

THE ANCIENT RENEWED: PSALMS FOR EVERY DAY

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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. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Rabbi Debra J. Robbins. Rabbi Robbins is a member of the clergy team at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, Texas, where she leads in teaching, pastoral care, and spiritual practice. She was ordained in 1991 at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, and she is the author of *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27*, a spiritual practice for the Jewish New Year, which came out in 2019. And today's topic, *New Each Day*, a spiritual practice for reading Psalms, which came out in 2023, and both books came out from CCAR Press. Rabbi Robbins, Debra, if I may, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Debra Robbins: Thank you, Dr. Holo. It's a pleasure to be here.

JH: Natan Sharansky famously saved a book of Psalms when he was jailed in the Gulag, and in his memoir, he refers to it as one of the sources of strength that allowed him to continue. What is it about the Psalms in general that meets some of our most urgent, or as you might frame it in light of your book, daily emotional or spiritual needs?

DR: It's a wonderful opening question to start with, because Sharansky really had such great wisdom to have that with him all the time. And I think that my book tries to get at that practice, that if you had to have only a limited number of poems or prayers or Psalms or words that you could turn to day after day and would really sustain you, the Psalms are a great place to learn. And this idea that there's a Psalm for each day, one small set of verses to help you, I think is really a great insight from our tradition. I don't know what Sharansky read each day, but maybe he followed this practice as well. But I think they're so sustaining because they have a universal quality. As much as they are fixed, I find them to be tremendously flexible. And that depending upon where we're at in our personal lives, what's going on in the world, we read the Monday Psalm in a really different way. They really partake of what's going on in the world around us and also where we're at in our personal lives. So, as we face this horrible war in Gaza, we read the Psalms a different way than we read them during the pandemic just a few short years ago. And I think that's why they have such lasting power.

JH: Before we get into the text of the Psalms, share with us your thoughts on the importance of routinization or practice as an element in spiritual development in general.

DR: This is a huge piece of learning that I've taken on in the last 10 or 15 years or so through some study that I've done and have really found that the idea of a routine, while sometimes taken to the extreme, can not be terribly helpful in one's life. It can make us too rigid. But the idea of a practice that lets us settle in, pay attention to our breath, this sort of real sense of holy animation within each one of us, singing is a huge part of this practice, and having it be something that's manageable. So, the whole idea of then reading the Psalm, reading a reflection for focus, doing some writing, just sitting quietly with it, and then a final practice of gratitude and forgiveness just locates one and gives us a sense of what's possible for our lives, what's going on that we might not have noticed before, what can we bring to each day to make it new and different than the day that was before it. The practice is compact enough that busy, busy people can carve out enough time to do this and can take just one bite of a Psalm, not even necessarily a whole verse sometimes. Sometimes it's just a word or a letter that then I think makes the practice more accessible.

JH: And you also give us an introductory food for thought that allows us to leverage these relatively small units of text. They're really quite beautiful and enriching, which leads me to the follow-up question, which is that you ask us to engage not only as readers, but also as writers. Why do you do that?

DR: We teach others in the ways that we learn best. I don't know if you found this in your teaching practice, but for me, if I'm going to process something, I need to write about it. So, that was how this began. And it just seemed natural that if it was working for me, maybe it would help others to have just a little bit to try and see if they could do it. It's why some of the very specific instructions I recommend for writing really help to do it in a fixed notebook so you can't sort of tear out the pages. I love pencil. Not everybody loves pencil, but I love it because it sort of glides across the page very gently. Although the key is to not really use the eraser very much and just let yourself, let the words flow. And I like these small composition books too, because it's not a daunting amount of space. And you write for a limited amount of time. It's only five minutes. We can do anything for just five minutes. And people find that they actually can write prose. They write things that end up looking like poetry. They uncover things that are inside them that they weren't aware of. And I really got a chance to try it out on my congregants, and they responded so positively to the practice.

JH: When it comes to squeezing meaning out of these texts, it's noteworthy that most American Jews, and presumably most of your readership, do not understand the Hebrew. And so, they rely entirely on translation. Tell us, if you would, about the translations that you used of the Psalms. And I'd love to hear your thoughts about why translation is both so difficult, but also so important.

DR: Oh, I love this question. So, the book makes use of the beautiful translation that Rabbi Richard Levy of HUC, now blessed memory, published. That's the translation included in both

books. It was published shortly before these books were published. I never had the chance to really talk to him about the translations, and I'm really sad about that. But what my students have really encouraged me to do in my work with them, my students here in Dallas, is to read from multiple translations at once. It's sort of a choose-your-own-adventure. You can build your own sentence once you have three people's versions of what the Hebrew says. And nobody is right, nobody is wrong. It just lets us each become empowered to read Bible in a way that we didn't think was possible, and to feel like we can bring ourselves to it. And I've also found, and this has been the real bonus, is that many of my students have then wanted to go on and learn Hebrew so that they could at least recognize the letters, decode a few words, be able to look up a word for themselves in the dictionary. So, it has really opened up a lot of additional learning for people.

DR: I want to say one other thing about the translations. In Hebrew, you might hear the echo of a word that's in a Psalm. It might echo in Hebrew because it was in a passage from Genesis, or it was in a passage in Deuteronomy, or it was in one of the prophetic books. And that doesn't always transfer into English. And so, what I try to do in some of my work, in some of the Reflections for Focus, is draw attention to that. And so, there are a lot of footnotes in this book, and there are a lot of source citations, so that again, if it's not completely clear because it's poetry in the Reflections for Focus, the readers can chase that down easily and see what those connections are that might not be evident if you're just reading English translation.

JH: So, translations in general unveil layers of meaning, and it's clear that you really engage in those layers. I wonder about the opposite, the potential talismanic power of reading in Hebrew, not despite the fact that you don't understand it, or maybe even because you don't understand it. Is there something meditational or focused or meaningful in reading Psalms in Hebrew, knowing perfectly well that you don't know what you're reading?

DR: Absolutely. One of the challenges we face in Jewish American life today is that there are people who can't even read the Hebrew. So, how do we get at that to even hear the sounds articulated or voiced? And I was really fortunate that the CCAR, we produced an app to go with my first book, the one about Psalm 27, and we were very clear that it would have recordings of the psalm in Hebrew and in English. We did it in a male voice and a female voice. Cantor Richard Cohen recorded the male voice so that people would absolutely have that auditory experience. And hopefully, if you wanted to, to try to decode it yourself and to read along. But that's why the book includes so much Hebrew as well.

JH: Going back to the content of the Psalms, which psalm is most difficult for you? The one that's either the most difficult to decode meaningfully, or perhaps the one that even when you have decoded it meaningfully, you find it awkward?

DR: Oh my goodness. The psalm that I might find difficult today might not be the psalm that I found was difficult yesterday, or might not be the one that's the most difficult tomorrow, which is the whole theory behind my book is that they are new each day and we need something different each day. I only have one child, but for people who have multiple children, like, all my

children are my favorite children, right? I love them all. I need them all. There's a reason there's 150 of them.

JH: That's 150 psalms, not 150 children. Just...

DR: No, 150 psalms, yeah. There is a reason there are 150 psalms. And thank God the Rabbis decided we just needed these seven for any given week. But then there's the bucket of them for Kabbalat Shabbat. There's different Psalms for all kinds of things.

JH: Okay, fair enough. So, in light of the fact that every day is a new day, which psalm would you like to share with us today?

DR: Oh, and that's a good question. All right. I think this is a good example of how the book works. So I would like to share the Reflection for Focus for Tuesday in week three. It's Reflection for Focus on Psalm 82:5, and it's entitled, The Foundations are Tottering. And I want to say a bit about this Reflection for Focus before I read it. In some ways, it captures how we feel about the world here in December as we're recording this, and the war rages in Israel, and we've lost our beloved teacher at HUC. This is the week of Shiva for Rabbi David Ellenson. And we see the rise of antisemitism and things feel so unsteady and so scary. And this psalm and this verse speak to that. But the Reflection for Focus was written on March 17, 2020, before we were beginning to understand the depths of what the COVID pandemic was going to be for us. And so for me, this is a great example of how these psalms can be new each day when we look at just a little bit of them and allow them to shine their light into our lives. So, here we go. It happened one day, but it could happen any day. Cities issued shelter-in-place laws. Schools locked their doors on a day's notice. The food pantry closed. The threat of disease outweighed the threat of hunger.

DR: Airlines wanted bailouts and small businesses, too. The bartender's hands shook as the restaurant prepared to close for table service. When would she next shake a cocktail, wipe the highballs, gather her tips? The waitress was unsteady on her feet. How would her dad, a clammer who can't export black clams, pay for oil to heat the house or gas to fuel his boat? The world wobbles, and I wonder, is it like the tremble of an earthquake followed by devastation? The pummeling of the shore by a winter storm when the coastline collapses? The ground shaking as a massive truck approaches, then passes by a moment later. Today, it is the unsteady balance of standing on a trampoline. The fabric isn't firm. I broaden my stance. It helps a little. I bend my knees to lower my center of gravity. It helps a bit, too. I extend my arms for balance. This helps more. I reach for love and compassion, generosity, patience, and selflessness, the enduring stabilizers of our world. No human hands touch line, but I'm steady for a moment in an unstable place.

DR: Yehuda HaLevi was right. God is there, waiting on a mountaintop, at the bottom of the sea, under the shade of a tree, sheltered in my home under quarantine. When I reach out, I find God reaching out to steady me, still my pounding heart, calm my breath, assure me, even on the trampoline, when the foundations of the earth are tottering, we still stand on holy ground, hand in hand.

JH: That's beautiful. Thank you. Your words just inspired me when you said, I reach for love and compassion, generosity, patience, and selflessness. I can't help but recall in the height of COVID shutdown, I was in a parking lot walking and a car almost ran me down just by lack of paying attention. And the driver jumped out and came over to me and begged my forgiveness in a way that, you're in Los Angeles, you don't do when you almost run someone over in a parking lot, you just kind of wave your hand and say, sorry. And it was so clear to me that this man was reaching out for compassion and generosity, that such things are possible when the world is tottering strikes me as cause for real hope. Thank you for reminding me of that.

DR: Thank you. And I just think it's such an apt image for the way so much of us are feeling about the world each day now. And we have this opportunity when we read the Tuesday Psalm, Psalms 82 to reflect on that and what's going to steady us and what kind of steadiness can we bring to other people.

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JH: The College Commons podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning and masterclasses for HUC alumni with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out at huc.edu/huc-connect. Now back to our interview. Sometimes the Psalms personify adversity in the figure of the enemy, unlike the world tottering that we just read. They often personify it in a figure as in Psalm 94, for example, which says, "Who will rise up for me among the evildoers" How do you on a spiritual level engage with that kind of imagery in the Psalms?

DR: It's a great question too. I think I often see the enemies when they're named in the Psalm like that example that you raised as the obstacles that we have in our lives, the enemies that are sort of within us. I tend not to externalize them as much, but the enemies are often lack of self-confidence, where we berate ourselves, when we're not generous with ourselves, our enemies can be our darker sides, our yetzer hara, the enemies of maybe not telling the truth or not being as forgiving as we could be. We tend to see them more as our negative qualities rather than actual physical enemies are in the landscape somewhere.

JH: Sometimes we fall in love with a poem, not necessarily because of the whole poem, but because of one serendipitous, elegant, beautiful, challenging, concise turn of phrase. If you could choose one verse from the Psalms that simply captivates you by virtue of its beauty, what would you choose?

DR: Oh, my goodness, I think you're exactly right about that. And before I tell you what I'll choose, I think that's very much how this book and the first book came about, was sort of phrase or word that popped out to me, that spoke to me from that particular Psalm on that particular day. So, it was harder with Psalm 27, but one of my favorites is a passage from the Thursday Psalm from Psalm 81, it's verse seven. And Richard Levy's translation is, "I removed his

shoulder from the burden." And the idea that we have to remove the burden, we have to shake it off ourselves. The idea that God removes our shoulder from it, that we are freed up from all that heaviness is so inviting and tantalizing to me that I don't have to carry it all. And that there is this reminder once a week that I can let it go. God's going to lift that and carry that. And then I can go back and the weight's still gonna be there. And I'm going to keep on carrying it and doing the sacred work. But my shoulder is removed. I'm given the space in which to catch my breath and to breathe and to regain my perspective and my footing.

JH: I can't tell you how much it touches me to talk about my dear friend, Richard Levy and his translations and his sheer passion for the Hebrew language and the Psalms. It really is a delight to hear you, delight in him. And thank you for giving even more life to his translation.

DR: Thank you.

JH: I'd like to end our interview with a customary question of mine, which is, what surprised you in writing this book? What delighted you? What came out of the blue? What didn't you expect?

DR: I did not expect that people would be so interested and ready to try this, to read in this different way. I'm a graduate of HUC. I came up through academia. The idea that we could break these texts open and break them apart and that people would be nourished by them and want more. I wrote New Each Day because when we finished reading Psalm 27 the first year and using Opening Your Heart, people said, well, what do we do now? We need more content. What are we gonna do to continue the practice? And so, that was just tremendously rewarding. And I also feel so fortunate and was so pleased that your colleague, my friend, Rabbi Andrea Weiss was willing to write the introduction to this and bring her unbelievable scholarship in Bible to this work that I think really elevates the academic piece of it, but still keeps it tremendously accessible. And one of my cantors from Temple Emanu-El and one of your colleagues also at HUC, Cantor Richard Cohn, was willing to write these seven niggunim, melodies without words, one for each day of the week to accompany people on the practice. So, these partnerships that were friendships that have led to this sacred work has been such a blessing and just a lovely, lovely bonus to the writing practice.

JH: Well, thank you for sharing it with all of us and mazal tov on the publication of New Each Day, a spiritual practice for reading Psalms. And most of all, thank you for the conversation and the pleasure of your company.

DR: Thank you. This was a great pleasure. And I really enjoyed getting to talk to you and look forward to talking to more people about this important work.

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