

## HUC CONNECT: INSIDE ISRAEL WITH JEREMY LEIGH

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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 our special series, HUC Connect Inside Israel and a conversation with Jeremy Leigh. Jeremy Leigh teaches Israel Studies and Modern Jewish History at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion Toby Family Campus in Jerusalem. He is the coordinator of the Richard J. Scheuer Israel Seminar for the Year in Israel Program, as well as the director of the HUC-JIR JDC Fellowship for Global Jewish Responsibility.

JH: He's written extensively about the field of Jewish educational travel, including his last book, *Jewish Journeys, Reflections on Jewish Travel*. Jeremy Leigh, thank you for joining us on the HUC Connect special series, Inside Israel.

Jeremy Leigh: Thank you very much for having me.

JH: Have you, in your work at HUC, observed that perhaps the war has sparked some kind of burgeoning or changing spiritual consciousness or expression among Israelis?

JL: It's a great question. And the reflection is going to be observational and the term spiritual has lots of connotations to it. But in terms of going on the broadest definition without question, and in a way it kind of leads to maybe one of the more profound understandings of what spiritual or religious life is about. The language of Israeli identity is written in highly politicized terms between secular and religious, but nonetheless, we're an incredibly religious society, including the most secular people. And the experience of what we're going through takes us to some of the most profound parts of human life, life and death, hope.

JL: Tragedy, catastrophe, history, and so it's almost as if anyone who opens their mouth and reflects on what's going on around them is expressing something deep within them, whether it comes from the soul or the imagination, obviously, that's for them to say. The outward expressions are enormous. One is just the enormous musical production that's happened in this country since the beginning of the war is phenomenal. Popular music always played a part as

being a quasi liturgy for the national performance to itself. And I'm not going to sing or perform or reference, this isn't the framework, but just suffice to say that anyone who wants to go looking will find incredibly deep, personal, profound moments. Maybe just, having just said that, maybe I'll just reference one because it sort of stood out, which is Doron Talmon.

JL: He's the lead singer of a band called Jane Bordeaux. She was sitting one evening and literally penned a song, which was really a reflection on the massacres that happened on the kibbutzim and the sense of emptiness both for the place, but also for her and imagining how will people go back and sing and so on and celebrate. But lists with this expression of solidarity, sense of collective identity and unity. It's just been written. It's just her on a guitar. It's like I imagine how people composed a prayer when they first shared it. That was that moment. Now, it's subsequently been re-recorded with musical backing and everything else, and I won't say that it's lost anything, she's added a verse, but it's very profound.

JL: Couple of just other little examples to draw on. One is, I noticed in my neighborhood from sort of mid October, I don't know whether it was kids doing something, but it looks like child painting. Painting slogans and hanging them on lampposts and public railings with expressions that, if you think behind them, they're cliché, they're kind of typical like sort of things that might say, Am Yisrael Chai, [0:04:08.4] \_\_\_\_ we love the soldiers. Yeah, tov. It's going to be okay. Am Yisrael Chai, and it's going to be okay. They're not quite the same thing. So I read something into that. The other one, maybe I would just point to is there are two things which go back to back because of the nature of two very prominent kind of groups of people that we're all our hearts are with.

JL: One is families of people who are held hostage, and the other one is the families of people who've been killed, either in the massacre, or soldiers, and they're very, by the way, different. But we see funerals, and the moment we see funeral, it's very much part of the Israeli kind of tradition, which is to put funerals on TV, so the Hespedim, the eulogies that someone's giving, it's not the private intimacy of the family and the people at the funeral, it's for everyone to hear, and at that most intimate moment, this kind of pouring out of human emotion. At that point, I mean, it's not to take anything away from them, but we're all in it. I've sat with my wife and my grown up daughters who've been here watching these funerals every night and feeling that we have to be there. We have to show up to shul. We have to be in the public congregation.

JH: Tell us a little bit about what your daily work reveals about Israel today. That those of us outside of Israel might not otherwise know about?

JL: I don't know that my work does 'cause I show up in the college and I teach Israel studies and Jewish history. There was an anecdote that someone said to me, when you live inside your work, you kind of own it. But does that work for every type of profession? If I'm a maths teacher, I don't have to be a triangle. But if I'm a Jewish history teacher, I'm very much in Jewish history. And I teach Israel studies alongside Jewish history, so I'm interpreting things. And I don't know what that reveals, but I'll give a small example. I'm teaching a survey course at the moment. One of the first classes was about the medieval period in Ashkenaz, and we talked about the

Crusades and the response to catastrophe. It's almost impossible to be talking about brutal, violent murder of Jews in the Middle Ages.

JL: Without, at the back of your mind thinking, but that's exactly what I'm feeling has happened. It's not identical. But if I'm thinking that in my work, then I think other people are spotting similar things. So maybe in my answer to you is I don't know what I could observe for Israeli society in teaching Israel studies, we had a seminar day where we were talking about actually about civil religion in Israel and kind of this notion of how in the secular civic world we perform rituals to express who we are and we would normally and always have done, gone to [Hebrew] it was the second week of the war.

JL: And my work took me to Har Herzl. And of course we're standing around freshly dug graves and we are seeing the area that, I dunno if it's brutal to say, but there will be other graves that haven't been dug yet.

JL: So you're having a conversation about one thing, but you're already having a conversation about something else. The other thing I was thinking was we did a seminar day where we were discussing streams in Israeli Judaism and went to visit [...] in the old city. And the conversation, I think at any other time would've been flat. It wouldn't have been straightforward. It would've been academic and exploratory. And we were having a conversation about what does it mean to be a national religious Jew in Israel.

JL: But what we were really talking about is our relationship to the land of Israel, our sense of history, why we are fighting and how it's drawn us closer together. I think the, maybe the only other thing I would say is that, I sort of experienced everything else, sort of not vicariously through the people that I know.

JL: So it's pretty hard not to say that, I have three daughters who are all in their 20s, One just finished the army, the other's sort of in the middle of university and the other one just graduated as a social worker. She's doing a hotline for the National Trauma Center every night. It's impossible to do that without sharing that with the people that are around you. My youngest is doing some work with a kindergarten of a kibbutz that's being evacuated and living in a hotel in Jerusalem. So in other words, there's a lens pretty much everywhere you go. It's as if everything stood still and we're all looking at each other, caring for each other to the best of our ability.

JH: Which leads me to ask you about you as our colleague and friend in Israel. How has this experience changed you in your work professional personality or Jewish identity, or your human feeling?

JL: It's rough. One of the reasons I came to live in this country was I wanted to feel harder the rhythm of the Jewish people in this incredible project of building an expression of Jewish sovereignty in the good, the bad, and the ugly, and hoping there's more good and dealing with the others.

JL: And I've kind of been through all these various kind of stages very soon after we met LER, we had the beginning of the Oslo peace process, which lifted us up and affirmed many of my own views of the world. Then we dealt with the assassination of the Prime Minister. And so balancing this hope and despair I feel as if I've been through various iterations of it. But I think, there's a phrase I've been asking pretty much every class I've taught or opportunity, which is how are we looking at this event tonight?

JL: Essentially I'm just doing my own sort of exploration through talking. Is this a significant moment or is this a historical moment? Significant is, we've moved, I don't know, 20 degrees. Historical we've moved at least 90 degrees if not 180 degrees, and I'm asking that of myself.

JL: So I look at all these other kind of moments I've been through in this country, military activities, highs and lows, certainly everything until October the 7th where we were fighting the good fight for democracy and now we've gone past that. We're now fighting for our lives. So I think it's very historical. It's changed me. It's challenged me. I feel a little bit of my optimism and faith in the world has been taking severe knocks and I've kind of reached into my world of teaching and the sources that I use and I kind of, I I keep coming back to the same piece.

JL: There's a poem that was written by Yiddish poet originally released in Europe, moved to America - Yankev Glatshteyn. He wrote in the poem he wrote in 1938 called Goodnight World, in which it's a kind of a poetic sort of screaming out, I'm giving up on you the world. I'm turning away from the world. All of my illusions of liberal optimism have been destroyed. And then he has this last phrase in the poem, which he says, within me weeps the joy of coming home. And I feel as if my world has turned inwards and I clinging onto home and the people around me in my country because I feel brutalized by the massacre. But I listen to the voice of support for that. That's come from the parts of the Palestinian politics, which I kind of thought might be my peace partner.

JL: And I look around at the liberal world in the big outside world. I know it's kind of played itself out in American terms recently through university heads being kind of congressional hearings. But it's not really that it's friends who I've kind of lost like everybody who I thought were there for me and turns out they couldn't show up. And a feeling that in the end we're talking inwards and not outwards. For me this disillusion with the liberal world has been tough. There's some notable exceptions.

JL: They for me and my kind of light moments like lifting up. One is I think there's been a finding of each other between diaspora and Israeli Jews, which is profound. I don't feel 100%, I think there's still ambivalence or distance, but that's fine. I was overwhelmed in the first weeks of the war, this enormous feeling of people connecting and a kind of a sense of former students and colleagues and friends.

JL: So I find that very uplifting. And the other thing which probably the bit that probably makes the most difference in my life, which is that I feel as if I found parts of Israeli society that I haven't seen for a long time. We've had a really tough period of bitter kind of tearing ourselves to pieces. I am uplifted but I hear comments where people really feel this need to hold each

other irrespective of their political views. And I don't think it's passing. I don't think it's just the drama of the war.

JL: And that's really worth everything because, there's a question I think all societies ask, which is what is the proximity between the citizen and the state? And some societies, certainly the one I grew up in in the UK, I think it's fair to say there's quite a distance between the everyday citizen and the sense of belonging to their country.

JL: I think we're in a moment where we're almost touching each other. And that's why, going back to the comment at the beginning about this expression of spirituality over religiosity, even the most dry military commentators speak on television when they're describing military activities with emotion. Maybe that's not good professional behavior, I don't know, but they're kind of expressing a sense of emotion that we're speaking all the time. The I and the we, the first person single and the first person plural, have become one.

JL: And in addition to the sense of solidarity, I mean, this is gonna sound very bombastic, but I mean, I don't mind saying I'm pretty open with sharing my emotions. I cry pretty much every night, watching the TV, hearing soldiers - the incredible expression of heroism, bravery, which I think are phrases which have taken a knock in the world in which we live as being somehow, I dunno, unacceptable.

JL: And people who've risked their lives, who risked their lives to look after me and the citizens of this country, Jewish or non-Jewish of any particular identity, persuasion, et cetera, is, is profound. And I find it's redemptive because I think that we'll emerge from this broken in tragedy, but uplifted through the expressions of it. And I wish we could feel such sense of solace by listening to a music festival.

JL: I feel not optimistic, very pessimistic about the prospect for conflict resolution. But on the one-on-one conversations with Palestinian-Israeli colleagues of work and citizens in the country and people that you bump into, people have reached out to, reached out to me, have taken some sense that, we found a common humanity. So it may not be the Bonton of the moment, but that's where I'm gonna go.

JH: Well, Jeremy Leigh, thank you very much for joining us on our special series, HUC Connect in Israel for the opportunity indeed to connect with you and to hear what you have to say about this moment in our hearts and minds. Thank you.

JL: Thank. You very much indeed for inviting me.

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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