knows that life are not back in many areas. So also Teachers' Lounge is not back yet. But this is not only because people are in the reserve, because we have both Jewish and Arab teachers. But because people lost trust, people really don't know what is the future of shared life here. We have really tough discussion amongst us, Jews and Arabs, and now find it difficult to share the same narrative. So we are in a moment that we have to build back for ourselves the understanding of what can be realistic goals for a shared society here in Israel.

MM: And I know that there are many Israeli Arabs who feel really bad about the Hamas and what they've done in Gaza, but yet not many of them had the courage to say that. So this is something that really hurts many of the Jewish people and also the Palestinians in Jerusalem and all over that lives in Israel. They suffer as well from loss of trust from both police and also from regular people. Everybody is now much more afraid from each other. And many of them, they're afraid to talk because they're afraid to express what they feel. And some of them have family in Gaza, so they feel for their own families in Gaza. They're afraid to say something about what we've been going through. So we have to find a way to listen to each other, to share our feelings with each other, and to imagine what can be the goals for living together. Because we are all going to stay here, so we will have to find a way to come back to this kind of education. But we're not there yet.

JH: You're telling such powerful stories, and I can't help but also think about you as my friend and colleague and leader in education in Israel right now. How is this changing you as a person?

MM: I think it's not the time to give generalizations yet. I can't say that I've been changed by this. I'm really sad now, but I hope that I won't become a sad person. I'm afraid, but I hope I won't become an anxious person. And also I do appreciate being resilient. And I do look for ways for resilience, not only for myself, but also for my family and friends and for my students. One thing that I know that I will change, not by this war but before, that for 10 months I've been leading the... One of the leaders of the protest. And this is something that I never imagined I would do, to be such a public person. And I did that because I felt that we have no way around it, that we have to go out to the streets and protest. So I've been changed in the role and the position that I am taking now as one of the public leaders. And I have to consider what I say and what I do in terms of broader audience that I was before as just dealing with education.

JH: I'd like to close our conversation by asking you, where you have been surprised by hope?

MM: I think that I get to know so many new friends and people, and each of them bring strength to the encounter. Because whenever I see friends that try hard to help others, I'm amazed by their abilities and by their strength inside. When I meet my friends who lost their sons or their families, and I see how much they believe in the future and try to think of our future here in Israel, they believe in us as a collective, it brings me strength and hope. We've never been in such a situation that we needed that so much.

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JH: It's really, really special for us to be able to talk. Thank you for taking the time.

MM: Thank you, Josh.

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

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