



RABBI MICHAEL STRASSFELD: DISRUPTING JUDAISM

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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.

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JH: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Rabbi Michael Strassfeld. Rabbi Strassfeld was one of the editors of the Jewish Catalog in 1973, which was a guide to Do It Yourself Judaism that sold over 300,000 copies. He authored the Jewish Holidays in 1985. Co-authored a Night of Questions, a Passover Haggadah in 1999 with his wife, Rabbi Joy Levitt, and authored a Book of Life embracing Judaism as a spiritual practice in 2002. His newest book Judaism Disrupted a Spiritual Manifesto for the 21st century, was published by Ben Yehuda Press on the 50th anniversary of the Jewish Catalog. He's the Rabbi emeritus of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. And he's joined us for a discussion about Judaism Disrupted. Rabbi Michael Strassfeld thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Michael Strassfeld: Thank you for having me.

JH: In a recent interview with Brandeis University, your alma mater, you respond to the question, what's wrong with Judaism? You say, "The problem is that many Jews think that Judaism is what I call doing the Jewish things. Things that only Jews do, like going to services or keeping kosher". And many people don't understand why they should care about any of that. Too often people look at Jewish rituals and say, what does this have to do with anything? I'd like to ask you, Michael, if it's fair to frame your argument as a spiritual proposition analogous to the sociological proposition of Bethany Horowitz who said famously that we should focus on how Jews quote on quote do Jewish rather than what they do.

MS: I agree with Bethany's point. It's really about why in some ways the distinction between like, new book and the catalog is, the catalog was really a book about how to, and this is focusing on why. I actually thought about calling the new book Judaism Why Bother, which I think is what a lot of Jews feel about Judaism. They feel, as you mentioned, disconnected from Jewish rituals and Jewish practices and Jewish institutions and don't see them as being helpful or meaningful in their lives. And I think that's one of the big challenges for today.

JH: In the book's Focus on Kavanah, which we might translate as intention or spiritual focus. And I wanna give you the opportunity to disagree if I'm misreading, but you seem to be willing to sacrifice at least some of the tradition. And to be fair, you're in good company. Judaism has always walked the tightrope of simultaneously preserving, reforming and even jettisoning aspects of our tradition in an every evolving cannon of text, tradition and religious definitions. Still, is it fair to acknowledge that in your vision of an improved Judaism, there is a price to be paid not only in leaving aside a certain quantity of tradition, but also and more importantly from the social emotional point of view, a price to be paid in giving up on some of the atavistic and deeply grounding sense of connectedness through the ages that raw traditionalism affords?

MS: I think that is a challenge, but as you said, I believe and lots of people believe that Judaism has always been developing and changing, and I would argue that that's actually allowed it to flourish over time rather than perhaps to stagnate in the past and just be unable to respond to the moment. So, for liberal Jews today, jettisoning the parts of Judaism that suggested a lesser status for women is a completely positive change in Judaism. And I don't think we miss anything by not having a patriarchal structured or favored Judaism and Jewish practice. And I think the challenge has always been to remain both deeply rooted in the tradition and yet also willing to be in the contemporary moment and see the contemporary challenges and figure out how to respond. And I would say it's clear sometimes Judaism didn't respond wisely. Here is an example, the reform movement tried the idea of having Shabbat on Sunday. And at some level it made sense, but it turned out, I think the consensus is that it didn't work. And so Shabbat went back to being on Saturday.

JH: So the way you're describing what I call the tightrope or a balancing act is I think amenable to many of us. I wonder what you think about a coexisting but different approach, which rather than aiming to strike a balance in the individual life of a given Jew, between the rootedness of tradition and the dynamism and relevance of change, instead looks at the corporate body politic, if you will, of the Jewish people and recognizes that there's a big middle where we try to strike that balance. But wherein we also need some of the extremes such as extreme traditionalism and extreme reformism. I suppose with a lowercase R there's a kind of representation of the extremes that we can point to as tent pegs for our tent, even if we don't go there ourselves. And just having them is sort of a good force for both stability and change.

MS: I understand the point. I don't know if I would agree. That there's importance to have the extremes in always as, you say, tent pegs. For me, I think it's more willing to look at the vastness of the Jewish tradition and find, as I did in the book some things that are in the traditional past that have been lost even within the traditional communities, and suggest that they may have meaning now in a way that they might have not had in the past. Or as I say to say, some things, really, belong in the dust bin of history. And that doesn't mean that there aren't people that still practice or like those aspects of Judaism, but I don't know that I need to be in dialogue with them on some level of keeping me within this larger framework. And I do think it's become increasingly challenging for the Jewish community to stand together. I think the things that divide us are becoming harder to bridge. And we're living in a society that is broadly not just

the Jewish part, but broadly divided. And it's hard to bridge those differences, which is problematic.

JH: And it is indeed. And for our listeners at a future date, Rabbi Strassfeld is referring to the fact that this is being recorded on November 8th, a mere month after the attacks at Hamas against Israel on October 7th, 2023, in which we are all reeling on many, many levels in Israel and in the Diaspora, and experiencing incredible expressions of solidarity and also some of the fishers to which, Rabbi Strassfeld. First, I'd like to stay for a moment on this issue of the sort of extremes of the tent pegs and what I think is the vast majority of Jews somewhere in the middle. And indeed, much of your book seems to address the problem of knee-jerk traditionalism on the one hand, and spiritually sterile modernism on the other. In the meanwhile, I experienced most self-defined and committed Jews, both in The United States, Israel, and abroad, as landing somewhere in a reasonably fulfilled middle. I think that for many Jews, the attenuated sense of mitzvah or commandment, which for the vast majority of Jews today, has been softened from commandment to, I guess suggestion is just right to keep us in a groove, without falling into a rut. Am I missing something? Is there a demand in the Jewish experience that requires the shakeup that your book offers?

MS: Well, I think it is about suggestion, or actually what I try to present in the book is a notion of practice. If mitzvah no longer means a commandment, whether it's because we don't believe in a commander, or we don't believe that tradition is literally the word of God, etcetera, etcetera, look, the question is then what motivates people to do it more than I feel like it or I don't feel like it. And I suggest that practice is a good way to talk about the practices, the customs of Judaism. And you do a practice regularly because you won't get the benefits of the practice if you do it only occasionally. I mean, if you wanna learn to play the piano and you only play three times a year, you'll never learn to play the piano. It's just not enough attention. And so I'm suggesting that we look upon whatever it is, whether it's prayer, whether it's being involved in social justice as practices.

MS: At one point in the book I talk about using the term Minhag America, which literally means the custom of America, which was then presented by Isaac Mayer Wise, a great reform leader in the 19th century. And he meant something different than I'm saying about it, but not completely different, right? That there is a way American Jewry lives a Jewish life, and as you say, there's a broad middle. And within that spectrum, there are a variety of ways of doing things. But there is a sense that we're all in this together and this is how we live our Jewish lives. Not because we feel commanded, but because we feel engaged or we feel that doing these things enriches our lives. And ultimately what I'm trying to say in my book is that, as you suggested, Judaism isn't about doing the Jewishly Jewish things. It's not about being a good Jew. It's really about taking the most precious gift we've been given in our life and live it with purpose and meaning aided by the wisdom and practices of Judaism.

JH: Some of those qualities of Judaism you point out, tend to fall into very rigid dualities, perhaps overly rigid dualities, especially in rabbinic thinking. And many of us who went to Hebrew school remember that the definition of holiness and Judaism hinges on the idea of separation. A, very, very radical distinction between holy and the shall we say as you prefer

comment, but you explain that these dualities come freighted with implicit and explicit hierarchies, which is to say it's not just that A is different from B, rather that A is better than B, or vice versa. So while distinctions are, as you say, inevitable for ordering the universe, at least in our human minds, is it indeed the case that the value judgment has to be wedded to the phenomenon of distinctions? Is there no way for us to say Viva La Diva loss to promote and value distinctions, to elevate and even maybe render starker distinctions as celebrations of variety diversity and the spice of life.

MS: I think that's really one of the challenges of our time, and that's why I was suggesting that rabbinic Judaism, which has been in some ways, the form of Judaism for the last almost 2000 years, which carries very much to these things about distinction, has too often led to hierarchy, right? So men are better than women, etcetera, etcetera. I think that's a danger within these distinctions. And obviously there's some distinctions, the difference between good and bad that are about values, but too often the distinctions feel arbitrary and feel rooted in societal notions about men and women, etcetera, etcetera. And I think one of the opportunities and challenges of the modern world is trying to lessen those distinctions and trying to be inclusive. And I think that's really been in some ways, the Arc and American, since its founding, is to widen the circles of people who are in, who have rights.

MS: We're far from perfect, but I think that's what we want. And one of the challenges for Judaism is how do you create a Judaism that lives in an open society where the boundaries are few rather than in the Middle Ages, where in some ways Jews had no choice about being Jewish because the outside world saw them only that way and wouldn't let them not be Jewish unless they converted to Christianity. So we live in a very different society and we want to live in that society which continues to expand the boundaries of who's inside, rather than create walls and distinctions that keep people out or in a second class status.

JH: And you don't see it as a sort of viable social project to both promote distinction and distinctiveness, and at the same time promote mutual valuing and inclusion.

MS: I 100% feel that one of the inner characteristics or spiritual characteristics that we want people to cultivate is non judgmentalism. Many people have said this, the people who are more traditional or are more observant, or whatever words you want to use than I am, are fanatics. And the people who are less than I am not serious. And I don't see any reason for those kinds of thinking and approaches. I 100% agree that we actually want to encourage pluralism and to accept that other people do Jewish, as it were, live their lives Jewishly in very different ways. And there's no reason to judge someone as being too much this way or too little that way. This is something we should strive for. I'm suggesting that in some ways the structure and Rabbinic Judaism lends itself too easily to say X is better than Y, etcetera.

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JH: In another direction of your book, you speak of the iterative quality of revelation, almost like a divine version of what you call practice, meaning you have to practice a lot to move towards the process of perfecting. And God's revelation to us also comes through iteratively, through a kind of practiced repetitive quality. I'd like to ask you, what about Judaism in particular in a culturally specific way? Most compellingly reminds us not only to learn, but also to relearn eternal lessons.

MS: The notion that we are to engage in Torah study by Torah, I mean here, broadest sense of Torah, of tradition. And that's really a lifelong occupation, right? Unlike much other study, there's no graduation from engaging in Torah study. And the fact that in the synagogue each week we read from the Torah portion or part of the Torah portion, suggests that what it's all about is engaging with the traditional text, the literally written Torah. But we do that by bringing our own personal experiences and more broadly the experiences of the contemporary moment. And there is an ongoing dialogue and, sometimes, a tension between those two. But I think the fact that we're encouraged to do that and each year we reread the Torah over and over again because the truth is we are different, and we see and hear the Torah differently. And I think that's an important teaching that Torah and our lives are about change and growth and to engage in that process as a critical one to grow as a human being and as a Jew.

JH: In your introduction, you shared with us that you have been thinking about the ideas in this book for a long time in an evolving spiritual development and journey. Still, I'd love for you to share with us the spark of something that touched you in a very specific moment in the course of writing this book, not necessarily something that's been gestating in your mind over all these years, but something that the act of writing this book revealed to you.

MS: That's a great question. One thing that comes to mind is a text of a Hasidic master, the Sifat Ahmed, who lived in the 19th century. In one of his teachings, he asks, if you could summarize what Torah is about in one word or two words, what would it be? And his answer I found surprising and in some ways shocking. His answer is that Torah is all about freedom and that don't think of Torah as 613 commandments, the traditional number of commandments, a mitzvah, but it's rather 613 counsels or advice, or we might even say practices, of how to achieve freedom in your life.

MS: And I think what he means by that, and that's where I got this idea of the precious gift of your life. There are lots of things in the way of our living our lives fully. That's the character traits that we struggle with. It's anxiety. It's a lack of self-confidence. The whole panoply of issues that each of us faces, each of us has a different combination on those issues. And he's saying that spiritual practice or Torah and the practices of Torah help us move to a place of more choice, of more freedom, of more deeper engagement in life and striving to live up to the hopes and images we have for ourselves, even though we know that we will often fail.

MS: And then text became like the founding point, if that's the right word, of the book. And I present that text, then follow that by talking about the 11 core principles that broadly flow from that. In some ways, my summary of the core principles of Judaism.

JH: So with the Sifat Ahmed, we have a new version of Hillel's summary of Torah on one foot. And with Judaism Disrupted, we have the commentary that we now have to go study. So walk us through the 11 principles that you cited that create the structure of your book.

MS: Sure. I'll just do it in brief. Principle one, created in the image of God. Two, living in a moral universe. Three, living with awareness. Four, engaging in social justice. Five, finding holiness everywhere. Six, caring for the planet. Seven, wrestling with God. Eight, working on our inner qualities. Nine, turning and returning Teshuvah. 10, be a lifelong learner. And 11, living in an open society. And actually, I thought there would be 10. It's a good Jewish number. But I realized that I hadn't really talked about community. And so chapter 11 is about living in an open society and aspects of community broadly.

JH: With that, I wanna thank you, Michael Strassfeld, for taking the time and really a lovely conversation on your new book, Judaism Disrupted, A Spiritual Manifesto for the 21st Century. Thanks again.

MS: Thank you.

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/huconnect.

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