

Around Us and In Us

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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 Julia Watts Belser. Julia Watts Belser is a rabbi, scholar and spiritual teacher, as well as a longtime activist for disability, LGBTQ and Gender Justice. She's a professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown University, and a core faculty member in Georgetown's disability studies program, as well as a senior research fellow at the Berkeley Center for Religion Peace and World Affairs. She's also an avid wheelchair hiker, and a lover of wild places. We're going to discuss her recent book, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom And The Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*, which won the 2023 National Jewish Book Award. And if I may add a personal note, a source of personal pride by association, a former student of mine. Julia, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Julia Watts Belser: It's such a pleasure to be with you. Thank you so much.

JH: Congratulations on the National Jewish Book Award, and give us a thumbnail of *Loving Our Own Bones* and orient us perhaps in what problem it tries to address.

JB: *Loving Our Own Bones* is an invitation to think more deeply about disability in biblical text, in Jewish tradition, in contemporary culture. One of the core things I'm interested in the book is thinking about the political and spiritual wisdom that disability and disabled people bring to this world. *Loving Our Own Bones* speaks a lot about ableism and disability injustice, really interested in examining the way in which a lot of disability prejudice is rooted in religious texts and continues to reflect out in our contemporary world. But I'm also orienting toward the way that religious texts, Jewish tradition, can be a potent invitation to reimagine our world, rethink our cultural and religious intellectual traditions in ways that really honor the vibrant complexity of all of our human bodies and minds.

JH: In this project, you trace a fantastically complex and rich relationship with authoritative Jewish texts, texts that you describe as loving, but also wrangling with texts that you cite and rely on for many things, but that you also, as you say, do not trust and which you will not rely on for definitive direction or decision making. Not so long ago, one of the great rabbis of the 20th century and a passionate and pithy partisan of reformed Judaism named Arnold Jacob Wolf, used to say, "The only true Judaism is orthodoxy, but every single one of us is in fact reform." Do you believe that the demographic dominance of a modern Jewry that inspires, connects, kind of grounds us in many ways, lots of us, but doesn't actually guide most of our thinking. And it certainly doesn't guide most of our practice that this kind of modern Jewry that's demographically more or less everywhere, at least in the United States, is a version of your complex relationship to Jewish texts, admittedly a flatfooted and an earthy expression of it is contrasted to your soaring rose and spiritual reflection, but a version nonetheless.

JB: I love that. I think in many ways the wrangling with text, as you name it, is one of the most deeply, authentically Jewish things that we do. I think when we look kind of sociologically and religiously across the spectrum of Jewish life and practice today, we see that different Jews, both individually and communally, have different latitude in terms of how much leeway they grant themselves or their traditions, their communities. Like how deeply can you argue with the text, how deep can that fight go? But I would say that I root myself most clearly in a feminist Jewish lineage, where in fact, a willingness to go deep with both love and distrust is a hallmark of commitment to the core spiritual work. I think of Adrian Rich's extraordinary poem, *Diving Into The Wreck*, right, where she talks about how it feels to be a deep sea diver, going into a place where so many of the texts and traditions do not and will probably never know or speak your name.

JB: And that was one of the texts that was a kind of companion text for me as I was working on *Loving Our Own Bones*. It's one of the volumes that sat in the middle of my Shas in the middle of my Talmud when I was in rabbinical school. I had this practice actually of taking my volumes of Talmud and my other traditional Jewish bookshelf, and I actually literally broke up the sets and put feminist poetry, Jewish feminist work, queer work, in the midst of that... I didn't know how to name it at the time, but what I was trying to do was rebuild a Jewish bookshelf that truly honored the fullness of my own experience and the experience of so many folks with whom I feel deepest kinship. And so I think that one of the things that I'm really committed to is to giving people permission to hold both a deep sense of fidelity to tradition and also a recognition that that fidelity, that loyalty might come through frustration, distrust, resting, right with.

JH: I can't help but think of Eikhah-Rabbah, the Midrash and Lamentations and the accusations against God. And it seems to me, if I'm hearing you right, that you're also arguing that this permission, it may be reinforced by you, but it's actually a profoundly Jewish permission that seems to me at the heart of your claim.

JB: Deeply. This is, I think one of the things that keeps drawing me back to Midrash and to Talmud to the role of debate and disputation and tangling with text, that for me is a posture of the power of dissent, the importance of the minority opinion. Now that said, I... It's easy I think to sort of wax poetic about this element of the rabbis, but in truth, when you said that about

Eikhah- Rabbah and God, I thought, honestly, I think often my problem is less with God and it's more with the rabbis. I find myself often much more willing to sort of take as bedrock the idea that like God is on my side. It's the rabbis, it's the voice articulation of Jewish tradition as it has come down to us as a combo human, divine enterprise that has often deeply disenfranchised folks.

JB: And certainly when I think about the way that Jewish tradition engages with and portrays and thinks about disability, which is the core question I grapple with in *Loving Our Own Bones*, I face square on the fact that the tradition on its face rarely gives me the full pass and the full resources for the liberation work that I'm longing for. So much of that is work that I bring into the tradition, in part by reading the experiences, the testimony, the life work of disability activists, disabled artists, culture makers, folks who are doing the extraordinary work of bringing disability culture into being, that work also I claim as sacred. And so I fold that in as another source of sacred text. And it's for me, often in conversation between these different sites and sources of wisdom that the magic happens.

JH: Disability movements have brought together many people who live brilliantly unconventional lives for activism, artistry, and passionate community. I couldn't help but think that embedded in your word unconventional there appears to reside a statistical concession. The word seems to acknowledge that in some measure, exclusion is a function of proportion. So I wanna ask you, is the statistical minority-hood of disability real or manufactured? And if it is real or partly real or what have you, is it always merely an excuse to exclude or are there times when statistical minority-hood is a legitimately challenging barrier to inclusion?

JB: Well, I think it's absolutely the case that, especially when we think about particular kinds of disability experiences, certain experiences are rare. I distinguish there between thinking about certain disability experiences and disability as a whole, which actually I think is vastly under recognized as an experience that cuts across a whole lot of different people's experiences when you begin to scratch the surface of people's lives, where we often find experiences that get people quite close to, if not all the way in to a kind of category of what could easily be understood as a disability identity. But certainly, when I think about my experience on campus, for example, wheelchair users are a minority. And in deaf communities, it's very common to think about deafness actually not as a disability at all, but as a linguistic minority. And so I think that recognition that certain kinds of disability experiences are rare experiences, helps explain a part of the exclusion, the failure to expect certain people in public spaces.

JB: But here's where I would suggest that actually it would be really helpful for us collectively to flip the script, instead of thinking about disability as a rare experience. I find it actually very instructive to assume whenever I'm in a space, whenever I'm in a classroom, whenever I'm in a group, even in the context of friendships, of personal relationships, I try to orient myself toward always assuming that disability is likely to be present. I just don't know it yet, or I don't know how, or I don't know where, and it orients me toward then assuming that building in access is going to be a crucial part of how we work together. It doesn't mean I know the specifics of what particular access needs are in the room, but it does mean I move through the world expecting

that access is going to be a consideration, an expectation, something that needs to be centered rather than a kind of last minute unexpected hitch.

JH: You referred to deafness and its complicated relationship to some of the ideas that you've named, including the very idea of disability. As an outside observer to disability, identity, culture, and politics. I must disclaim my ignorance. I am, however, as I think many people are, aware of the particularly thriving phenomenon of deaf culture. Am I correct in attributing to deaf culture, a pioneering place in much of what you seek to describe, celebrate and advance?

JB: Yes. I think this idea of deaf culture has been really helpful. When I use the term disability culture, it's a kind of recognition that disabled people when we come together or when we make art that's centered in disability experience or when we build virtual spaces that are rooted in disability norms, that there's distinctive characteristics, practices, there's at our best right, shared values, aspirations. Like any culture, I think it's important to not romanticize it. Of course, there's a lot of short falling in terms of, it doesn't always work, but that aspiration to show up in the world in a particular way, for example, in a way that really prioritizes and centers rest, that recognizes the importance of honoring the complexity of people's bodies and minds.

JB: Making space for accommodations, for access, like doing that intricate dance, sort of figuring out how we will actually materially care for each other and offer each other the access that we need. That's beautiful. Jewishly, I would say, that feels redemptive to me. That feels like the kind of work I want to see in the world. And of course in practice it's always imperfect, but culturally, it's something that I prize, I cherish, I treasure it.

JH: Let's talk a little bit about the literature and perhaps the theory of Jewish sources that has inspired you, has, perhaps enraged you and engaged you. I'm thinking about the difference between Torah, the five books of Moses that are primarily legislative and narrative versus the minor prophets, the writings, the Psalms, that have tremendous quantities of figurative language that's not properly narrative or legislative. And I wonder if there's something in those sources that's more malleable, that can resonate more with your spiritual investigations than sometimes the other genres.

JB: I'm not sure that I found that to be categorically the case. I find actually that narrative, that metaphor is often a really dangerous place for disability because disability is so often used as a metaphor and disabled people are so often evoked, metaphorically. I think about the way a lot of the prophets, for example, are interested in, invested in, blindness or deafness as a kind of negative metaphor, as a way to describe unfortunate spiritual states. And that's something that I want us to deeply rethink. This happens a lot in Jewish liturgy as well, right? The appeal to God, not to be deaf to our plea is predicated on the idea that deafness itself is both first a kind of willful inability to hear, but also a negative state, an unfortunate experience from which everyone wants a person to be free. The same thing with blindness. So often blindness is used as a metaphor for spiritual incapacity and that idea that to see the light is to be in the privileged place.

JH: To be enlightened.

JB: To be enlightened, right? You see how it's built on a deeply stigmatizing assumption about certain kinds of sensory experiences, certain kinds of disability experiences as being estranged from true spirituality or full human being.

JH: I was really, really taken with a particular tone of phrase that you used to bring us in an alternative direction in precisely this regard, moving away from the metaphorical uses of disability as language and cipher for obscurantism or distance from God or inability to understand and to offer us its lessons of disability in ways that are affirmative. And you relate to the story of Isaac and his blindness as one such lesson, and you say that what you learned from the story of Isaac is that sensory perception is a quality of attention. I loved that phrase and I know what it says to me, but what did you mean by it?

JB: Oh, thank you so much for picking up on that phrase. I think that there's often kind of normative assumption that at least in the culture that I move through, right, that sight is the primary way we know the world, and that if you don't have sight, you experience kind of profound diminishment of self. So many of our root metaphors and language are for comprehension, for understanding, for pleasure, all related to seeing and vision. But one of the things that I have come to learn through friendships and relationships with blind folks is that there's a whole rich, tactile world of sensory knowing that comes not through sight at all.

JB: So it's like, if sight is your thing, great. I don't wanna take it from you, but the assumption that sight is the only road, this is a problem. And so when I'm interested, particularly in thinking with Isaac's story about the power of sensory perception as a matter of attention, I'm interested in thinking about the ways in which other modes of being attentive to the world, alert to the world, present in the world, can also give us a rich, embodied, sensuous grasp of the world in which we live. Now, of course, ironically, the Isaac story, the biblical text as we have it, the Tanakh as we have it, the story doesn't really show us Isaac leaning into this kind of sensory perception. He has a moment where he's fold by the very thin masquerade of the goat skins.

JB: And so it feels very painful to me actually to recognize that the Tanakh doesn't give us this invitation. It in fact, kind of stereotypically sort of slam shut the door imagines Isaac as a failed patriarch in several ways, but also as a man who's not very good at blindness. He is a bumbling figure and it's particularly painful for me. It's actually one of the stories I really dreaded coming to, because as a disabled person myself I have often felt an incredible pressure to perform disability flawlessly, to showcase the excellence of my own ability to navigate in a wheelchair. And I found myself always flinching back from Isaac's story, not just because it uses disability as a negative trope to imagine a great tragedy or not just because it uses disability as a way to showcase Isaac's vulnerability and his ability to be tricked by his family. It also felt, I guess I would say, threatening to me. Like, Isaac, I want you to be a better exemplar of a skilled blind man. And I realized over the course of working on that chapter that this dynamic of expecting, demanding perfection from minoritized peoples is a dynamic that happens repeatedly in culture. And it also happens within minoritized groups. That we often feel made vulnerable by other people sort of messing up in public.

JH: I think twos are very familiar with.

JB: Yes, exactly. The risk of that dynamic felt so magnified for me in this story. And so as I worked with it, it felt like an invitation to extend Isaac some generosity to imagine this one story we get of Blind Isaac as just the beginning of Isaac's blind life. Now, one of the tragedies of the Tanakh story is that Isaac leaves the scene. He's no longer a protagonist in any significant way after he becomes blind. This is I think another really unfortunate way of marginalizing disability and disabled people. It's definitely not limited to the Tanakh. It happens all the time in literature. Disabled characters often end up marginalized or they end up dead. But I find myself really interested in imagining another trajectory. Or Isaac, what is the rest of his story like? How does he live into his own blindness? I find myself longing for him to find a mentor, a friend. Someone who will help show him the ropes. So many of us who have come into disability community or found our disabilities changing over the course of our own lives have benefited so much from this kind of rich community and friendship. And I long for that for him and in the Midrash in my own heart, that's gonna become a part of the unwritten text for me.

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JH: I'd like to expand our conversation a little bit into the social politics of disability. The first thing I need to ask is, what's a helpful term to use to refer to people who either don't have a disability or for whom their disabilities don't figure into their conscious identity?

JB: Such a great question. I use the term non-disabled.

JH: Non-disabled people of good faith can often, and I say often advisedly as I see it and feel it, can often get mired in fear. When relating to disabled people. They worry about vocabulary, they worry about offering help or not. They worry about feigning indifference or insouciance. They worry about any number of things that all flow from their sincere desire to interact well and with dignity and kindness and good faith.

JH: Meanwhile, if one tries to pay attention to disability discourse today, one often hears of their failures. Can you tell us the story of a successful act of courtesy and thoughtfulness directed toward you by a non-disabled person in the context of disability? And then can you tell us why it was successful?

JB: Absolutely. So I think the first thing I'd wanna say here is that I think one of the most important things that non-disabled and disabled people alike can do is to think about disability in social, structural, and political terms. I want us to get away from the idea of thinking about disability as basically a problem of like people not being nice enough and instead orient us

toward the practice of recognizing and resisting ableism. That to me, feels like the most crucial thing. So let me just say a brief word about what I mean by ableism. When I talk about ableism, I mean a complex set of social structures, policies, norms, attitudes, ideas and practices that marginalize people with disabilities, people who are thought to be disabled. Ableism works hand in hand with a lot of other systems of oppression. So with racism, with classism, with capitalism, misogyny, queer and trans hatred, antisemitism and war.

JB: But the reason I want us to think first and foremost about ableism is because it helps us get out of the trap of thinking. It's just a matter of finding the right words or doing the nice thing in the moment. Ableism is about power. It's about the way certain bodies and minds get treated as normal and others get figured as like deviant, undesirable, abnormal, inferior ableism is also about concrete, tangible practices. It's not just about stigma. It's not just about how people think or feel, it's also about the way that we've built this world. We have built a world that expects everyone to work at the same pace, to process information in the same way. The assumption is everybody's gonna move through the world in the same narrow way and that's manifestly not true. And one of the reasons why disability injustice remains so entrenched in the world is because it's like built into the architecture, both the physical architecture of our workplaces and our cities, but also the way we organize time, the way we think about productivity, the kinds of expectations we have about how bodies and minds operate.

JB: So to my mind, one of the most powerful things that people can do to work against that is to first begin to notice the way in which these norms and expectations, these kind of hegemonic norms operate. And then to figure out how to conspire against them. Another piece of the trouble is that disability is often imagined as a kind of individual personal problem, right? Like I as a wheelchair user have kind of private problem. One of the most powerful things that non-disabled folks can do is to help recognize that actually the work of changing those power dynamics is not on me personally. It's a collective effort. It's a collective enterprise. So I'll share an example of a moment where a beloved friend really showed up for me. This is when I lived in Berkeley, California. I lived on a block that had sidewalk, but a curb cut only in one direction.

JB: So a curb cut's little access ramp that wheelchair users need in order to get off the curb. Of course, it's not just useful for wheelchair users. Anyone who has pushed a stroller or lugged a suitcase or a grocery cart on the city streets has taken advantage of a curb cut. But for me, as a wheelchair user, the absence of a curb cut on one side of that street meant whole swaths of my neighborhood were basically inaccessible to me. My housemate and I we called the city. We were working all of the channels and it took a long time. So one day my friend noticed that some street work was being done and some asphalt was being laid. And she went over to the truck where the workers were and she said, can I borrow a shovel of that asphalt. And she literally took a shovel of the asphalt and laid it down to make a kind of ad hoc curb cut. And I think that's the kind of help I'm looking for in the world. The very concrete willingness to show up both for the long game advocacy activism, like the long struggle. But also the kind of strategic reflection on whether there are ways to change the basic conditions under which person is living or working in a way that would make access more spacious, more useful, more possible.

JH: Well, I take the reframing to heart and thank you for it. And I suppose it's on all of us together to rise to the challenge. 'Cause it seems like quite a challenge.

JB: It is a challenge. I told that story, but then I think I could also tell the story of the way in which a lot of beloveds have shown up for me in the trouble, not with a fix.

JB: But with a recognition, a bearing witness to harm. That also matters. A kind of willingness to go deeper than the platitude, an interest in the root causes of inequality and injustice. These are some of the things that I think can be a kind of orientation, a way in, even a curiosity about disability culture, about the lived experience of navigating the world in a dissident, different way. These are also, I think, moments where I have found profound opportunities to build deeper relationships and a deeper sense of connection across and between people.

JH: I'd like to take us out with the question of surprise. What surprised you about writing this book?

JB: Oh, what an amazing question. One of the things that surprised me most about writing this book was how incredibly life-giving it felt to breed a spiritual commitment with deep textual work and political activism. When I began working on the project part of me thought, how will I ever shape and hold these three strands together? Because for me they are equally crucial. But one of the absolute delights of writing this book was coming to realize how much fire I could bring into my reading of passages from Talmud, passages of Midrash, engaged with both beloved and difficult passages of the Tanakh. How juicy that felt as a way to also engage with key political questions of disability culture and disability activism.

JH: Well, you do that fire justice with your book, *Loving Our Own Bones* and the exquisite prose that you bring to these incredibly challenging, rich and as you say life-giving ideas. Thank you for sharing with us on the College Commons Podcast, and congratulations again for the 2023 National Jewish Book Award.

JB: Thank you so much. What a huge pleasure to get to talk with you today.

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