Rabbi Marc Katz: A Civilization's Inflection Point

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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. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Rabbi Marc Katz. Rabbi Katz is the Senior Rabbi of Temple Ner Tamid. Before entering rabbinical school, Rabbi Katz worked as a legislative assistant for the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, lobbying for environmental protection and healthcare reform on behalf of the Reform movement. Rabbi Katz was ordained at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in 2012, where, for many years, he served as adjunct professor of Talmud as well. He's the author of two books, the Heart of Loneliness: How Judaism Can Help You Cope and Find Comfort, which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award, and the subject of today's conversation, Yochanan's Gamble: Judaism's Pragmatic Approach to Life, which came out from the Jewish publication society in 2024 and was a finalist for the PROSE Award. Rabbi Katz, welcome and thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Rabbi Marc Katz: Thank you very much for having me.

Joshua Holo: Congratulations on the publication of Yochanan's Gamble and being a finalist for the PROSE Award. What's the gamble that your title refers to and what's the premise of your book?

Rabbi Marc Katz: The gamble that my book refers to takes place about 2,000 years ago, and it's around 70 CE, and the Romans are surrounding Jerusalem and they're ready to besiege the city. And Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who's an important leader at the time, sneaks out of Jerusalem and ends up having an audience with Vespasian, who at the time, is the governor of Judea, the province around the Temple. And while he's talking to Vespasian, he gives Vespasian a prophecy and says to him, I think that you're going to become the Caesar. Vespasian looks at him like he's crazy. But this being, by the way, the founding myth of what we call Rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism in the post Temple time, as soon as he says this, somebody runs in and says, Vespasian, great news, the Em-peror is dead, you're the new emperor. Long live Caesar. And so Vespasian gets ready to go to Rome, and on his way out the door, he turns to Yochanan and he says to him, well, I have to imag-ine that your prophecy did something to cause this. So basically, ask me for anything, and if it works for me, I'll give it to you.

Rabbi Marc Katz: And Yochanan thinks about it and he says, okay, I need these three things. Give me a little plot of land in a place called Yavneh where I can restart Judaism after the Temple is destroyed and save two other rabbis who are currently Jerusalem right now. And Vespasian thinks about it, and he grants him the wish. And by the way, that decision, that gamble, becomes one of the most important decisions in all of Jewish history. After the Temple's destroyed and Jews can no longer sacrifice in the Temple, which was a main part of the way that Jews used to worship at the time, Yochanan and his followers, who we call the rabbis, end up basically reinventing Judaism. They create the prayer service and the fact that we pray three times a day. They totally reinvent the holidays, many of them actually in the image of the kind of Hellenistic culture at the time. And rather than bring an offering to the Temple and sacrifice it like they did before the Temple was destroyed, they actually invent the idea of the Passover Seder and the fact that we have what amounts to a Greek symposium, right? What is a symposium?

Rabbi Marc Katz: You lay around, you drink wine, you eat food, you talk about ideas. What's a Passover Seder? You lay around, you drink wine, you eat food, and you talk about ideas. And so he, in a way, saves Judaism after this destruction of the Temple. But he's criticized for it right after the story of his conversation with Vespasian. So a rabbi whose name is Akiva, comes forward, who's a rabbi a few generations after Yochanan Ben Zakkai, and basically says, what a jerk? This guy had the ear of the emperor. And rather than asking for the thing he really wanted, which was for Jerusa-lem to be saved, he basically sold out Jerusalem for this plot of land to restart Judaism after the Temple's destruction. And then there's always an anonymous voice in the Talmud, which is this important Jewish law code from the 5th, 6th century, where this story takes place. And the anony-mous voice, which is called the Stam, jumps in and says, actually, he asked for the thing he knew he could get, not the thing he really wanted, because he likely wouldn't have gotten that thing and would have squandered his one request. And so that idea of what can only be called the pragmatic gamble of Yochanan Ben Zakkai becomes woven into basically the way that Jews think from that moment.

Rabbi Marc Katz: That pragmatism, political acumen, compromise, even messy compromise, becomes the watchword of what Judaism is about. And ultimately, I wrote this book, because we've lost touch with that muscle. We stand on soapboxes screaming at one another, and we don't under-stand what it means to take those kind of compromises, those pragmatic gambles that Yochanan showed us to do, and which is woven into basically every page of the Talmud, every page of rab-binic literature. And I think that we would be better to be able to study exactly who they were and what they stood for in their pragmatic way as an antidote to the stridency and the intractability of the time that we live in today.

Joshua Holo: Yochanan made a safer bet instead of shooting for the greater prize as you just described. I wonder if you've ever pondered the possibility that there was another risk from Yochanan's perspective. Do you ever imagine a counterfactual past, which is already something of a fantastical past, in which Yochanan might have avoided begging for Jerusalem because he actual-ly feared success, that Jerusalem was too much of a hotbed of Jewish internal conflict, too much of a liability, I guess, for any Jewish future that he might imagine, and so that he actually preferred to move in a different direction.

Rabbi Marc Katz: I can understand where you're coming from with that question. Jerusalem was defined by sectarianism at the time where he made this gamble, right? There were groups of Zeal-ots who used to walk around with these kind of curved swords, and they were actually called biry-ani because of the nature of the swords that they would use to assassinate fellow Jews. And our ancient rabbis actually say that Jerusalem was destroyed because of this kind of senseless hatred that existed between everyone. And the rabbis, who he becomes the forefather of, were actually a pretty minor group at the time. Now, scholars also think that they continued to be a minor group. If you read the scholarship of, for example, Seth Schwartz out of Columbia, you find that, like much of what we're talking about here is mythology. And I'll come back to that in a second. But I hear what you're saying, because Yochanan was never going to rise to prominence as long as the temple stood and the Sadducees, who are the priestly class, stayed. And as long as these Zealots were still in power, and at the same time, I think in the rabbinic imagination, Yochanan feels incredibly conflicted about his decision.

Rabbi Marc Katz: If it was indeed just a political calculation in order to wrest power, there wouldn't be the scene that I actually end the book with, which is Yochanan on his deathbed afraid of dying and his students coming to him and basically saying to him, "Why are you scared? Like, you're the guy who saved Judaism." And Yochanan saying, "Look, I'm going to meet my maker. I'm going to meet God. And I have no idea whether God's pleased or upset with my decision." By the way, he ends up dying. And his last words on his breath are calling for Hezekiah, a king who lived in biblical times, who made a lot of other pragmatic gambles, to be the one to usher him into the next world. And I truly believe that if he didn't feel conflicted about this, he would not have had that moment right before he died where he is scared. And all the more so because he feels that way, it gives us permission when we make these pragmatic gambles to also feel conflicted. Ethical liv-ing is really difficult, partly because it's usually two rights that get put up against one another, and you're trying to decide which right wins.

Rabbi Marc Katz: It's not a difference between right and wrong. And so, because of the nature of his specific choice that he made with Vespasian, Yochanan lives his life not knowing he did the right thing. I actually think that if he had simply done this because he felt like this was the next stage in Jewish evolution and he knew that Jerusalem would never work, had the Romans not suc-ceeded, I don't think he would have had that conflicted feeling. Now, I want to say a word also about the mythology of this whole thing, which is that scholars are pretty sure that this moment in front of Vespasian never happened. They're actually even pretty sure that the mythology of Yavneh and the rabbis restarting Judaism in the way that they did probably also didn't happen. But the question is, why would the Vespasian story be a central founding myth? And I actually think the answer is, both to position Yochanan as this central character so that him and his students matter, but more importantly, because the worldview that the Vespasian story that Yochanan's Gamble ends up giving to the world is one that is pragmatism forward, which I think then sets the stage for almost every other decision the rabbis are going to make as they take those messy compromises and gambles throughout the rest of Rabbinic Judaism, which lasts for centuries more.

Joshua Holo: Let's follow this line of thinking, which I think is really the heart of your book. But more importantly, it's the heart of what you attribute to the rabbis. You offer a vision of the rabbis not only as pragmatic, but more pointedly, largely as being defined by their pragmatism, and not only in their interpretation of Torah and law, but perhaps more deeply as you lay out so convinc-ingly and eloquently in their collective temperament, or perhaps in the DNA of their project in the first place, as characterized by Yochanan's Gamble. If that's a fair summary of your book, one would be forgiven for thinking that we are only a hair's breadth away from a kind of deeply, deeply enfranchised relativism whereby one can make divine authority say more or less what one wants it to say. Is that threat real? And what are the hedges against it?

Rabbi Marc Katz: So I'm glad you asked that question, because that is the chief critique that I've gotten from this book. And so I want to bring us to a moment in the book where I speak actually about who I think one of the most evil characters in the whole of the Bible is, which is King Ahas-uerus, the king of the Purim story. And the reason that I think he's evil, and I actually think he's more evil than Haman, is because whereas Haman was kind of single mindedly for the destruction of the Jewish people, Ahasuerus cared about himself more than anybody else. So when it was polit-ically expedient for him to give the keys over to Haman and allow Haman to destroy the Jews, he did that. And after Haman was vanquished, he gave the keys over to Mordechai and let Mordechai take vengeance on all of those people and settle all the scores that he needed to settle in the post Haman era. And many, many people died at the end of the Purim story, non-Jews. And I ultimately say that actually Ahasuerus might be the most pragmatic character in the whole of the Bible, because ultimately for me, pragmatism is not an end, it is a tool.

Rabbi Marc Katz: And what I mean by that is that, if your goal is to have more power, if your goal is to have more prestige, if your goal is to get more money, then ultimately you can do some really pragmatic things to get there. We're noticing, in America right now, a very pragmatic toolkit that's being used by the administration to not always do things that feel so good to us or feel so eth-ical to us. And in fact, we're taught by Nachmanides, who's an important medieval commentator, that you could be a Neville Batorah, a scoundrel within the bounds of law, within the Bounds of Torah. You can do some pretty bad things that are "legal" even as they're not ethical.

Joshua Holo: The devil can quote Scripture.

Rabbi Marc Katz: Exactly. The rabbis, I don't think, are that, right? I do think the rabbis have their moral compass pointed toward what I would call Torah values. They want to bring God into the world. They believe in loving your neighbor as yourself. They understand that the goal of humanity is to follow a phrase that is in the Torah, in Deuteronomy, to do "what is Tovi Yashar", right, and good. And they're trying to do that. The difference, though, is that they're doing it using the tool of pragmatism. So to draw a distinction between the rabbis and the prophets, right? Both of them are trying to do good. The prophets yell the truth to people. It doesn't really matter if they hear that. They just need the people to follow them. The rabbis, on the other hand, have to do it in such a way that it can be heard that they can move the people. And so for them, they're willing to take incrementalism, they're willing to make these gambles, they're willing to

change laws, they're willing to play around with notions of truth, all in the hope of advancing the ball forward on the big things that matter, because law becomes a tool to get there. And so for them, pragmatism is their chief avenue toward building a world they want to see.

Joshua Holo: In these last few moments, you've discussed about this end, this goal of goodness, which I like. But you also, in the book, spill a fair amount of ink to discuss truth. And unless you object, I'm going to, for the moment at least for this question, equate divine truth with goodness. And if I may do that, I want to pause and spare a word of real appreciation for your very brief, but very clear survey of different types of truth. There's pragmatic truth, there's coherent truth, there's correspondent truth, meaning there are these different ways of conceptualizing truth, and we can talk about all of them from different angles. And you do. I want to ask you if it's possible that rab-binical truth is yet of a different nature, namely, that rabbinical truth is negotiated truth, wherein the hedge against relativism is the fact that the negotiators themselves, that is the rabbis, agree on the ground rules. And the ground rules are a composite, a matrix of divine truth with a certain amount of dynamism, a certain amount of dimensionalism, and therefore a certain amount of room to maneuver. And as long as you maneuver within them, you are free to negotiate and counterbalance and counter argue the truth in ways that are genuinely dynamic and internally might feel highly relativistic, but in fact are contextualized in something that is deeply grounded in a shared understanding of truth.

Rabbi Marc Katz: I think that's fair. When we're trying to figure out truth, we have to draw a distinction between fact and truth. I think for the rabbis, there's no question fact is fact, right? But the majority of the times where truth gets sticky is when we're not trying to negotiate fact, when we're trying to negotiate something else. And the best way that I can define the way that most people think of truth, which in my book I call correspondence truth, but I'm going to define it a little differently here than I do in my book, is, if you had an audience with God, what would God say the answer was? So let's take, for example, one of the thorniest issues in our world today, which is the issue of a woman's right to choose. None of us know actually when it is ethically wrong to termi-nate a pregnancy. And so that's why you find all of these different boundaries. How amazing would it be if we could actually sit down with God and say to God, okay, so tell us, is it when the fetus has a heartbeat? Is it when the fetus is viable? Is it only when you need to save a mother's life?

Rabbi Marc Katz: What is the line of which this is okay? And I actually do believe, and I think the rabbis do believe also, that there is a truth out there written into the universe that you could talk to God and God would tell you the answer to every thorny question you could ever come up with. But the point is that you can't. And in fact, we have a story where people are given the oppor-tunity to ask God an answer to authority question and they forego that because they understand that that one time where they can ask God actually gets in the way of the processes that exist in the world to figure out answers and truth. So the story is called the Oven of Akhnai. And I imagine, because I know you've got an educated group of listeners, that maybe many of your listeners have heard this story before. But one rabbi named Rabbi Eliezer is fighting about the purity of an oven. He has one idea, everyone else has another. And he basically says, look, if I'm right, let a bunch of miracles happen. And so trees uproot themselves and replant, rivers flow forward and then turn around and flow backwards.

Rabbi Marc Katz: The walls of the study house start collapsing in on them until another rabbi tells the walls to butt out. And somehow this is supposed to show that he's right because these mir-acles are happening, but the rabbis aren't believing him until finally he says, well, let God show up and say that I am correct. And so God shows up and says, what are you doing? Eliezer is correct. Eliezer is right. And another rabbi named Rabbi Yehoshua jumps in and basically says, God, butt out. It says, in your Torah, the Torah is ours, not yours. And in addition to that, you gave us a bunch of laws on how we should govern ourselves. And one of those laws are that law follows the majori-ty. And there's me and the rest of my rabbis, and then there's Eliezer, and maybe even we can count you God, right? That's the assumption of the story, even though he doesn't say that explicitly. And so even with you, it's two against many. We win. The law follows us. And there's a postscript where a rabbi, whose name is Rabbi Natan, ends up running into the prophet Elijah and says to Elijah, so tell me Elijah, what was God thinking when he got kicked out of the study hall? And Elijah says to Natan, God laughed saying, my children have defeated me. My children have defeated me.

Rabbi Marc Katz: Now, there is nothing more truthful than being able to have God tell you what happens with that oven. But for the rabbis, it doesn't matter, in part, because what matters more is something called pragmatic truth, which is the idea that law and truth must work. And it doesn't work to have God butting in all the time to supersede the laws that we have in terms of how society should function and that law should follow majority. And so ultimately, the rabbis end up framing not just the what is right question on its own, but marrying that question to the what will work question, which is the pragmatic truth framing. And so those two together, which I guess you've been calling it negotiated truth, become the kind of two watchwords of the Jewish people. And so allow us to often ask questions of things for which we will never find the truth. I give one example of one of the most famous Mishnahs, which is the law code from 200 CE. Two people who see a garment on the ground at the same time and both claim to see it first.

Rabbi Marc Katz: If you could ask God, God would tell you which person saw it first. You can never ask God. So even though there is a truth to one of their claims, you split the thing in half because it works better in society to cut the garment in half each take half the garment to keep the infighting from happening. I speak in chapter two about this interesting tension that the rabbis have about the nature of settling lawsuits. The point of a judge really is to get as close to truth as possi-ble, right? In the ancient world, a judge and a jury were the same thing. And so the judge would hear the defense, they would hear the prosecution, and they would ultimately be a stand in for God and decide what is truth in this moment. But the idea of settling lawsuits is not the pursuit of truth. It's the opposite. It's pragmatic. It's making sure people don't argue. It's saving people money. And so settling helps with all of those things, but it doesn't get you any closer to the correspondence theory of truth is. Or the theory of truth, if you could talk to God. And so for the rabbis, they have to weigh is it okay to settle a lawsuit?

Rabbi Marc Katz: They end up coming up with this middle ground approach where it's okay up until the point where the judge has made up his mind. And once that happens, you can no longer settle anymore, which is a little bit later, actually, than in kind of modern thought and the way that we deal with settling in our lawsuits today. But it's an important idea because what it

means is that for the rabbis, truth is not the most important thing. Truth must be coupled with all those other pragmatic concerns as a way to get at a kind of greater package of truth to help people figure out what is right.

Joshua Holo: Let's stick with the truth train here for a minute, and I'd like to elicit your thoughts on the contemporary body of literature beyond the Talmud and its relationship with truth for the sake of communicating the complexity and the dimensionality of Judaism's truth in the same form-ative period of what we call late antiquity or the early centuries of the Common Era. In particular, I'm thinking about the truth of the mystical Heikh Ha Lot poetry from the land of Israel in this time, or the Midrashim, these stories that fill out the narrative of the Bible. They're beyond the scope of your book, which focuses on the Babylonian Talmud. But how might they color our understanding of how Judaism makes sense of the world? And ought they perhaps even challenge or offer an alternative approach to the Talmud?

Rabbi Marc Katz: They absolutely do. All right, let's take the mystic as an example. For the mys-tic, first of all, their set of questions, I think, have a lot in common with the set of rabbinical ques-tions about how to be in the world where God dwells in the world what is humans place in the world? What is my purpose in the world? But they get at it at a completely different way. Ulti-mately, I think Judaism has a lot of arbiters of ethics throughout its history, right? I spoke about the prophet as one, and I critique the prophet. But the prophet has a lot to add, right? I would say the priest is another, and the priest has a lot to add, though the priest has some downsides too. Then there's the philosopher, who also has a lot to add. And Judaism has a ton to learn from the philo-sophical tradition of Judaism. And I would put the mystic along with them. All of them are trying to get at these kind of big fundamental questions, but they're doing it in different ways, with differ-ent paradigms, and ultimately, each speak for what their generation needs. And as important as mystical literature was, and there was at the time of the rabbis, mystical literature, it doesn't hit its stride until later, I think, because the moment the rabbis live in need their pragmatic approach more than some of the other approaches.

Rabbi Marc Katz: The mystics really hit their stride post 1492, post inquisition. Now, granted, look, the Zohar was written before that, and there were plenty of mystical movements before that. But I actually think that if you really look at when mysticism hits in the Middle Ages, it subsumes medieval Jewish philosophy. You've got people like Albo and Gersonides and Maimonides who are writing at the time, and for them, they're translating Greek thought into Jewish thought. And they're trying to make a kind of rational case for how it is that Judaism could be godly and rational at the same time. The problem with their approach, honestly, is that it doesn't kind of hit the Kish-kas, right? It doesn't hit the emotional register of the Jewish people in the same way. The questions and the approach of mysticism end up speaking to the emotional needs of the Jews post exile in a way that the rationality of these kind of medieval Jewish thinkers don't. And so I would actually say that the pragmatism of the rabbis was perfect for its moment. It then takes a backseat to other moments. And my contention in the book is that the bifurcated moment that we live in feels very much like pre 70 CE Judaism. And so we actually need to return to their worldview to deal with the sectarianism and the intractability of our current moment.

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Joshua Holo: In your chapter on keeping peace with your neighbors, you offered very pointed examples of humility. For example, you describe when Judah, the prince who was the leader of the Jews of the land of Israel and who had official recognition by the Roman Empire, when he, in an act of humility, insisted that his salutation to the Emperor Antoninus should read from your servant Judah, not from the prince Judah. Now that is an act of humility. But one way or another, at least politically, Judah already was actually subservient to Emperor Antoninus. I'd like to ask you to tell us about the even greater power of humility when applied to encounters among peers.

Rabbi Marc Katz: So there's two things at play. One is the humility that exists in the system as a whole, and the other is in between individual rabbis. So let's first talk about the system as a whole. There are times where for the rabbis, they have no problem realizing that a certain law is wrong and changing that law. So to give you one of the most famous examples, which is called the prose bowl. In Judaism, every seven years your debts are forgiven. And the problem with that is that imagine you lend someone money in year six and a half of that seven year cycle. Odds are they're not going to pay you back before their debt is then forgiven. So you're not going to be likely to actual-ly give them the money. And so what ends up happening is that you will refrain from giving them the money. And as we know in just modern economics, the ability to lend money is the thing that makes economies work. You sink or swim on, at least nowadays, your interest rates. And so the rabbis understood that it couldn't happen that people stop lending money a few years before that deadline of when it's going to be forgiven.

Rabbi Marc Katz: So instead, essentially what happens is the rabbis figure out some kind of loop-hole that allow for people to trade off their debt to the court who holds their debt as that seventh year approaches, and then transfers the debt back to the debt holder so that they can then recollect for the next seven years. Now, that idea, these loopholes, these changes, show a tremendous amount of humility in the system. Because for the rabbis, if there's going to be infighting, if there's going to be economic consequences, if something feels unfair, they have no problem understanding that what happened before does not need to be the case in their current era.

Rabbi Marc Katz: And so time after time, they change things. Sometimes for the needs of peace between neighbors. It's called mip ne dar shalom in Hebrew. Sometimes it's to keep up good rela-tions with the Romans. That's called mishum ahavah. Sometimes it's to avoid factionalism. That excuse is called lotit go to do. And I explore each of these different categories. So that's one piece, but on the other piece is the humility to just sometimes compromise if something isn't happening well. I start chapter two, which is my chapter on compromise, of this scene where

two rabbis end up coming together for dinner, and one rabbi ends up realizing that there's this kind of odd omen that the host has.

Rabbi Marc Katz: He's got this kind of white donkey that's wandering around, and he says to him, like, look, you got to get rid of this donkey. Like, it's got to be bad for you. And the rabbi's like, okay, I'll just sell him. And the other rabbi says, no, no, you can't do that. That means you're giving someone else a bad omen. And he says, okay, well, I'll muzzle him. And the answer is, no, you can't do that. That actually causes undue harm to an animal, which violates one of the precepts, which is called sarbaale chaim in rabbinic literature. And he says, fine, well, I'll kill it. And he says, no, that's wanton destruction. You can't just kill an animal. And so the rabbi says, well, what am I supposed to do? And his guest kind of throws up his hands and is like, I don't know, but you got to do something. And the inability of this guest to be creative, to compromise, ends up caus-ing... In the Talmud, they talk about this a literal mountain to grow between these two rabbis who no longer can see each other and have to turn around and go home.

Rabbi Marc Katz: And so I use that as a metaphor to talk about the power of making these kinds of compromises because ultimately the goal is to not build that mountain between us, but to break it down so that we can come together and be creative in our decisions. And often it's ego that gets in the way, or the inability to be creative or the inability to think outside the box. The rabbis talk about one of the great tragedies, which is Jephthah's daughter. Now, if you know that story, this is from the Book of Judges. Jephthah, who's a war hero, comes home, and on his way in the door he basically says, I'm going to sacrifice the first thing that I see. And so he ends up running into his daughter and realizing that he has to sacrifice her. And the Bible basically ends there. He tells the daughter what's going to happen. She goes and asks for a little bit of time to kind of just regroup and hang out with the other women until finally he's going to go and sacrifice her. But what ends up happening in the rabbinic imagination is that he's made a hasty vow. And he could go to the priest at the time and ask the priest to annul his vow, but he doesn't have the humility to do that.

Rabbi Marc Katz: He says to himself, I'm not going to go to this priest. This priest should come to me. I'm one of the chief political leaders of my era. And the priest says, well, I could go to him and annul his vow, but he should come to me. I'm the high priest. And ultimately, Jephthah's daughter dies because two men won't have the humility to actually go to one another and to have one suck it up so that they can actually figure out a way to annul the vow that he makes. And the rabbis use this as a cautionary tale of what it means to not end up making these kinds of compromises that are so important for their era and for ours.

Joshua Holo: Sticking with the notion that what you teach us in this book has relevance today, a theme that is sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit in your book. We live in a time that all parties routinely define as polarized, at least. And we tend these days to see the gap between us much more than the bridges. If you had to conceptualize the rabbi's pragmatism as one of those bridges that we might cross today, how would you articulate it?

Rabbi Marc Katz: So I would probably speak about the bridge using actually many of the titles of my chapters. I would love to see a world where we figure out compromise, even messy

compro-mise, where leaders learn how to lead in such a way that they are one step ahead of the people they lead, but not so far that people can't follow. And that ultimately leaders become expert, not in the field that they are in, but also with the people that they are leading. They ultimately become psychologists to understand their flock so that they can take their flock where they need to go. I would love to see a world where we understand the other, both the distant other, like the rabbis under-stood the Romans, but also the other standing in our midst, the people who are around us, and that we use the tools at our disposal to do good, things like incrementalism, things like creative read-ings of our founding texts, and that sometimes we understand and give each other a little bit of a break, that living ethically is messy, and that when you're deciding between two rights, you're go-ing to sometimes choose a right that is not my right, but that we understand that when you are coming to things with real integrity, it's a matter of degrees.

Rabbi Marc Katz: So if I'm choosing, for example, between, let's just use a mundane example, being truthful and being kind, both of them matter. But there are times where sometimes you have to lie because it's the kind thing to do. And sometimes you have to tell a harsh truth, even if it hurts someone's feelings. But often we don't give people the benefit of the doubt that they're coming to decisions with integrity, even if they have a different decision than ours. And at the same time, to hold people accountable, as the rabbis do, which is my final chapter, which tells them that ulti-mately you need to have your moral compass pointed due north, and that you can't hide behind things that are legal, even if they are wrong.

Joshua Holo: I'd like to close the conversation by going back to the beginning of your book in your introduction, where you acknowledge that you're arguing a very specific point about the rab-bis when you highlight their pragmatism as the engine for their thinking and their way of looking at the world. And, of course, you also are careful to recognize that others may have a different perspective on the rabbis and their project. But I'm wondering what surprised you? How did the rabbis force you to rethink your own argument about them as you wrote the book?

Rabbi Marc Katz: I think that the rabbis certainly have counterexamples to what I've laid out. Rabbi Akiva is the most famous counterexample of all of these rabbis, right? He's a rabbi who, in the face of Roman persecution, didn't do what the Jews did, which is try to find ways around it and to keep good relations. He ultimately kept teaching Torah even when Romans not to, and became a martyr and ended up being killed in an extremely gruesome way. And so there are definitely coun-terexamples in rabbinic tradition. And I came across those counter examples all the time. But I will certainly tell you that those are the minority. And this is what I would tell anyone who wants to get a sense of how Judaism functions, right? I believe that you can read the Torah in two ways. You can read the Torah as a forest, or you could read the Torah as trees. Trees are the individual laws. But I actually tell my Karens all the time that the goal is to pick the Torah up and just read the thing and then kind of understand what are the big messages, what's the ethos that jumps out? And I believe that there is no way, for example, to read the Torah without the idea of taking care of the stranger, loving the neighborhood, being ethical, being the foundational point that jumps out at the Torah.

Rabbi Marc Katz: Now, I know I'm not alone, right? I once heard Shai Held say, and I agree with him, he's a rabbi at Hadar right now, that when Maimonides did that exact thing and just read the Torah all the way through, the thing that jumped out to him more than anything else is the idea of avoiding idolatry. So it's impossible to read the same text and have that same ethos jumped out. But through my own eyes, I can't imagine a world where you read the Torah and you come to the conclusion that the rabbis as a whole, were Akiva and not Yochanan Ben Zakkai. Because I just think Yochanan Ben Zakkai is on every single page of the Talmud in spirit, right? That gamble, that pragmatic way of thinking, just as part and parcel. And I actually think that writing this book didn't undermine my conclusion. It actually affirmed it as I just came. For example, of example, this book could have been twice as long, but I chose to keep it tight in order to make it readable.

Joshua Holo: Well, Rabbi Marc Katz, thank you so much for the conversation for the book Yochanan's Gamble and its perspective and its lessons for today as we discussed at the last part of our conversation. Thank you and congratulations on the book.

Rabbi Marc Katz: Thank you.

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