

HUC CONNECT: INSIDE ISRAEL WITH TALIA AVNON-BENVENISTE

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JH: 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 our special series HUC Connect Inside Israel, and our conversation with Rabbi Talia Avnon-Benveniste. Rabbi Avnon-Benveniste is the director of the Israel Rabbinical Program at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion's, Taube Family Campus in Jerusalem. She was ordained after completing the Israel Rabbinical Program in 2008 and returned to HUC-JIR following her time as director of the International School for Peoplehood Studies at Beit Hatfutsot the Museum of the Jewish people now called ANU, where she led public discourse on Jewish peoplehood and identity in the 21st century. Talia, thank you for joining us on the special edition Inside Israel.

Talia Avnon-Benveniste: Thank you very much for inviting me.

JH: The first question I want to ask you has to do with the world around you. Right now have you seen a change in the religious expression of Jews in Israel?

TA-B: There is something that is happening here that is so heartbreaking that in a very deep level, I think we're all looking for answers, not from the authorities, but from our own sets of beliefs. We were born in this country and we were raised in this country having sets of values and beliefs and why we are here, the fact that Israel is a safe haven for the Jews, and we experience how this is all very fragile and was broken in one day, one Shabbat as we were coming together to celebrate the cycle of reading tour. Instead of dancing that Shabbat, we found ourself mourning in ways that we never did before as a society, as a country, and as people. So in terms of spirituality, I think we are all looking for the same answer for the questions of existence as Jews in the 21st century. Is Israel still a safe home? What makes this a safe haven? How can we protect our lives and Jews and of course, not only in Israel, I think worldwide? We're trying to understand what it means to be a Jew in this world of today that is so broken. We're all searching for what will help us come together as people, as a nation in Israel and worldwide, and claim new meaning to our identity as individuals and its communities.

JH: I'm glad you referred to worldwide Judaism because certainly where I sit here in the United States, everything you said applies. We are indeed thinking and worrying, but also caring a great deal about our shared destiny as a single people together and our homeland in Israel. So your words have great resonance. I want to ask you about your work at HUC-JIR or as the leader of our Israel Rabbinical Program, which ordains Israeli Rabbis for Israeli society in the mold of our values as reform and liberal Jews. In that context, what does your daily work reveal about Israel right now as you're experiencing it in the execution of your work that people outside of Israel may not be aware of?

TA-B: I think there are many layers to this question. I think on one layer is a very emotional layer that we experience. We are all mourners, we are all seeking to be comforted and to having lights in our life now that is very much filled with darkness. There is a layer of existentialism and philosophical thinking about what is happening now and how we can draw from the past and from the present, from the wisdom of our tradition to help us understand what is happening now and to see the cycle of Jewish life and know that after there is destruction, there is rebuild of life and there is the practical one. I think our life is very much different. We might look the same, but we are very much different than when we were, we are broken, but we are trying to put the pieces together of our life every day.

TA-B: Mostly I think for me and for many of our students of our HUC community is to make sure that our part of the covenant of the people who live now in Israel and has suffered the most from this tragedy, people who've lost family members, people who are in hostage in Gaza, that we are constantly hearing their stories and being witness to their stories and making sure that they are not alone in their experiences. And on a daily basis it means that I listen to as many stories on the news, on Facebook, and individuals I meet where the communities have been evacuated, are now located in different hotels in Israel, trying to make sure that I spend as much time witnessing someone else's tragedy and story and telling them that they are not alone in this, that this is our duty as a society to be witness in them especially.

TA-B: Many of us are volunteering in different activities around Israel, helping the agriculture market and farmers to still make sure that whatever is being grown on the field, it's being cut down and it's being displayed for people's use and it's not being thrown away and that the economy is still going. Israel's economy has always been offended by the security situation. So one of the things that we can do is just help our economy by volunteering in different places that are now just in needs of a work labor. So many of us find ourself doing works that we are not trying to do, but we are happily making sure that their farming industry is still growing.

TA-B: I think many of us find ourselves helping and just preparing meals and shipping clothing and equipment to soldiers and reserve them to soldiers who are just now serving either in the north and in the south. And I guess in the more deeper level is trying to listen to where the need and the pain exist and resonate and just be there in order for someone else to feel that their pain is not their own burden and they can share it.

JH: How have you personally internally changed as a result of your work in the moment?

TA-B: I've heard that one of the eulogies of the family of a soldier did die on the same week when the war started, they quoted him and they were saying that, he always said that "The last things that die are hopes." So when I heard that said in the eulogy of a young soldier, that in his life he lived by this notion that hope is the last thing that will ever die. And even when he dies, his hope to life continues to resonate with the family and with us. Listening to that eulogy and seeing the parents and the families and seeing the families of the kidnaps embracing one another as a large family and saying, we can only go through this if we hold onto one another. So for me, having Israel return as a very strong society that holds onto one another in solidarity, in mutual respect, in sensitivity, in giving and sharing and holding together the pain and the grief and the generosity of just making us available to someone else's need, this is where I draw my own hope and my own spiritual dwelling and the understanding of what it means to be an Israeli one and a Jew now in the way that was lost for so many years and now is returned in a great sense of tragedy, but it's back and it's us for us to embrace and hold and make sure it doesn't go away again.

JH: I have heard tell of the story of you and your students in the Israel Rabbinical Program preparing unexpectedly for funerals as part of their tasks, but to have to learn and to prepare for that task perhaps prematurely in the course of their studies. How did that go and how are our students going back to their home communities to serve in this difficult and painful time?

TA-B: As students, as alumni, we prepared ourselves for the worst and in the very first week of the war, knowing the numbers are growing and every day there are more and more numbers of victims that we need to prepare ourselves for many funerals to come. Some that happened in the very first few days of the war in the weeks and now that are still happening. In the past, if you are not an Orthodox rabbi, most likely that you'll not officiate a military funeral or a public funeral that happens in most of the cemeteries in Israel. I'm not saying that I'm happy that it changed because of these circumstances, but it's something that we are now able to provide. So very quickly, we were training ourselves to provide the service of having a respectful Jewish egalitarian funeral for the families of the victims, and for them to choose a liberal rabbi to officiate the service to be along with them in the very painful days is something that we are now as a clergy are able to offer.

JH: Thank you for doing that service on our behalf and for our Israeli brothers and sisters, and thank you for everything you do and for joining us on this conversation. Rabbi Talia Avnon-Benveniste, it's my honor and pleasure to work with you and to have you join us on this conversation.

TA-B: Thank you very much.

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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