

THE BOTTOM LINE: COMPASSION

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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.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, and a conversation with Rabbi Hirshel Jaffe. Hirshel Jaffe earned the moniker, "the running rabbi," for participating in the 1978 New York City Marathon. But even more notably, in 1980, he visited the 52 hostages in Iran, and was later invited by President Reagan to greet the returning Americans in a White House welcome service. Rabbi Jaffe's new book, *Why Not Me? Searching for God When We Suffer*, a five-time cancer survivor's story of family, friendship, and faith, is coauthored with James and Marcia Rudin. And it chronicles his survival from leukemia and the teachings of Judaism that comfort the sick from the point of view of all of the authors. Rabbi Jaffe, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Hirshel Jaffe: Thank you for inviting me.

JH: With your permission, I'd like to pick up on some of the salient themes that come out in your story, rather than on the chronology of those events because I think that these themes are the motivation for and message of your book. And one of the overarching questions is a rabbinical one. It's the question, *Who comforts the comforter?* But it raises other rabbinic questions as well, for example, prayer. At one point, in a stage of recovery, you go to synagogue and you comment, *Since I wasn't busy officiating, I could really concentrate on the words of the prayer book.* In other words, how does the person who facilitates prayer, him or herself, pray in a similar fashion to the question, *Who comforts the comforter?* So the question I have for you is this. Does being a rabbi pose perhaps counterintuitively hurdles to the rabbi's own spiritual completeness?

HJ: Yes, definitely. I think rabbis, clergy, know of the serious questions that we have about the efficacy of prayer. And I must admit that sometimes I vacillate between agnostic and believer. The world is a mess. And the Talmud, the rabbis, said, *Maybe it would be better for man not to have been created.* And they took a vote and said, *Yes, it's better for God not to have created us.* But the kicker is, since we have been created...

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HJ: Let us measure our deeds. And so I as a rabbi have devoted myself to thank God for my rescue from illness. Psalm 138 begins...

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HJ: And the day I called to you, you answered me. And I remember returning to my congregation after a long hiatus of recovery. And one of the congregants embraced me and said, Rabbi, who will comfort the comforter? We will. As far as the efficacy of prayer, I believe that prayer is really evoking the spirit within us that makes for goodness, that it's not as if God is a divine manipulator, we're not robots, but I think what Hashem has implanted in us is the ability to reach for the power that we have and use it for the good. My favorite phrase in Aramaic, kind of sums up my belief, is...

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HJ: God wants heart. And although I'm a rabbi and proud of my Jewish heritage, I believe that the heart of true religion is human goodness and decency. Our sage and philosopher, Rambam, in the Mishneh Torah many centuries ago asked the question, Who is a pious person? And the Rambam taught us that as much ritual as you do, putting on three sets of tefillin and keeping super kosher, you cannot call yourself a religious or spiritual person, unless you're kind to other people. And I think that's the heart of true religion, and it far surpasses denominational and parochial lines.

JH: In a number of places in your book, you very poignantly point to your experience of cancer and recovery in relation to your parents, who were alive at the time. Tell us a bit about the window into the human experience of being a parent and being a child that this process opened up for you.

HJ: When I decided to become a rabbi, my parents were so proud of me. Actually, I had quite a circuitous path. I actually attended the Wharton Graduate School of Business, but it wasn't for me. And I remember I was kind of embarrassed to go home in the middle of the term when I left the university. And I sold Good Humor ice cream. And as I was ringing the bell and making my circuits, I thought to myself, what is it that my parents would want of me? And around our table, we actually on Shabbos, on Friday night, when we lit the candles and recited the Kiddush, we talked matters of Judaism and Jewish ethics. And my parents taught me, Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God. And so in thanks to God, as a rabbi, I've devoted my life to being a prayerful friend to the sick. Many people follow my inspirational website. The address is marathonrabbi.com. And on marathonrabbi.com, I openly invite people from all over the world, I give my phone number and my email, to call me if they need support and somebody who's been there. And yesterday, actually, a woman called me from France and she said, Rabbi, I was diagnosed with leukemia. I'm so scared. Can you help me? And of course, that's what I think Hashem has in store for me.

JH: I was particularly moved, with respect to the parents, an intimation on your part that there was some difficulty, some challenges as an adult child that you felt because of your parents being overwhelmed by your sickness and their sometimes inability to come visit you. And I'm wondering if there's something about the parental experience, that that revealed to you in their pain and their way of dealing with it in relation to your pain.

HJ: Yes, their inability to come and visit me. They were frightened, they were hesitant, they were afraid of what they would see. And actually, a rabbi, a colleague of mine called up my parents, said, You got to go and see Hirshel. And they came to my side, and that was so comforting.

JH: At one point, James, your coauthor and friend, gently chastises you for making a bargain with God in return for your recovery. He warns you that acts with God can be dangerous. And in response, you make light of it a bit. You say, I didn't agree to give God much back. You dismiss it a little bit. And it was funny, but humor aside, you both seem to implicitly agree that making bargains with God is not the highest spiritual plane. But I wonder, Is there a place for bargaining with God? And can bargaining with God focus the mind or put a spotlight on faith?

HJ: Yes, you know, Jews from the time of Abraham, who said...

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HJ: Would the judge of all the earth not do justly? We Jews question God. God is not toppled by our questions. And I wanna share a story in the hospital. Some ministers came and they taught me how to pray. They came to my side, and instead of praying, I lift my eyes to the mountains from West Ham with my help. They said, God, here's our friend Hirshel lying in this bed. He wants to live. He wants to see his daughter skating on the ice, his children under the huppah, so God, be kind to him. And what happened was, I adopted that method of praying. One night in the hospital with awful fevers of 105 and the shaking chills, I prayed not.

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HJ: I lift my eyes to the mountains... But dear God, I'm trying to get up this mountain, and every time I get up a little way, I fall back again. So Lord, I'm not asking you to get me all the way, but could you hold my hand and not let me fall into the abyss? And that prayer was comforting to me.

JH: I've had cause over the years to speak with many rabbis and non rabbis who have articulated how powerfully their Christian colleagues have, as you say, taught them how to pray. There's incredible capacity for us to learn from each other across religions. And this open-hearted prayer culture that is part of many people's Christian faith has really been a powerful teaching for many Jews in my experience. So thank you for the story.

HJ: May I share with you a scene in the hospital? Here I was, emaciated. They actually took away the mirror, they didn't want me to see how thin I was. And I had pain in all my limbs, the doctors couldn't figure out why. And I was becoming depressed and not eating and very down.

And the doctors and the nurses came to my room and they said, Rabbi, we wanna make a contract with you. We'll give you some more pain medication, we'll give you some therapy, and why don't you be a rabbi? Oh, I said, Okay. That kind of embarrassed me. So I went to the basement of the hospital of the University of Chicago, and they were lowering me into warm water to ease the pain in my limbs. And I looked up, and there was a young man in a wheelchair surrounded by the therapists, and they were calling him Jerry. And he was trying to lift himself up onto the wooden parallel bars. And they were urging him on, Come on, Jerry. Well, if he lifted himself up an inch, that was a lot. And I thought to myself, What guts.

HJ: So that night, remembering what the doctor said about being a rabbi, I went into Jerry's room, and he was a lot worse than I was. And he said, How are you doing, Hirshel? What are the doctors telling you? And in a very pessimistic way, I said, Oh, I don't think they want to tell me the bad news. He said, Wait a minute, Hirshel. You're Jewish, right? I said, Yes. Didn't I hear that you were a rabbi? I said, Yes. He said, Well, I'm not Jewish, but didn't I hear that the Jewish people are a people of hope? That the national anthem of the Jewish people is Hatikvah. So why don't you be as Jewish as you can and have hope? And I think at that moment, that young Christian knew more about my religion than I did. I was an experimental patient, one of the first patients in the world to be saved with the immunological drug interferon. And I had to go back for many months, and they had to check me and take my blood and bone marrow, see how I was doing. And every time I went, I would go and see Jerry. And then there came a month when I said, Let me see my friend Jerry. And they said, Hirshel, he didn't make it. So I went into the chapel and I prayed. And on the way home, I thought, How am I going to remember Jerry? And I did something for the first time as a rabbi. I said, I know what I'll do. I'm going to insert Jerry's name into the Kaddish to honor his memory.

JH: Well, it's quite a story. It is compelling to be reminded that not only are we the people of hope, supposedly, we are Asirei Ha-tikvah.

JH: We are prisoners of hope, that we have no choice but to hope, even if it sometimes limits our possibilities. I'd like to go, with your permission, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Although I don't think running is ridiculous, it's not quite as elevated as what we've been discussing. So I wanna talk to you for a minute about running. As a fellow runner who... I can't stand running. I have to ask you, Do you actually enjoy it or do you simply, like me, appreciate its benefits as being worth the sacrifice?

HJ: I actually enjoyed running. Often, I would work out problems in my mind and find solutions. And I was able to put my running to use when I was the man of the year for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. And I staged 10Ks all over the country to raise money for cancer research. And also, I led the team of training in the New York City Marathon. And we had people to endorse us 'cause when I testified before Congress twice with my doctors, congressional committees on health, asking for more money for biomedical research, I said to the Congress people and senators, You spend more money on one submarine than all the money you put into cancer research. It was Congressman Waxman actually, from California. And I quoted...

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HJ: If you save one life, you save a whole world. And the Congressman said, Oh, let me get that transliterated, Rabbi. That's really good. And then when I finished my testimony before the Congress, there were reporters there. And there was a reporter from the Chicago Tribune, and I said, Oh, I guess you're here covering the story of our testimony. He said, Well, I'm here for another reason. I said, Why is that? He said, my father died of your disease. I said, Oh my God, I'm so sorry. He said, No, I wanted to be here to see that now somebody can make it through.

JH: The power of medicine, speaking of this very story, is another theme that emerges. And indeed, you and your coauthors spill a fair amount of ink on the topic of doctors and medicine, as relate to faith and Judaism in particular. As I'm sure you know, Jews in America count among the religious groups that most fervently identify with science and accept its precepts and assumptions. In fact, you yourself explain how Jewish religion embraces the science of healing going back really for millennia. And in our own conversation, for example, you've quoted the great philosopher and doctor, Maimonides. In general, though, speaking as just an observer and a participant in the human experience, do you think that illness is the place where we work out our relationship with science and religion? Does the vulnerability of sickness force us to reckon with our personal boundary between medicine and faith and how each of them jostles for attention in our lives?

HJ: Yes, I do. My salvation and rescue, I think the doctors, the medicine, and Hashem in no particular order, the Talmud says very humorously and cynically...

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HJ: The best of doctors deserve to go to hell. But why do they say that? Because sometimes doctors think that they're God. But I have to say that the doctors who cared for me were just amazing. And right now, I'm under observation because I'm in remission from my fifth cancer, the same diagnosis as Congressman Jamie Raskin, diffuse large B cell lymphoma. It's a very, very difficult disease. And thank God, there was a cocktail of drugs to put me in a long remission. And all of a sudden, my new oncologist is a young Asian woman, brilliant, caring. And she was telling me that fewer doctors now are going into research because the funds aren't there. So we have things backwards. The health in this country is behind. We're not number one as far as mortality and so on. It's a...

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HJ: It's really a shame. I believe that every person in this country has the total right to health care, no matter who they are.

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 master classes 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/hucconnect. Now, back to our interview.

JH: I'd like to move from the science and the faith to a more generalized human experience that exists regardless of science and faith, which is the very nature of suffering. You describe how your experience with cancer made you a more attentive and deliberate rabbi, and also that your congregants noticed this difference. You quote Albert Schweitzer, the great humanitarian doctor, who refers to the fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain, which is a fellowship, of course, that presumably includes all of us eventually. At the end of the day, are pain and suffering, rather than joy or wisdom, the true bridge of human solidarity and compassion? And if so, might that be their purpose?

HJ: That's a very powerful question, very provocative. My response is, yes, through suffering we can learn a lot, we can become better people, but we don't ask for suffering and I don't welcome it as a catalyst. I grew, I learned a lot from suffering, but my fervent wish is that every human being would be spared from suffering. There's a story, I think, in the Midrash, When will Mashiach come? When will the Messiah come? And there's a debate in Judaism about how the Messiah would come. And they said, When the Messiah comes, where will we find him? Surely in the precincts of the temple, before the Holy Ark. And the answer is, No, you won't find him in the precincts of the temple. You will find him outside of the walls of the temple. And what will he be doing? Putting on the bandages of the sick. So to me, having been through this, I am a better person through my suffering. And I learned how important it is to reach out to others, to be compassionate, to have...

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HJ: To have mercy. God knows that's lacking in our world.

JH: I'd like to close by asking you, What surprised you in the course of writing this book?

HJ: Oh, what surprised me was that the book got published. No, really, because we had an agent who was a tough lady from the Bronx, and she took us on, I think, to be charitable and kind. And she said, Cancer books are not popular. And she peddled our book to a hundred agents. But finally, St. Martin's Press published our book, and many rabbis used it for sermons. And I wanna mention, At the end of the book, I give people advice as to how to cope with cancer. I have 10 or 15 ways. Just very briefly, one is, Cheer yourself on. Be kind to yourself. Learn to cherish your existence. Hang on to your fighting spirit. The story is that my nurses told me once when I was delirious, I was pounding on the rails of my bed and yelling out, Come on, Hirshel! So I was urging myself on.

JH: Well, Rabbi Hirshel Jaffe, thank you so much for sharing your experience and for so openly and frankly talking about your book and all of the stories behind it. And here's to wishing you continued remission and good health for many years to come. Thank you.

HJ: And let me end with the words...

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HJ: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem and Gaza and all of its inhabitants. Thank you so much for hosting me.

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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