



## Scorching Psalms

(Begin audio)

[music]

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.

[music]

Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Menachem Rosensaft.

JH: Menachem Rosensaft was born in 1948 in the displaced persons camp of Bergen-Belsen to two survivors of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. He is Adjunct Professor of Law at Cornell Law School, Lecturer-in-Law at Columbia Law School, General Counsel Emeritus of the World Jewish Congress. And he is the author most recently of *Poems Born in Bergen-Belsen*, which came out from Kelsey Books in 2021, and the editor of *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes, Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, which came out from Jewish Lights Publishing in 2015.

JH: Today, we will speak about his new poetic anthology titled *Burning Songs, Confronting Adonai After Auschwitz*. Menachem Rosensaft, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Menachem Rosensaft: Thank you very much for having me.

JH: Before we launch into the poems themselves, I'd like to frame our conversation the way you yourself framed the anthology, that is to say, patterned on the biblical psalms. In your mind, what is the power of psalms, and what is the tension or contradiction that they pose to you?

MR: Psalms is the traditional way that Jews have related to God in our prayers, in our liturgy. That is our interaction with God, our praise for God, our gratitude to God. And what struck me was that there is a disconnect when it comes to considering the Holocaust, because we consistently thank God and praise God for the miracles God performed on behalf of the Jewish people, knowing that no such miracles were performed during the years of the Holocaust.

MR: And the question then comes, how do we reconcile the concept of an omniscient all-powerful God, whom we thank for loving kindness and mercy, with a God who chose to be absent in the face of Auschwitz and Treblinka and Bergen-Belsen? And to me, the next question is, where is the Holocaust in Jewish ritual? And the answer is, it's not there. It has not appeared. It may be there in the Martyrology on Yom Kippur, if it's added. We have Yom HaShoah, a day of remembrance for the Holocaust, on the Jewish calendar.

MR: And there may be occasional mention, perhaps a reference on Kristallnacht. But overall, it's not there. And that is despite the fact that over the centuries, prayers and hymns have in fact been added to the liturgy, whether it's Kol Nidre that was written somewhere in the 6th or 7th century, or Yedid Nefesh that was composed and added following the expulsion from Spain, or the Prayer for the State of Israel that was composed by the then chief rabbi of Israel in 1948, Rabbi Herzog. And that is now part of every service. So, the precedent for adding prayers, adding hymns, is there, and yet in the 80 years since the end of the Holocaust, this is a topic that has studiously been avoided on pretty much all levels of Jewish observance. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist. That was a motivation for my trying to reimagine the Psalms.

MR: In other words, what would be said to God, to Adonai, in the aftermath of the Holocaust? How would the Psalms read if we were to be honest and straightforward with God? We refer to God, to Adonai, as Avinu Malkeinu, our parent and our sovereign. Well, when we have questions, when we have complaints with a parent or a sovereign, we voice them.

JH: Still yet before we get to your Burning Psalms, I wanna ask another question about the Psalms as a genre in lowercase t, torah, the Hebrew Bible, and I wanna get at what it is that you think that makes Psalms so apt a tool or a framework to get to the heart of the theology of tragedy. What is it that a Psalm can inspire in that impossible musing of loss that the great post-Holocaust theologians such as Elie Wiesel or David Weiss Halivni or Emil Fackenheim can't get at?

MR: The strength of Psalms is that they are in the voice of the individual. It is the individual who is suffering and is calling out to God. It's often forgotten that, certainly according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' last words were from Psalm 22, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

MR: That's the voice of the individual, and that translates to me more easily or more powerfully into the post-Holocaust narrative because, well, certainly speaking for myself, it enabled me to have thechutzpah to imagine what the victims, the dying, the dead, or those who survived would have said to God at the nadir of their lives. I had a brother, my mother's son from her first marriage. My mother arrived with her son and her first husband and her parents and her sister at Birkenau on the night of August 3rd to 4th of 1943.

MR: In the selection, my grandparents, my mother's first husband, and their son went in one direction, and my mother and her sister went in the other. This was the last moment that my mother saw her five-and-a-half-year-old, a boy named Benjamin. And in the Psalms, I try to imagine what Benjamin might have felt, what he might have thought, what a

five-and-a-half-year-old child might have said to Adonai, whom the child was taught would be a protector, a God filled with loving-kindness. And how would someone feel as the gates of the gas chamber closed down and no help was forthcoming? And then again, that juxtaposes with the miracles that were performed. You asked me about the theologians.

MR: Well, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote an article in early 1944 while the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau was still operating in full force. And in that article, he had a phrase that struck me. The day of the Lord is a day without the Lord. Where is God? Why dost thou not halt the trains loaded with Jews being led to slaughter? That is the essence of the question that needs to be asked, and that is the essence of the question that I think can best be asked in Psalm rather than in a complex theological or hermeneutic discussion.

JH: The power of Psalms resonates precisely as you describe across civilizations and centuries. I wanna pick up on the sense of betrayal that you describe. Particularly in Burning Psalm 3. You cite betraying Absalons, erstwhile brothers, erstwhile friends, whom you charge with the guilt of their betrayal and murderousness.

JH: But you go on to charge God with negligence for failing to protect the victims against those murderers. You double down on your charge to God, but you do not revisit your moral outrage at these killers, at least as I read you. Now, as with Psalms, I understand that your primary interlocutor is God, but I do wonder when I read this particular poem. When you, Menachem, rage internally, do you in fact rage more at God than your fellow human being?

MR: We've gotten through our rage at the killers. We have expressed it. We have categorized Nazis, the SS, the Einsatzkommandos that were doing the Holocaust by bullet in Ukraine and Russia, and we have come to terms with what we think of them. Let's put it into modern terms. We don't need to have a long debate on the Hamas killers who perpetrated the October 7th sabbatary. We've dealt with that.

MR: In these Psalms, the human betrayers are individuals that we know how to relate to. But the moral account, what is called in Hebrew cheshbon ha-nefesh, the accounting of the soul, as it were. With God has not been done, and we are, I believe, being somewhat hypocritical if we continue to praise God, and thank God, and exalt God for miracles and greatness performed thousands of years ago and ignore the fact that they were not performed within the lifetime of people who are still with us.

MR: And so, the Psalms are meant to be a theological exercise, and note, by the way, I at no point hold God responsible for the Holocaust. I at no point accuse God of having perpetrated the Holocaust. My charge, as it were, is that God at no point stopped it. God at no point even expressed compassion. The heavens did not open. There were no tears. There was only divine silence.

JH: In the theme of bringing God to account, I'd like to ask you to read Burning Psalm 4 in it's entirety.

MR: For the violin, cello, and mandolin players outside Birkenau's crematoria, one final melody to muffle your silence, you did not protect, did not save the righteous any more than the wicked, the truth speakers any more than the liars, the infants who had not yet learned to walk any more than the elderly who could no longer walk, the humble any more than the arrogant. You put no joy, no peace in their hearts, only fear, bitterness, and a fading melody for violin, cello, and mandolin.

JH: In this brutal poem, I hear you unflinchingly indict the abuse of art as a sacrilege all its own. But I also wonder if when you speak of our failure to bring God to account, does the particular embitterment in this poem put art at the juncture of the human and divine and thereby become part of that overdue accounting?

MR: You have to bear something in mind. The violin, cello, and mandolin players I was referring to, were members of the women's orchestra who played in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Classical music, Beethoven, Mozart, were forced to be played as inmates walked through the camp, as they walked toward a selection.

MR: So the sacrilege was already performed, and to me, that is part of it. What we need to recognize, the horror was not just that people were being killed, it is how they were being killed. The cynical brutality of the Germans in having beautiful music played that could no longer be deemed pure because that music had been so desecrated. By the way, the same orchestra inspired one of Leonard Cohen's most beautiful songs, which is Dance Me to the End of Love.

JH: I'd like to ask you to read Burning Psalm 52.

MR: When David, not Jeremiah, is a role model, fear of being unmasked is greater than the fear of heaven.

JH: We associate folkloristically, or piously, the psalms with King David as their author. And here, you invoke him as our failed role model. Is it possible that it is precisely David's failings as a role model that make his psalms such a powerful role model of yearning and brokenness?

MR: Yes, very possible. And yet I find that Jeremiah was far more honest, demonstrated far greater ethical standards than David. To a large extent I guess what I'm trying to say there is, let's keep Jeremiah front and centre because a great deal of what he wrote is relevant to our contemporary times as much or perhaps more so than David. And of course we go back to, as you say, the folkloristic narrative, which is probably inaccurate because by all historical accounts, David was not the author of most, if any of the actual Psalms. And indeed no one person was.

JH: You write in your introduction of a kind of tortured effort to put yourself in the shoes of your murdered brother in a poetical act of radical empathy of a different order. Really so radical, I suppose that you call it chutzpah. In the meanwhile, nowhere as far as I can tell, do you even so much as claim to relate to God or to adopt God's perspective, which would perhaps, I suppose, be chutzpah of yet a different order again. So I wonder, does your choice to rail against God

rather than to justify God, reveal the wrath of the betrayed believer or the despair of the unbeliever?

MR: I think it is the anger at the hypocrisy of those who are in charge of the literature. I don't think any of us have the audacity to say that we know God, that we understand God. Therefore, all we can do is track the way the relationship has been perpetuated and that relationship is via prayer. And to me, the fact that there is no acknowledgement in our liturgy anywhere, that the God we pray to, failed us, we ask God between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to inscribe us in the Book of life, in the book of sustenance, in the Book of Health, in the Book of Merit, and then on Yom Kippur to seal us in those books. So we ask for tangible help, for tangible protection without acknowledging, without recognizing that no such tangible protection was given to six million Jews. We are at a particular moment in history is the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, followed by the 80th anniversary of the liberation of other camps and the end of the Holocaust.

MR: For the past 80 years, we have had the enormous privilege of listening to survivors and having them in our midst as a human awareness of what had happened. I spoke to my students at Cornell in a class on antisemitism in the courts, and I told them that they are privileged because all of them had encountered a survivor in their family, a grandparent, an uncle, someone in the community. Theirs is the last generation to have that privilege. And if we do not make the Holocaust tangible in human terms, if we do not bring the voices of the ghosts of Auschwitz into our liturgy, in our prayers, then it will fade and we will have failed the victims because we owe them a remembrance. I tried to imagine myself as my brother because by imagining myself as him, I give him an additional couple of seconds of existence. And perhaps if my daughter and my grandchildren will read what I have written about my brother, then his memory will continue even beyond my lifetime.

S1: 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/huconnect](http://huc.edu/huconnect). Now back to our interview.

JH: Moving from the poetic to the social and religious context, I'd like to ask a question about memory and memorialization. So for the moment, leaving aside the very real and acute risks of willful holocaust denial or bad faith amnesia, I want to ask you about memory and memorialization in their organic and perhaps even healthy evolution. How does memory change with the passage of time, regardless of our efforts to keep it unchanged? And if that change is inevitable, how should we nevertheless harness the meaning of the past?

MR: I think we need to keep memory alive. Oblivion is the darkest place in the universe. A slave who was emancipated in 1864, 1865 had a different attitude towards slavery and remembered it differently from their children who lived at the beginning of the 20th century or their grandchildren in the 1930s, or their descendants in 2024. They're the different remembrance. They're the different form of, in some way, mythologizing the event in other ways of being

scrupulously accurate with historical fact. And the same will hold true with the remembrance of the Holocaust. I can't expect someone born in 2025 who will never have met a survivor and will never have seen a number tattooed on a relative arm or on anybody's arm to have the same visceral reaction to the Holocaust as we do. But all we can do is transmit the legacy in the hope that there will be those coming after us who will take the legacy and even if they transform it, treasure it and value it, and take it forward to give to the next generation.

MR: The Jewish people has done that on Tisha B'Av, for almost 2000 years. More if you go to the destruction of the first temple. But I suspect that if Yohanan ben Zakkai, and his students at Yavneh decided to commemorate Tisha B'Av, they did so differently having been in the temple that was destroyed in their lifetime and possibly with them seeing it being destroyed than Jews in Spain during the Golden Age, or Jews in Ukraine during Khmelnytsky pogrom or us today. And yet the form of remembrance, the form of adapting lamentations to our own age that keeps the imagery alive as more than something perfunctory. All one has to do, is to go to a Jewish summer camp on Tisha B'Av and see that you have teenagers who sit on lawns and relate to Lamentations. And that to me is a way of having a national memory, a national conscience.

JH: I'd like to switch gears because your book switches gears in the epilogue where you offer poems that do not directly or primarily refer to Psalms, but rather refer to other sources such as October 7th and the prophet Jeremiah. In the poem titled, Simchat Torah Requiem, dedicated to the victims, the wounded, the survivors, and the hostages of October 7th, 2023. You write, Despite unending anguish, Adonai's anguish, Allah's anguish, our anguish, Israelis and Palestinians, Muslims, and Jews must now look into the sunrise. Do I detect a different God here from the God of your Burning Psalms? Do I read a God who suffers with us rather than who ignores us?

MR: Perhaps I am in this instance hoping that the presence of God, the presence of a divinity, the presence of a divine spark may have some sort of redemptive quality that can help bring the tragedy to an end. There's nothing one can do about what happened on October 7th. But following that, I added another poem which I wrote after, which is poem called, The Child. And there I basically note that the starving child of the Warsaw Ghetto, Belsen ghetto, Bergen Ghetto was created in the same divine image by the same God, the same Adonai, the same Allah as a starving child in Gaza city, Khan Younis Rafah, and the dead child in Gaza, Khan Younis Rafah is cried over with the same tears, by the same God, the same Allah, the same Adonai as a dead child in Al Kufa Najaf, Nahal Oz Berry. It's a hope that people will come to their senses and recognize that we believe ourselves to be created in a divine image. And if we are created in a divine image, then perhaps the Creator does not want us to destroy ourselves. It's the mid rush of the angels singing when God caused the waters to drown the Egyptians who were pursuing the Israelites, and God got angry with them to say, my creatures are dying, and you are laughing. So you are right in this instance, I suppose, I was writing there in the presence of the tragedy, perhaps hoping that a divine compassion might transmit itself to the actors on the ground.

JH: In this hopefulness, in your hopeful call for Jews and Muslims, in this poem, to look together at the sunrise, are you making a call that at the end of the day boils down to asking the

Palestinians to emotionally accept the defeat of 1948 and asking Jews to do the same for October 7th. And if so, might it be the case that God resides not in reconciliation itself, but rather in the self-negation that reconciliation demands?

MR: We have no way of knowing what God's countenance is like. But let me give you a personal anecdote. I became a bar mitzvah in Israel. At that time, we had lived in the United States for four or five years. Most of my parents' friends of the survivors lived in Israel. And my bar mitzvah was at a hotel in Herzliya in Israel. And my father at the time was friendly with Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, and Rabbi Kaplan was at my Bar Mitzvah. He participated in the service. He had an aliyah. And that afternoon, I'm a 13-year-old kid. I am extremely relieved that everything is over. And I was sitting in the lobby of the hotel when Rabbi Kaplan came over to me and congratulated me, and then asked me, tell me, do you know why it is written that God created man in his image?

MR: Now, I was precocious, but I knew enough that when Mordecai Kaplan asked such a question, the only appropriate answer was, no, Dr. Kaplan, I don't know. And he proceeded to say, look, Ancient man was a sun worshipper, and when they saw their shadows in front of them, they thought that was a reflection of God, as opposed to a reflection of themselves. And then he said, "It's not that God created man in God's image, it that man created God in man's image." And in Psalms or in anything that we do, we imagine God. We believe, we think what God looked like, whether it on the Sistine Chapel or in any other format. But we don't know. And therefore, all we can do is imagine the power of God.

MR: And therefore, if the power of God can be used for reconciliation, then it is critical for us to use that power in order to hopefully come up with some kind of resolution. Abba Eban, the legendary Foreign Minister of Israel, used to say that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not a conflict between right and wrong, but a conflict between two rights. And to the extent that we can use religious beliefs, to the extent that we can use the impact of divinity, the impact of theological teachings, as a force for something positive, then we need to try to do so, which does not mean that there aren't those on both sides, the Jewish fundamentalist side and the Muslim fundamentalist side, who believe in absolutist terms that they and they alone know the truth.

MR: Well, I have no way of knowing whether any of them have, but hopefully somewhere, somehow, there will be people who will realize that, yes, 1948 will have to be somehow accepted. Yes, the justifiable fury of Israelis after October 7th will have to be put in check because, at the end of the day, having children killed, whether they're Jewish kids or Muslim kids, Israeli children or Palestinian children. They are still children, and unless someone recognizes that the war has ceased to be about anything legitimate and at some point becomes simply an exercise in warfare on perpetual motion, there has to be a point when some people agree that let's rethink this. Yitzhak Rabin was no pacifist. Yasser Arafat was a terrorist. Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin shook hands on the White House lawn in September of 1993 with a resulting effort to reach a compromise, to reach some kind of an end situation to warfare. And remember that at one point, Rabin said that he would have much rather made peace with the Norwegians, but that's not the neighborhood he was dropped into.

JH: I'd like to close the interview with a question about your experience writing this book. What surprised you?

MR: I think what surprised me the most is that I actually finished it. This is a book that I didn't think I would write because I started writing it and decided to do it numerically in accordance with the biblical Psalms. And on an almost daily basis, there was this voice in my head saying, what are you doing? How can you write Psalms? Give it up. And something in me forced me to keep writing. It took me about a year and a half using the original Psalms as inspirations, as landmarks. And at one point, I got to Psalm 150, at which point I re-read them. And I said, "Well, they hang together." And I think it happens sometimes to authors that they read their own works and wonder who wrote these things because you don't remember having those thoughts and yet you know they were your thoughts.

JH: Well, Menachem, Rosensaft, I wanna thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast and for the conversation of such consequence and thoughtfulness. It's really been a pleasure. Thank you.

MR: Thank you, Josh. Thank you for having me.

MR: 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](http://huc.edu/hucconnect).

[music]

(End of audio)