Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove: A New Era for Judaism and Israel

(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, and you're listening to our special series from the pulpit, discussions about influential sermons and speeches with the Rabbis who gave them.

Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and a conversation with colleague and my friend, Rabbi Dr. Elliot Cosgrove. Rabbi Cosgrove, a leading voice in American Judaism, has served as the senior Rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City since 2008 after having been ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary and having earned his PhD from the University of Chicago Divinity School. He has published multiple collections of sermons and took a leading role in supporting Israel in the wake of October 7th. His recent book, For Such a Time as This, came out in 2024. Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, Elliot, thank you for joining us on the Col-lege Commons podcast.

Elliot Cosgrove: And such a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much for the warm invitation.

Joshua Holo: I just found out that your synagogue, Park Avenue Synagogue, actually has reform roots and is therefore somehow, at least historically connected to the Hebrew Indian College. Is that so?

Elliot Cosgrove: Absolutely. It is a fascinating story and has the benefit of being true unlike many stories Rabbis tell that in the 1920s and prior to that, Park Avenue Synagogue was a card carrying reform synagogue and the Rabbi of some tenure passed away and they were on the search for a new Rabbi. The chairman sent the head of the search committee to go find another Rabbi and said, go to the seminary. In order to understand this, you need to know fifth Avenue in New York, which is presently a one-way street, used to be a two-way street. And the head of the search committee took the bus to the seminary, but went the wrong way. Instead of going down to HUC downtown, the head of the search committee went uptown to JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary, where I ulti-mately, as a conservative Rabbi, was ordained.

Elliot Cosgrove: By the time he got into the office of the person placing Rabbis at JTS, he realized that he was actually in the wrong seminary, but as a gesture of goodwill, and this was

Park Avenue Synagogue after all, the representative from JTS said, let me just send you one of my students. It was agreed upon and that student was one of the dominant figures of American Jewry, one of my predecessors, Rabbi Milton Steinberg of Blessed Memory, who was then in Indianapolis.

Elliot Cosgrove: And so to make a long story short, it was on that sort of mistake 'cause Steinberg blew away all the other candidates of his generation, that Park Avenue Synagogue shifted from be-ing an HUC institution to a JTS institution. So that is the history of how Park Avenue went from being a reform synagogue to a conservative synagogue.

Joshua Holo: Milton Steinberg himself, a nationally known Rabbi as the author of, As a Driven Leaf, which had a wide publication and one of the illustrations of Park Avenue synagogue's impact and influence. Well, I'm glad for the serendipity and it echoes your and my hometown Los Ange-les, where HUC and the American Jewish University also often get confused and people end up in the wrong building sometimes. So we come by it, honestly.

Elliot Cosgrove: I mean, and we're all on the same team.

Joshua Holo: That's right. Give us the skinny, if you would, on your recent book, For Such a Time as This?

Elliot Cosgrove: Let me begin with the title of the book, which takes its cue from the biblical book of Esther that we read on the Festival of Purim. As the story goes, there was a Jewish com-munity in ancient Shushan, Persia that believed itself to be living comfortably in the diaspora out-side of the land of Israel. The main character of the story, queen Esther, Esther, actually means to hide. Esther hid her identity in the Palace of Ash Roche and rose up to the highest ranks of power to Queen, and thus we celebrate the festival of Purim. And the going was good until of course, the wicked decree of Haman came and the fate of the Jewish people was hanging in the balance.

Elliot Cosgrove: It was at that moment that Esther received a message by way of an emissary from Mordecai, her uncle, and Mordecai said, "Esther, don't think that you will escape with your life in this moment, and who knows if it was not for such a time as this, that you've arrived at your royal station." And from that charge, Esther rises up, she has her Esther moment, and the Jewish people are saved. And I use that biblical story, Josh, as sort of the biblical spine for what American Jewry went through in a October 7th and post-October 7th world, we thought that we were living comfortably in our moment like the Jews of Persia, that yes, there's antisemitism in Europe. Yes, there's historic antisemitism, but we thought that the American Jewish story was different. And then of course the attacks came, not just against Israel, but against Jews, crimes against humanity. And the hatred was not just anti-Zionism, but also as we've all experienced anti-Semitism here on American shores.

Elliot Cosgrove: And we've all been called on to rise up for our Esther moment. Some people call it October 8th Jews, sociologists talk about the surge, other people talk about the great awakening. But in some way, we have all been called on to rise up to this moment of time of

crisis. And that's really what this book is about, not so much about the geopolitics of Israel, but about this moment of American Jewish identity.

Joshua Holo: I want to talk about the need for sermons to tap into a sense of urgency, which you have alluded to in your introduction to the book, but I want to dive down into a little bit more. You quote the poet Michael Zatz saying, how everything looks unchanged, even when nothing remains the same. How can you communicate urgency without risking inflationary hyperbole? And I ask this question, particularly because it's been many, many years now that I have heard over and over again, the phrase, now more than ever, now more than ever this, unprecedented that, from the pul-pit, from political speakers, you name it. So there's something unique that you're trying to tap into. But how do you find the right balance of communication?

Elliot Cosgrove: I think, whatever the expression is that everyone believes themselves to be liv-ing in an inflection moment of history. And so I think the task of any preacher, certainly of my rab-binate, is to give voice to the concerns of the Jew in the pew by way of the wisdom and the text of tradition. So in a way, that is the homiletic or Rabbinic vocation to translate the riches of Jewish texts and the cadences of the holidays into the coin of what is on the minds and hearts of the Jew-ish community I serve. That's what a Rabbi does to translate tradition through the vehicle of per-sonality.

Elliot Cosgrove: And so I not only think it's okay to do that, but it's actually my job and demand to do that week in and week out, to ask the question of, what is on the minds of my congregants and to communicate that our tradition speaks to those concerns. How do we do so while, at the same time, recognizing that we're in it for the long haul, that we can't react with hyperbole, with exaggeration and otherwise. I do believe, Josh, that ours is a moment in time that calls on us to re-spond.

Elliot Cosgrove: I think we are objectively living through a moment of transformations, not just in Israeli society, not just in American Jewry, but in the relationship between the two. And I think that we need to speak with that urgency. And at the same time, my great fear right now is because everyone feels that everything is so urgent and politics are divisive as they are on the left and on the right, that people are speaking past each other with polarizing and sometimes vitriolic mega-phones as opposed to listening to each other and recognizing that we need to get through this jour-ney together.

Joshua Holo: In the first chapter, you describe the essence of the experience of Jews in America as simultaneously American and Jewish in what you call dynamic tension. If October 7th is a genuine watershed, I think we would agree that it is. Did October 7th unmask tension between our Ameri-canness and our Jewishness, or did October 7th actually change the reality such that we had been living in benign homeostasis and now have to adapt to bona fide tension?

Elliot Cosgrove: I think October 7th was experienced differently by different communities within American Jewry. Of course, we can't talk about all of American Jews and certainly not all of Jews as one monolithic entity. I think that for some, October 7th was a

where-did-that-come-from mo-ment. I had a young person walk into my office, a professional in his late 20s, and said, you know, Rabbi, I thought always those stories my parents told me about the need for Israel as a refuge and anti-Semitism, that they were crazy. And he says, now I think I'm the one who was crazy.

Elliot Cosgrove: So they felt, a certain generation, but certain Jews felt a sense of whiplash. An-other generation felt that this was a big I-told-you-so moment, that the last 70 plus years post-World War II up until now were the aberration of Jewish history, and now it's a reversion to the norm. There was a famous turn-of-the-century play, Israel Zangwill's Melting Pot idea, that some-how the promise of America was that we would all be thrown into a cauldron of identity and a sin-gle emergent American ethnicity, religiosity would emerge. In response to that, the American pub-lic Jewish intellectual Horace Callen said, no, that's absolutely not the promise of America. The promise of America is the image of a symphony where every ethnicity, faith, and otherwise, would be able to play the instrument of their identity according to their own timbre and tonality, and that America was the promised land by which everyone could give expression to their own identities as a shared American identity.

Elliot Cosgrove: And I think that we had at least hoped that that was the promise of America, that we respected each other's differences all the while respecting that project as the shared American project. And October 7th was really a moment, I do think, that the curtain was pulled back, that somehow with the pernicious and permeable boundary between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, I think we, back to the Purim story, realized that maybe, just maybe, this place, America, is not quite as hospitable to matters of Jewish concern and safety and security as we would have hoped.

[music]

Joshua Holo: 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 class-room 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.

Joshua Holo: Moving to Israel for the moment, I noticed you do something that I appreciated for its frankness in the book. You introduce yourself politically when you openly espouse the principle of a two-state solution for Israel-Palestine, even if it's also the case that you believe that October 7th forces a deferral of that solution given the tensions and the difficulties in Israel that we can foresee will continue for some time. This position, the two-state solution, has moved from the cen-ter of the, perhaps, global Jewish political spectrum to the left of that spectrum. Certainly long be-fore October 7th, the two-state solution became more associated with the left than it had originally been. To what do you attribute that particular shift?

Elliot Cosgrove: Trauma and betrayal. I've been to Israel twice at the beginning of 2025 already. I go there very frequently. The Israeli left is dead. I think the promise of a two-state solution right now is a pipe dream that, much to my dismay, is probably not a dream that's going to be

realized in our lifetimes. And as someone who very much grew up with that Oslo possibility of Jewish self-determination side by side with Palestinian self-determination, I say that with an incredibly heavy heart. The betrayal that Israelis felt prior to October 7th, that there was not a peace partner, a rightward swing in the Israeli body politic that the Prime Minister was either or beholden to, a set of policies that precluded a possible two-state solution was just given a horrific exclamation point on the events of October 7th and since. You go and you see people at a rally on a Saturday night calling for the hostages to come back. You see people mourning, IDF soldiers championing their courage. You might even see people protesting the government in Israel, but there's like one guy with one flyer off to the side, marginal, marginal, still talking about a two-state solution.

Elliot Cosgrove: And so I think that bears to ask the question of, where do those voices go today and what's the role of American Jewry for whom the two-state solution is very much the Torah, the talking point of who we are. And I actually think that there's a prophetic role that diaspora Jewry can play for Israel, meaning even if you and I soberly can say that a two-state solution is a pipe dream right now, I do think we can plant the seeds for that pipe dream. I do think we can still speak for that dream even if it's not realized in our time, which frankly is a very Jewish muscle group that whether we get to the promised land, we keep marching towards it. Whether we return from exile, we still long for it. It took us till 1948 to get Jewish self-determination. It's going to take us a while longer to get both Palestinian and Jewish self-determination in peace. But what are we if not a people who dream?

Joshua Holo: Referring to one of your sermons a mere two weeks after October 7th, you focused on the role of your audience, let's call them American Jews for the moment insofar as you gave the sermon in English, in developing a language, what you called a lexicon, a vocabulary with which to discuss and to mold and to understand our notion of the ethics of war. The sermon was called, Israel's Just War. Let's leave aside, for the moment, the non-Jewish discourse and vocabulary about the war in Israel and let's limit ourselves to the American Jewish community. Do we even share a lexicon, getting back to your earlier point about our internal conversation, or are we still, even in the American Jewish context, speaking different languages to or worse at each other?

Elliot Cosgrove: In response to trauma, and I make this point in the book, some people respond with empathy and some people respond with vigilance. Whether it's a Holocaust survivor or petty theft, you can respond by shields up and saying never again shall I put myself in a vulnerable posi-tion and vigilance bleeds into vengeance, or you can take your experience and respond with empa-thy and concern for humankind. You see it in the Passover Haggadah, which has both strands. On the one hand, you were once a stranger in a strange land and therefore you shall know the heart of the stranger, and yet on the other hand, we have the passage that says that in every generation a new Pharaoh arises who wants to destroy the Jewish people and we have to be vigilant against them. And my contention is that both strands are within the DNA of the Jewish people, not just in the Passover Haggadah. The problem is that right now people seem to be dividing up between far left, whose focus, appropriately so, is on empathy for tens of thousands of Gazans killed and dis-placed, and that is where their reflex is and the critique of the present Israeli government and its prosecution of the war.

Elliot Cosgrove: And on the right, there are those who feel that in such a time as this of trauma and continued loss and vulnerability, that our number one through 20 set of concerns as an Ameri-can Jewish community should be Israel's right to self-defense and to make sure that those who seek our destruction are wiped from the earth. And anyone who says otherwise is missing the boat and a traitor to the cause. And so you have these two people using different vocabularies, two different approaches.

Elliot Cosgrove: And what I'm trying to do, Josh, is find the vocabulary that rejects the binaries, that rejects the either or and embraces the both and, that we can put at the forefront of our concern the well-being of Israel and the Jewish people. And to do so, can also include empathy for the oth-er, in this case, the Palestinians, who themselves are held hostage to the sadistic tactics of Hamas. My war is not with the Palestinian people, my war is with Hamas and those who seek Israel's de-struction. And so I think we need to find a vocabulary of both and the ability to hold multiple thoughts at one and the same time.

Joshua Holo: I'd like to expand our conversation a bit to politics as an idea, politics writ large. We often query and implicitly or explicitly criticize the idea of politics from the pulpit. And I'd like to ask you about how you see that phenomenon.

Elliot Cosgrove: There are those people who say, Rabbi, you shouldn't talk politics from the pul-pit. But that, generally speaking, are people who disagree with my politics or the politics of said Rabbi. If you're just echoing someone's politics, I assure you they don't complain about it. At the same time, I do think Rabbis are called on to speak about tradition and the wisdom of our heritage to the issues of the day, which are oftentimes political issues, but not to mistake themselves to be op-ed writers for the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. I do think that right now the is-sues on the docket of the Jewish people are related to the well-being of the sovereign state of Israel and collective well-being of the global Jewish community, which are political in a way that, say, 50 years ago we might have all been discussing whether swordfish is or isn't kosher or intermar-riage or Shabbat observance or whatever it might be, which didn't have the same political valence. So I think that it's a responsibility. I personally think that it's our obligation and responsibility to speak to the issues of the day through the vehicle of the text of our tradition.

Elliot Cosgrove: And I think that our communities have hired their Rabbis because they know that that process happens by way of personality of clergy. And so to ask a Rabbi to check their con-science at the door is to lose sight of what it is to hire a Rabbi. Now, just one sort of coda to that is I'm unapologetic from the pulpit about my own particular views. Having said that, I never presume that everyone in the pews thinks the way I do. You and I both know the model of Hillel and Sham-mai. Hillel and Shammai disagreed on everything. Hillel is said to have won most of the argu-ments, thus more campus organizations named after Hillel than Shammai. But the reason was not because Hillel was smarter than Shammai, the reason was because Hillel, the Rabbis explain, stated Shammai's point of view prior to stating his own.

Elliot Cosgrove: So if I take a position from the pulpit, I always acknowledge verbally and oth-erwise that there are those in the room who disagree with me. And nine times out of 10, when I do that, they will come up to me or have a coffee with me or send me an email and they'll say, I disa-gree with you, but I felt seen. I felt that you recognized that there's more than one view. So if there's anyone listening wondering how to craft sermons on this, I would say, say what you want, but just always say what the other view is, even as you're stating your own.

Joshua Holo: I'd like to add to the Hillel-Shammai another coda that we often don't add, but is re-ally important, which is mutuality. It's not just that Hillel gave space for Shammai's position. It's also that Shammai was known for having greeted everybody with a warm countenance, that he en-countered the human being behind the idea, and he has merit in this relationship as well. I think we can learn from both and we should compound the merits of both of them for the sake of every con-versation we have.

Elliot Cosgrove: Amen. Amen.

Joshua Holo: Tell us something surprising and good that you've experienced in the wake of Octo-ber 7th, despite the pain and the tragedy and sometimes even the despair that we have all experi-enced and which you have dedicated so much thought and care to talking about.

Elliot Cosgrove: This post-October 7th moment has been one of the most challenging chapters of my Rabbinate and Jewish life. I say one of because I think COVID presented a whole series of chal-lenges that were felt very differently, and a moment where we have all, as the name of the book states, been called on to rise up for such a time as did Queen Esther.

Elliot Cosgrove: In the face of the trauma, I have been inspired by countless stories of my con-gregation and seeing American Jewry as a whole rise up to the calling of the hour. And that can happen by way of philanthropy, that can happen by way of advocacy, that can happen by way of Jewish life and living. Many, many Jews in my community and across the board have said, I will not let my Judaism be defined by the hatred of others. I am going to assert a positive expression of what being Jewish means to me. I have seen accidental activists getting engaged, not just in Israel, but in the Jewish community as a whole. And by any metric in my own community, I've seen an exponential growth of dynamism and engagement.

Elliot Cosgrove: So if I could turn back the clock, both I and any person of conscience would choose to live in a world without the horrors of October 7th, and I've certainly been called on to respond, but I have been affirmed in the importance of congregational leadership tenfold by way of what's happened since.

Joshua Holo: Well, I want to thank you for that role, for this wonderful book, which is filled with really meaningful considerations and valuable and useful topics for all of us to consider. It's a real-ly important read, and for taking the time to speak with us on the College Commons Podcast, and most of all, for reconnecting after years of not having crossed paths with you. It's a real pleasure, and thank you.

Elliot Cosgrove: Josh, we look exactly the same as we did 20-odd years ago. It is so great to re-connect with you.

Joshua Holo: Speak for yourself, my friend, which is absolutely true. I'm going to let our listeners who can't see me be duped into thinking that you're right.

[music]

Joshua Holo: 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.

[music]

(End of audio)