What the World Needs Now

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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 this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where I'm delighted to introduce Rabbi Shai Held. Rabbi Held, philosopher, theologian and biblical scholar is the president and dean at the Hadar Institute. He received the Covenant Award for excellence in Jewish education, and has been named multiple times by Newsweek as one of the 50 most influential rabbis in America. He's the author of Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence from 2013, The Heart of Torah from 2017, and Judaism is About Love, from 2024, which is also the topic of our conversation today. Rabbi Shai Held, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Shai Held: Thank you so much for having me.

JH: You open by saying that Judaism is not what you think it is. As far as you can gather, what did we think it was?

SH: That's a great question, thank you. That opening statement is obviously intended to be a bit of a provocation because who the you is, is obviously open for discussion. I think that many people think that Judaism is a religion of ritual, of law, perhaps, of a concern with justice as opposed to love. And what I'm trying to do, both with the title of the book and with the introduction is to provoke a conversation. When I make the statement, Judaism is about love, it's obviously not intended as a comprehensive thesis, right? Judaism is about a lot of things, but I wanna suggest to people that love is a really fundamental and actually crucial lens through which to look at the vastness of the Jewish tradition.

SH: I didn't make this as explicit as I might have, but one of the things I try to do over the course of the book is to look at the relationship between love on the one hand, and many of the things that I know many people would say Judaism is about on the other. So the relationship between love and law, say, where I try to show that law in Judaism is a manifestation of love, rather than

an alternative to it or love and justice, where I try to show that they can be held in tension, but sometimes love is actually the engine that drives us towards justice. People think many things about what Judaism is, but I don't think enough people have been invited to see Judaism through what I find to be a very productive and even inspiring lens.

JH: Were you ever tempted to use Islam as an allied example of how a culture frequently understood to be more "legalistic" is also imbued with mercy and love and the like?

SH: It's a really interesting question, and the answer is that I was tempted by that, but at the end of the day, I chose to focus on Christianity for two reasons. One is, I think that a lot of the internalized anti-Judaism that I diagnosed in my experience of traveling and teaching in the Jewish community comes from Christianity, and so that's a conversation that I really wanted explicitly to have. I wrote this book mainly for Jews, but I also wrote it for Christians who are open to re-imagining what they think they knew about what Judaism is. And also, to be quite honest, I chose to stay in the lane of my own expertise. I've been a lifelong student of Christianity, and what I know about Islam is much more limited. I will say I also had the temptation at times to write about Judaism and Buddhism, given the appeal that Buddhism holds for so many contemporary American Jews. There too, I felt a little bit like I wanna stay in the lane where I have spent much of my adult life and certainly much of my intellectual life and the book is already long and a little sprawling. There's several chapters that I wrote that did not make it into the book.

JH: You're in good company 'cause Ron Baum kept his footnotes out of the Mishneh Torah as well, so.

SH: That may be the first and last time I'm ever compared to Rom Baum, so thank you.

JH: You're welcome anytime. Based on your own description of the book, is it fair to call it an apologia and if so, is that a bad thing or a troubling thing, or does it raise your hackles at all?

SH: Yeah, that is a really important question. And it's one I confess I've really struggled with because I struggle in my role as rabbi and in my hat as sort of philosopher theologian to negotiate between the role of apologist on the one hand and philosopher on the other. By apologist, I think what we mean is someone, part of whose project is to make tradition more accessible and believable.

JH: And to defend it from either misconceptions or attacks.

SH: Right. Where I don't feel great about the word apologia is that it is very important to me in my writing not to pretend to tie the tradition up in a bow and make it seem perfect. I wanna talk about difficult text, and I wanna acknowledge that there are texts that are so difficult that I don't have a lot to say about them other than as an inheritor of this tradition and one who embraces it to wrestle with them. In other words, I would say it's an apologia with the caveat that it doesn't pretend to do more than it does. Is that helpful as a formulation?

JH: I think it's helpful as a formulation. I don't think it gets to the heart of the defensiveness embedded in the term or the genre apologia that I picked up on at certain points in the book, and I also picked up on in your description of the book at the outset of the conversation.

SH: There's a defensiveness and there's also a little bit of offense. What I mean by that is that the defensiveness is, yes, I do think it is true that many, many Jews have a distorted and even destructive perspective on their own tradition that results from 2000 years of Christian anti-Judaism. It's not the only source of it, but it's a major source of it. The offense is that I am not interested in saying Judaism is about love, and so Judaism is Christianity avant la lectura, right? It's like we were Christians before they were Christians. I wanna say, Judaism is a religion that is in very significant ways about love. And on the one hand, there are many things we say about love that dovetail with many things Christians say, and there are some crucial ways in which we think about love differently from Christians, and I'm gonna make a case for some of those ways. So there's defense and there's offense, but what I hope there is, is also honesty along the way, meaning, I don't wanna get swept up in either defense or offense. My goal is to honestly reckon with this tradition and the challenges that it raises.

JH: One of the topics centered in the idea of love or adjacent to it is grace. And I'd like to test my understanding of the idea of grace in relation to yours. Grace seems to mean some combination of warmth, kindness, generosity, goodwill, and the benefit of the doubt, colloquially. And as you write, divine love comes with expectations, which is to say you tighten up that idea of a very loose grace with some expectations. And this combination of ideas seems to sort of undergird what you are working with in the book. However, I understand the term grace to mean technically something given freely and unconditionally.

JH: This is the Latin and the Christian theological meaning of grace, meaning gratis, but both Judaism and Christianity impose strings. In Christianity, you get the gift of grace, which is eternal life only if you bend the knee. And in Judaism as widely interpreted, God may be full of grace, but one doesn't actually get the benefit of grace unless one opts proverbially for door number one, that is to say, to follow the rules. And if you choose door number two, there are some hefty curses waiting for you behind it. So neither of these two things, Jewish or Christian, feels like grace. They both feel quite conditional and quite constrained. Do you also perceive this problem or difference in understanding in relation to the idea of grace?

SH: So first, I should say I do think of grace as meaning gratis as that which is given, but unearned. There's two primary ways that I think about grace in Jewish theology. There are undoubtedly many others. One is the idea we find expressed near the end of The Guide for the Perplexed in book three, chapter 53, where Maimonides talks about how the gift of life is sheer grace, and that none of us ever did anything or could have done anything to earn it. I think also, similarly, a formative fundamental aspect of divine love as the sages understood it is also grace. And that is, for example, Rabbi Akiva statement Chaviv HaAdam Shenivra B'Tzelem, beloved is the human being who was created or for he was created in the image of God. That is God loves us not because of anything we do to earn that love, but simply because we're created in the image of God. So, creation by grace and belovedness by grace.

SH: Now, the argument that I wanna make about this is that we often get confused, I think, between conditions on the one hand and expectations on the other. I think both in Judaism and in Christianity, divine love, which is gracious, does come with expectations, but it doesn't come with conditions. That is to say when God is disappointed in the Jewish people because of its sinfulness in these texts, I don't think that means that God doesn't love the Jewish people. I think that means that God is disappointed in the Jewish people. And a better reading of Tanakh of the Hebrew Bible, I think would say that God is disappointed in Israel precisely because of the depths of God's love for Israel. So I don't see the notion of commanding this and obligation as mitigating the reality of grace. They come after divine love, not as a condition for it.

SH: The thing that I argue in the book and that I spent a lot of time talking to people about is the idea that many times in parenting our kids, we get confused between conditions and expectations, such that we end up either making our kids feel that our love is conditional or that we don't expect anything of them. And I think that there's really interesting parallels with all the appropriate caveats, of course, between human parents and the aspiration to love our kids without conditions, but with expectations and theology in which we talk about a God who loves us without conditions, but with expectations.

JH: You mentioned politics from the pulpit, and you remind us that Judaism is an embodied and located religious civilization. It forces us to address questions of the other, of economic distribution, of commercial regulation, etcetera. Have you ever attended a sermon that was patently political, but that was nevertheless so artful, so soulful that its politics were palatable or hearable even by those who disagreed?

SH: Really interesting question. Would it be too Jewish a move to start by asking, have you?

JH: No, it's not too Jewish a move. It's totally acceptably Jewish a move. [laughter]

SH: Maybe. I'm thinking about it, but I'm curious as I think about it since you formulated the question, it sounds like your answer is no, you've never heard such a thing, but I'm curious if that's right.

JH: The short answer is no, but the deeper answer that both keeps me up at night and gets me up in the morning in my role at the Hebrew Union College where we train clergy among other things for the reform movement, I feel like that's the goal, to train sermonizers to be so incredibly communicative with such supple, yet rooted perspectives and commitments that they can raise exactly these things that are politics from the pulpit, and inspire deep listening, engagement and constructive disagreement, rather than fleeing from it.

SH: Yes, I agree with that and I share that aspiration. The way I would formulate this, even though this is obviously much easier to formulate than it is to execute, is that when we talk about politics, we ideally wanna be talking about values rather than partisanship, right? I'm not sure that a rabbi should ever include a sermon with, and therefore you should vote Republican and not just because of tax laws. I think it's more can I challenge people to think about values? Take an example that comes up in this book is when I talk about the mitzvah, the commandment

to love the stranger or the immigrant, what I conclude with is saying, look, these texts cannot, I think with integrity, be used to say, okay, and therefore the United States should take in X number of Ukrainian or Syrian immigrants in a given year. But it surely can be used and I think ought to be used to set an ethos, right?

SH: The demonization and dehumanization of immigrants is intolerable and actually a theological abomination, or the laws of the sabbatical year as Deuteronomy imagines them, we're not gonna be able to derive economic policy very easily from an ancient Eastern text. But when we look at the way Deuteronomy 15 is so focused on making sure that poverty does not become endemic and that it does not become something from which there is no exit, then we have to have a discussion about how do we as Jews try to help build a society in which poverty is not entrenched? Now in a society that was functioning healthily, I think, we could then have liberals and conservatives and every other permutation talk about how do we go about that, and disagree in good faith? Where I think is very hard right now is, no one can say anything without being essentially assailed and degraded. And I think we sometimes succumb to too easy partisanship, rather than insistently trying to draw out the values, the ethos, rather than pretending to derive concrete policy from texts from 3000 years ago.

JH: Yeah, I agree. And it's not just that it devolves into anger, it's also that it's very hard to convince someone that you're talking about the values and that you're not taking a partisan position on a given issue, because it will be seen through as if it were, and that's hard to surmount.

SH: Yeah, it's hard to surmount the idea that we don't assume anyone's good faith anymore.

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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 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: You have a chapter about loving one's enemy, and you lead off that section by asking us to focus our thinking to bracket the extreme case, the proverbial Hitler. Instead, you ask us to consider the far more routine realities of enmity, grudges, conflict, et cetera, and within that frame to think about what it means to love one's enemy. Despite the fact that you've asked us to bracket the extreme case, which I think by the way is a fair request of the reader, would you nevertheless be willing to share your thoughts on forgiving one's enemy in that context?

SH: The chapter on Love of Enemies in this book was far and away the most difficult part of the book for me to write. And part of it was because I felt almost bewildered by the sheer cacophony of voices and cases that came up. And at the risk of sounding like a parody of myself, I think I must have written not even exaggerating here, 20 or 25 different conclusions to the chapter. I would sit at my desk, I would sort of hammer out a conclusion, and I'd say, "Okay, I can live with

this. I feel like this is the point I wanna close with." And then I would come back to my computer the next morning and think, really, this is what you think? This is not what you think. And I'd start all over again. Until I finally kind of ended with what I thought was honest and which undoubtedly some readers would see as a cop out and maybe it is, it was where I ended up, which is sometimes, these texts are better at raising extremely difficult questions for us than they are at offering definitive answers and clear guidance in every situation.

SH: The case that you are asking about, what is Judaism's approach to Yahya Sinwar, let's say. I don't think that you will find sources that say it is a mitzvah to love or readily forgive a mass murderer. I do think you'll find sources that say that God finds it extremely difficult when the Egyptians drown at sea. And the Yakhu Chemoni Medieval Midrash that says, and that's why we don't say the second part of Hallel of those chapters of the Psalms on the six days of Passover, because we acknowledge the downfall and the death of our enemies who presumably sought to kill us. So even here, I think there is some pull in different directions. I was asked to give a lecture at a conference on Christian theology. The conference is about Amor Mundi, the idea of loving the world. And I was asked to reflect on the question Amor Mundi, is that a Jewish notion?

SH: And one of the things that I have been thinking about a lot is something you find a lot in late medieval Kabbalistic sources, and then later, the idea that since God loves everyone, if one loves God, it's impermissible to hate anyone. Now, many of those sources take place in the context of the mitzvah of loving your fellow Jew, but their logic is more universal than that, since God is the creator of more than just Jews. And I'm sort of trying to find my way through what claim do these sources make? And I'll be honest and say, I'm not looking for these sources to just confirm what I already think instinctively about this question. I really wanna wrestle with what are the ways that they might be saying something that I find alien or even alienating, which is, again, going back to the beginning of our conversation where I don't just wanna offer an apologia, right? I really wanna wrestle with what are the ways these sources upend me.

SH: I talked in the book about a midrash in the book of Proverbs, which is probably the source I found most surprising in all the work I did over many years on this book that says, "When your enemy comes to your home to kill you, but arrives hungry, you should feed him." That is really not what you'd expect a Jewish source to say, especially since the Halakhic tradition is very clear about this. Someone comes to your home to kill you, kill them first. That text is so surprising in terms of what we assume Judaism is. And yet I think it's a midrash and that it's not offering the instruction that says, "Here's what you must do." It's maybe saying something like, when you have no other choice, you have to kill someone, but is this a case where you have no other choice. It's maybe asking that question about this particular interpersonal encounter.

SH: And I'll say when I first encountered this midrash, I was so kind of taken aback by it. It so happened that I was teaching a group of rabbis a couple of days later, and I brought this text to a room full of rabbis interdenominational from around the country, and I said guys, what do you make of this? How do you respond to this? And the responses were so fascinating to me. A couple of rabbis said, "Well, this immediately makes me think about those cases where a rabbi or a cantor has invited a white supremacist over to their home, and has begun the process of

that person changing." And then another rabbi said, "I'm sorry, having been stalked by white supremacists, having been physically threatened by them, I can't live with a text like this. I can't live with it." And just began to cry. And I found that to be a very powerful moment as a student of Torah, of watching the way the text opens up a set of questions but doesn't close them. And in many ways that's very hard because it's hard to derive policy from reading midrash, but I'm not sure that's what midrash is pretending to do.

JH: Right, right.

SH: I certainly don't see Halakhic sources that say, "You have to love people who are genocidally committed to your destruction." You find sources that say you have to fight them. Now, where I think Jewish sources might help spiritually and morally is that, for example, we are forbidden always from dehumanizing other people. The moment you dehumanize other people, you have licensed yourself to behave as they do, that's always the danger of dehumanizing. Not to mention, by the way, and this is just something that as a sort of philosopher, I've always found very, very odd, the moment you dehumanize someone who has done something savage against you, you've also essentially let them off the hook, because it's precisely their humanity that brings them into this fear of moral obligation.

JH: I'd like to shift to a section that you dedicate to the intimacy through learning. I think it's fair to say that all venerable traditions value learning in one way or another, but I think it's a fair generalization to state that Judaism famously emphasizes religious learning with notable energy, and perhaps in some cases even to a unique degree. Talk to us about the power of learning as a religious endeavor, both vertically, so to speak, between human and God and horizontally among people.

SH: Yeah. Thank you for that question. Studying Torah with another human being, the horizontal level requires and cultivates at least ideally a posture of genuine curiosity about other people and other minds and their experiences of the world. I think there is something actually enormously moving and powerful about that. A colleague of mine, Rabbi Steven Exler, rabbi of an orthodox synagogue in Riverdale talked about Chavruta as the project of loving curiosity. It expands us and expands our horizons. It really cultivates, ideally a certain kind of openness. That is certainly not what you always find in every midrash or study. All people can also blodge each other over text. But that's the sort of Chavruta that I imagine.

SH: I wanna talk about verticality in two ways. One is the kind of verticality of through history is that when I study a text, I'm studying the same text that Maimonides and Rashi might have studied. And in some ways I enter into a kind of timeless space of conversation. It feels time transcending. It reminds me of something I've been struggling with a lot liturgically. Sometimes when I am reciting a prayer and feeling totally disconnected from it, I sort of remind myself that there's something about participating in some kind of conversation that has been alive for thousands of years where I'm almost praying with my ancestors. I'm studying with them. When I am sitting trying to understand a passage in Deuteronomy, Rabbi Akiva tried to understand the same passage. There is something about living inside a tradition, the power of which is very, very hard to communicate, but the experience of which is very visceral and connected. And then

there's the kind of the other level of verticality, which is the experience of study is an act of devotion. It is about giving the mind to God in some way.

SH: I think my first book was about Abraham Joshua Heschel, and one of the things that I think about a lot is this comment that he makes in passing, where he says something like, the path to believing in the possibility of Torah min ha-shamayim, of Torah coming from heaven is the experience of shamayim min ha Torah, is the experience of heaven from the Torah. It is like, it is the experience of learning in a particular way. It is the only thing that makes coherent the claim that there's something divine going on. I will only say that even though I couldn't really develop that discursively, I have felt that in my own life at moments very, very deeply.

JH: I would take it even further. And I would say that many Jews who are cognizant of the depth of the tradition, but who may not be experts in it, intuit what you describe, even if they only experience it relatively fleetingly or glancingly in the course of their lives.

SH: Yeah. One of the great privileges of my life is I've probably now visited easily more than 130 synagogues, and I'm always taken aback when I hear people who are deeply immersed in tradition sort of assume that the only way to access the power of learning is to be an expert and an insider, 'cause I have seen again and again and again, felt it again and again and again, people who's just, you can see their soul light up with a text that they have no experience with, they don't normally have access to. That is really, really a powerful thing to watch and an amazing blessing to facilitate when you're lucky enough to have that happen.

JH: I'd like to wrap up our conversation with my typical closer, which is what surprised you about writing this book?

SH: I often find myself thinking that anytime someone says Judaism says X about Y, they are at worst lying and in best oversimplifying. Because about so many things, Judaism says X and not X. To borrow a term that I myself borrow in this book, traditions are a multilith. That's what they are. They're a kind of parade of voices about any particular issue. And yet, I was still sort of blown away time and time again by the sheer range of views of the most elemental questions in Judaism. And one of the chapters I most enjoyed writing was the chapter about what it means to love your neighbor, because I found it so deliciously wonderful that Jews can all agree that love your neighbor as yourself, Ve'ahavta le'reyakha kamokha is one of the great principles of the Torah, and yet they've never been able to agree at all about what it actually requires. It's just something so wonderful about that. And I must have gone through 85 sources, rabbinic sources, medieval sources, late medieval sources, Hasidic sources, mustard sources, modern Jewish thinkers, and I was so delighted by the sheer range of what I found, that was really a source of great kind of joy for me.

JH: Well, thank you for the book and its thoughtfulness, its depth. There's just a wonderful amount to discover and discuss, and it's really been a pleasure to discuss it with you. Thank you for joining us.

SH: Thank you so much.

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/hucconnect.

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