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RABBI DAVID ELLENSON: WHAT MAKES ME A REFORM JEW?

(Begin audio)

JOSHUA HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah with a Point of View, produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish Institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host and Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles.

You've tuned into a Bully Pulpit special series for Symposium One which the Hebrew Union College convened in New York City in November 2016. Symposium One was organized around the theme of crafting Jewish life in a complex religious landscape. We at the Bully Pulpit had the privilege of interviewing some of the outstanding thinkers who participated in Symposium One, and we think you'll enjoy the conversation.

HOLO: It is my tremendous pleasure to welcome my friend, David Ellenson, the chancellor emeritus of our institution, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and currently the director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandies University. David is a widely-known scholar on 19th century Jewish movements and religious history. He joins us today to talk about some of his ideas. And it's really a tremendous pleasure to have you. And I look forward to talking to you.

DAVID ELLENSON: Well, it's a great, great pleasure to be here. I have missed you, I have to confess, these last couple of years and I'm glad that we're able to be together in this way.

HOLO: Likewise. Likewise. And I know we're going to see more of each other soon as well.

ELLENSON: Yes.

HOLO: Among the themes you write about, you discuss Jewish religious sensibilities confronting secularization in modern Europe.

ELLENSON: Right.

HOLO: This is a major theme of your writing. What I'd like to ask you to do is to illustrate this tension that Jews confronted with some telling examples or some symptoms of this confrontation.

ELLENSON: Okay. I mean it's a great question. I think actually what led me even to study this type of thing, even related to my own childhood in Virginia. I had grown up in a traditional Jewish home and yet my family was very much involved in the politics, culture, and life of the Virginia Peninsula back in the '50s and '60s. And what occurred to me was that as I observed virtually all the Jews even in Newport News, Virginia, a small community of about 500-700 families and that's 200,000 gentiles, were the tensions between what I would call a commitment to Jewish tradition and Jewish identity on the one hand, and a desire to participate fully in the larger world on the other, and exactly what prompted me to engage in these studies.

What my studies focus on then is the ordeal, I would call it, and the tensions that marked Jews as they moved from a relatively ghettoized position, culturally, politically, religiously in the pre-modern Jewish world. As I speak to someone like you with your knowledge I, of course, am aware that Jews were never as hermetically sealed off from the larger world, even in Europe as popular images might present. But nevertheless, Jews were part of a non-voluntaristic community to be a Jew in the pre-modern world, granted one his or her status politically in the larger world. Culturally, Jews by and large were educated in classical Jewish religious tradition. Of course, this means almost exclusively the boys. Girls would have not even attended formal kinds of schools. And their cultural knowledge would have been predominantly Jewish.

This begins to change in the late 18th Century. Figures like Moses Mendelssohn emerged. But one has to keep in mind that when Mendelssohn, for example, desired to teach Jews, if you want an example of tension, how to speak an appropriate German, he translated the Bible then from Hebrew into German. But the Jewish population of 1781, living in today what we would call Germany, could not even read a non-Hebrew alphabet. Hence, his translation of the Hebrew Bible into German is a transliteration using Hebrew letters. The issue for the Jewish community was how do you take a community that is that sealed off from the larger environment in which Jews find themselves suddenly through the dint of the French Revolution and the emancipatory movements of late 18th, early 19th century Europe, how did Jews come to be part of the larger world.

And so my studies really focus on this question whether I talk about people who would ultimately become what we would call modern Orthodox Jews, Conservative, Reform. All of these people of the 19th century, how is it that they began to integrate themselves into Western culture? How did they come to learn a German language? How did they come to read Kant and Goethe and Talmud and Bible? And how does one take this larger identity that is bestowed upon them by the larger world and simultaneously maintain their integrity and authenticity as Jews? In many ways it strikes me that we had this problem in the country like the United States as our Eastern European ancestors, for most of us, moved into this country. After all, to date, it's 2016. The Jews are thoroughly acculturated. This seems to be "an ancient tale" by this point.

But the reality is how is it you move from a Jewish culture that was extremely thick, and how do you become part of the modern world? How do you learn the morays of the modern world? How do you learn what it is to dress in appropriate Western style? How do you learn manners? All of these things seem to be non-problematic for us today because we're the other end of this acculturation process. But this really was, and here I am quoting the work of a non-Jewish scholar, John Murray Cuddihy who wrote a book entitled, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity*. The point being that Jews had to learn how to navigate from this relatively closed world to the larger open world of the West.

HOLO: And allow me to interrupt at this point. What I heard you say, and I know to be a scholarly position of yours, but I want you to elaborate for a moment, is that we have to understand all of the modern Judaisms that we know very intimately to be America, all of them as equally flowing from the same problem. And in that way are fundamentally, chronologically born at the same time, in the same crucible.

ELLENSON: Yeah, that is exactly my position. In other words, once Spinoza arrives and writes the *Theologico-Politico Tractatus* and there's separation between religion and state and a neutral, or at best, and in reality a semi-neutral society begins to be created where people, Jews, can live in the larger world but still retain their identity as Jews, particularly in privatized kinds of sections.

The issue becomes how do I create a Judaism that both allows me to participate in the modern world and simultaneously allows me to be in "authentically Jewish"? The first movement to attempt to do that was the Reform Movement.

Israel Jacobson who lived from 1768 to 1828 is in many senses the grandfather of Reform Judaism. He created schools where Jews and Christians both attended. And where Jews and Christians were prepared to live in this neutral society. And his task, and later on people like Abraham Geiger, Samuel Holdheim in Germany, people like Isaac Mayer Wise, and David Einhorn in America attempted to create a Reform Judaism that would be appropriate to this new cultural setting. But it is important to keep in mind that you had other thoroughly acculturated Jews like Samson Raphael Hirsh, the founder of Modern Neo-Centrist Orthodoxy, who completely affirmed Western culture but wanted to retain an allegiance to *halakhah*, to Jewish law. Hirsh described himself as growing up in a family in Hamburg that was called Enlightened Religious. Religious for him meant that they were observant of *halakhah* in the ritual realms, but enlightened meant they participated fully in Western culture. And then finally you had a position that was adopted by Zacharias Frankel who lived from 1801 to 1875. He was the father of positive-historical Judaism out of which the Conservative Movement arose. Modern Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, and Reform Judaism all emerged ideologically out of the crucible of 19th century Germany. And my own fascination with that realm is to understand how all of these are expressions of what I would call, and my teacher Joseph Blau at, at Columbia called modern varieties of Judaism. And in that

sense, they do all emerge out of the same crucible. In contrast, you do have a counter modernizing trend. There's a figure in Hungary named the Chatam Sofer.

HOLO: Chasam Sofer.

ELLENSON: Chasam Sofer, yes, if we were to do it more accurately.

HOLO: Some of our listeners are going to know.

ELLENSON: But the Chasam Sofer, some of you may have even gone to a Chasam Sofer synagogue. I belong to congregation Rodeph Sholom in New York. And it's the 175th anniversary of this flagship reform congregation. But today, actually, in honor of the 175th anniversary, they were taking everyone from the Upper West Side down to the Lower Eastside to what today is the Chasam Sofer synagogue on the Lower Eastside of Manhattan which was the original home of Rodeph Sholom, 175 years ago.

HOLO: That's a great American irony.

ELLENSON: That is. Well Sofer, of course, who lived in Hungary in Pressbrug took a phrase from the Mishna completely out of context, which asserts *hadash assur min-ha-Torah* - anything new he interpreted to mean is forbidden by the Torah itself. And he took a negative position in relationship to modernity. He said that if Jews acculturate, if they go to secular universities, if they go to synagogues...

HOLO: If they wear clothes...

ELLENSON: If they go to synagogues where sermons are delivered in the vernacular, if Jews do not distinguish themselves and become or live virtually a sectarian or to be even more accurate, sociologically if they don't live in enclaves where integration or interaction with the modern world is not limited, only to the extent it is necessary for economic survival, complete acculturation and ultimately assimilation would emerge. It's ironic to think that if Chasam Sofer were alive today, almost 200 years later, and he would read the current Pew study and see that we had, give or take, 60, 70, 80 percent intermarriage rate, Sofer I know would say, "Well what do you think would have happened?"

HOLO: I told you so.

ELLENSON: What do you think would happen once you began to acculturate? And in that sense ultra-Orthodoxy is not a movement that I generally study because the ultra-Orthodox are a counter-modernizers. That part is definitely true. And by that, I mean they're not like natives in an Amazon river basin. Modernity is about to encroach upon them but they are completely unaware. People like Sopher, the people who live in Meah She'arim or New City in New York, perhaps even Hancock Park in Los Angeles, they know all about the modern world and they want to resist its blandishments. I do not tend to study those people.

HOLO: But certainly, it is also true for them even though they went in the opposite direction of total non-engagement. They nevertheless just as much as Orthodoxy conservatism and Reform are fruits of the same crucible because they're asking the same question. They just came up with...

ELLENSON: A different answer. Yes, I think that's actually a very fair and good point. Yes, they do come up with an opposite sort of answer. By the way, they also have, to cite the work of Peter Berger, the great sociologist of religion, and in the interest, I don't know a full confession, I should indicate that my own doctorate at Columbia was really in sociology of religion. And I was actually interested in the question of how do traditional religions respond to change that they have a tremendous problem of social engineering. In other words, if you're living in Hancock Park, or you're living in Brooklyn, anyone who has access to a computer knows that there are pluralistic options that are open...

HOLO: Anyone who walks down the street.

ELLENSON: You don't live in splendid isolation from one another. The ultra-Orthodox problem is social engineering. And there was a book recently by a Hasid from the New City area in New York entitled, *Those Who Go Shall Not Return*, Shulem Deen. I don't know if you've read it. D-E-E-N. And he describes what it was to leave the ultra-Orthodox world. The point about tradition is that tradition should be understood as *muvan me-elav* (taken for granted). There should not be any other way to live in the world than the way in which you're presented it. But as Berger points out, the whole nature of the modern world is that it falsifies the notion that there's only one way to dwell in it. So the problem the ultra-Orthodox have is how do you maintain these reality enclaves where your plausibility structure, if I can cite all of these fancy sociological terms how do you maintain a plausibility structure?

HOLO: That's constantly under assault.

ELLENSON: Constantly under assault. The problem we have who are the liberals...

HOLO: Is the inverse.

ELLENSON: Is the inverse. Their problem is how do you engage in effective resistance. Our problem, we've all agreed we want to be accommodationists. But how far do we accommodate?

HOLO: And once we decide we don't want to go any further how do we hold on?

ELLENSON: Well that is a gigantic problem. In other words, our problem is where do you create the boundaries. And by the way, ironically, I mean one of the things, again, that led me in to this was having grown up in a community where there was a Reform, Conservative, and two Orthodox congregations. One had a rabbi from Yeshiva University

where men and women sat together. The other was an Orthodox congregation where they did not. And the community I grew up in it was sort of interesting. Anyone who was to the left of where my family was religiously was, and I won't use the terms that were actually used in my home, but I'll just say they were inauthentic. And anyone who was to the right was a fanatic. And most Jews tend to think, oh, where I am that's just right. But if you look at it from a larger perspective, as a sociologist, yes, they all represent different points of response along a continuum. And when I used to teach at the college in L.A. and would do my Jewish Thought class, when I would present different thinkers I actually would not divide them denominationally. I'd put tradition over here and modernity over there and place thinkers on different points on a continuum, of a spectrum. And that I think actually captured much more accurately what so many modern Jews are like.

HOLO: What is the most useful message that Reform Judaism alone can make to all this Jewish conversation?

ELLENSON: I think that is a great question. In a sense the way in which I would reword your question is what is it that makes me a Reform Jew? In other words, what is it that makes me think that way?

HOLO: Why bother? Why should you be a Reform?

ELLENSON: Why bother? To my way of thinking, those thinkers who have identified as Reform in our institutions best capture, and I need to be very careful in a post-modernist, non-essentialist sense, Reform Judaism comports more accurately to authenticity and truth than any of the other movements for me. And I'll explain why. I understand the logic of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy makes the assertion in one way or another that the Torah that was revealed by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, both written and oral, is in some sense affirmed or should be affirmed because it is really literally, virtually, the word of God. Samson Raphael Hirsh in his work *Horeb* wrote the law both written and oral was closed with Moses at Mount Sinai. Orthodox Judaism does not have a problem with epistemology. By that I mean what's the authority that undergirds the *halakhah*, Jewish law. Why should you observe it? You should observe it because God revealed it.

HOLO: They have a straight answer for the question.

ELLENSON: They have a straight answer. I mean one other quote is that there is a quote for Rabbi Moshe Feinstein who is the great leader of Orthodox Judaism in the 20th century, the leading *halakhic* authority, who wrote even that which a veteran rabbi, *talmid vatik*, will teach before his student, it was already revealed by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. *ly efshar leshannot* - you cannot change that. They have a straight forward answer. I do not think that position is correct, though I respect the people who would affirm it, because from my own knowledge of history, and my own study critically which Reform Judaism embraces, part of what I learn is that Judaism evolves from generation to

generation. If I were to quote even Mordechai Kaplan, "Judaism is an evolving religious civilization."

HOLO: Or if I could quote David Ellenson, "The theology courses at the Hebrew Union College are the history courses."

ELLENSON: Yes. That is precisely right. It doesn't mean we don't have theology classes, but history is the foundation upon which Reform is based. So now that I've said that...

HOLO: So perhaps we could sum up your view of Orthodoxy that it is coherent prescriptively but it is descriptively untenable.

ELLENSON: Yes, because of my personality and you know me well, I don't like to make such direct statements. I would not disagree with that. So then we move into the liberal camp. I, by the way, think there are sociological reasons why you have a Reform and Conservative movement. My Conservative colleagues would not completely agree with me and I don't want to say that Reform and Conservative ideology are not identical. But for me, Reform ideology is more coherent than Conservative. But what both share is the notion that Judaism does evolve and change historically.

HOLO: Right.

ELLENSON: Whether it's Samuel Holdheim and Abraham Geiger or David Einhorn in the Reform camp, or Zacharias Frankel in the Conservative, or my friends Elliot Dorf and Brad Artson in the Conservative camp today, all would say that Judaism evolves and changes historically. Reform Judaism therefore, in taking this sort of critical historical approach captures for me, the essence of what Jewish religious tradition is about, namely everything I know about truth in the world, teaches me that a Reform approach that would talk about the fact that Judaism is always embedded in culture.

If I want to describe a relationship that exists between God and Israel, the Hebrew Bible employs a term like *berith*, covenant. But I know enough to know that the term *berith* comes from the Akkadian root word *berithu* so that it is interesting to me that the ancient Hebrews, the ancient Jews in trying to describe, capture the relationship that existed they felt between them and their God employ a term from the political lexicon of the ancient Near East to describe that relationship. *Dibbra Torah kilshon benei adam*, the Torah speaks in human language. And I think in every generation this has occurred. So therefore, I look back to the reality of Jewish tradition and its evolution.

I have great respect for the *halakhic* tradition, the tradition of the rabbis in the first through sixth centuries, the medieval Jewish tradition whether it be in Byzantium or North Africa or Europe. But the way in which I come to look at it from my Reform perspective is that I see it as an ongoing narrative where each generation of Jews writes a different story in which they attempt to capture what it is they feel that God commands in their age. For

Jews in a premodern world who lived in exclusively patriarchal culture, that meant that men alone had public roles of power and authority and women were excluded from those roles. I neither feel the need particularly to apologize for that or be proud of it, quite frankly. I know that apologetically we in the Jewish community always try to say it. It may well be true that compared to other cultures in the ancient Near East or in the pre-modern world, Judaism may have even had a more advanced attitude, more inclusive attitude towards women than some other cultures. But I think it's more matter of degree really than kind. But if there's a classic *halakhic* text then that says a woman cannot serve as a witness, I can understand in a patriarchal culture that would be the norm. In other words, that domestic roles are assigned to women, domestic roles of honor, whereas, public roles of status and authority reserved for men. But it's not incumbent upon me in the 20th or 21st century to see that as authoritative in any kind of way. Namely, what Reform Judaism captures for me is the dynamic that marks Jewish tradition. And in this sense, I do borrow from the work of a legal philosopher, Ronald Dworkin, in a book that he wrote, Dworkin, *Law's Empire*, he compared...

HOLO: Constitutional scholar.

ELLENSON: A constitutional scholar taught at Oxford and at New York University. In any event, Professor Dworkin in this book, *Law's Empire*, that was published by Belknap Press of Harvard University, he basically says that in any legal tradition there's an ongoing narrative. One is required, in order to be authentic, to situate oneself, to plant oneself within that tradition and to be aware of the preceding chapters that have been written. He actually compares the legal system to a chain novel. In order to be authentic one needs to know the previous chapter. But that doesn't obviate, it doesn't remove each generation's responsibility while situating itself in that past story to not write the next chapter of what that story would be.

HOLO: Now doesn't Reform Judaism in its fullest flower have a more aggressive polemical position which is not merely that we claim a reasoned authority to advance our civilization in ways we know are different from the past? But do we not also assert that every generation before us has also done that vis-à-vis the prior one to it?

ELLENSON: Yes, of course we do say that. I mean Biblical Judaism is really, in my view, qualitatively different than Rabbinic Judaism. The very fact that we have a term like *rabbi* to describe our religious leaders, that is not found in the Bible.

HOLO: It's a revolutionary term.

ELLENSON: It's a revolutionary term. What occurred at Yavne, the First Century, when after the destruction of the temple by the Romans when Yohanan Ben Zakkai affirmed the great leader of the Jewish people and the Pharisees that he would go to Yavne and open a rabbinical academy and there they would sit and would study. The liturgy was established there. Our Bible was canonized there. I mean I could go on and on. I see that every generation has taken some of that authority upon itself. So, I would claim that.

However, if I were to look at the totality of Jewish history, I would say you had a biblical civilization and some single event at Mount Sinai that we call revelation. Yavne represents, meaning the birth of rabbinic Judaism, another revolutionary, major step. And we know that there were Sadducees and Karaites, and this group and that group, religious pluralism isn't brand new to Judaism in this day. And it's interesting in the 19th century in my studies, one thing I have done is to look at the curricula of the different seminaries in Germany. So it was interesting that people like Geiger who started the *Hochschule*, which is the predecessor institution to the Hebrew Union College, had classes, for example, on Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, that was a required class for rabbinic students. And quite clearly, he saw that as a model for what it was that they were doing in the 19th century.

But I would claim the following, that from around the beginning of the first century of the common era through the French and American Revolutions the hegemonic part of Judaism wasn't *halakhic* Rabbinic Judaism. And what the Enlightenment ushers in is a challenge to a classical Rabbinic notion that was, again I use the term hegemonic, it was dominant for 1800 years, that begins to question whether Rabbinic Judaism and *halakhah* therefore, possess the kind of absolute authority that they did before. Namely, what Reform introduces in the 19th Century is a different conception empirically for the basis of epistemologically for the basis for Jewish authority.

HOLO: So I don't diametrically disagree with you but I would inject...

ELLENSON: Yes.

HOLO: I would recognize at least two much bigger articulation points than you are willing to grant in the period between the rabbis and the Enlightenment. And that would be philosophy which epistemologically gets as much to the root of the matter as does anything else because it questions the source of truth itself. And then mysticism. Mysticism challenging the *halakhic* regime of access to the fulfillment to the covenant. And the epistemological roots of the authority of the Jewish proposal in the first place are really quite central to the target of...

ELLENSON: Let me try to argue with them in the following way. I would argue and agree that both Kabbalah mysticism and philosophy represent radically different ways of viewing the tradition. But here I borrow some of the work, frankly, of my teacher Ismar Schorsch who of course was also the head, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Chancellor Schorsch's, in one of his works on Heinrich Graetz, distinguishes between what he labels authority and medium. And this is how I would understand philosophy. His contention is *halakhah* remains authoritative from Maimonides. Let's just use him as the example.

HOLO: He protests that it does. I don't...

ELLENSON: The philosophy that...

HOLO: The fact he has to protest so hard seems like he's protesting...

ELLENSON: But he writes a *Mishneh Torah* and then the philosophy becomes the medium through which Judaism is explained. Part of what the 19th century does is that the medium through which Judaism comes to be explained as history and authority becomes history. That is, I think, a point you and I could continue to debate. In regard to the mystical tradition, clearly it represents a radically different way of going about and regarding the tradition. And anyone who studies this and certainly the Baal Shem Tov, neo-Hasidic writings, there are certain antinomian elements in this. In other words, it runs counter to this *halakhic* hegemony.

HOLO: Of a legal civilization.

ELLENSON: Of a legal civilization. Having said that though, the arguments, and this is what's different about modernity. The arguments that are put forth in that tradition are still drawn culturally from a text of the tradition itself. In other words, part of what marks modernity as unique in my way of thinking, is that the arguments are taken completely, historically from the non-Jewish realm. And that's why I argue that the 19th century ushers in a disjunction between past and present with which we're still attempting to deal. When I talk to our students today at the Hebrew Union College, while I am completely committed to history, they just open a text and they think, in my opinion, that the text speaks both magically, in an authentic and almost an unmediated kind of way. In other words, all the historical points that I would make that I think enrich the meaning of the text, are essentially – I'm even going to use this term - kind of irrelevant to them. They might find some of the points interesting, others uninteresting. I mean if I could ask you a question, you're the dean. I mean do you find that among our students?

HOLO: I find that they have to be taught the relevance. This is part of our job at the Hebrew Union College. I do think that one of the primary gauges of our success will be how much do we bring them along to where you and I are, which is, of course, the right place.

ELLENSON: The right place.

HOLO: But I do think...

ELLENSON: Just what I talked about before.

HOLO: Exactly. Exactly. Without any jingoism, whatsoever.

ELLENSON: Not at all.

HOLO: Well, I want to thank you for taking the time and having what I knew would be a purely pleasurable conversation together. Go ahead.

ELLENSON: Just one point. This has been the best conversation I've had in this regard since years and years ago. I should mention to you, Sandy Reagans had a program on the Jewish Television Network entitled, *Die Wissenschaft des Judenthums*.

HOLO: Which was oversubscribed no doubt.

ELLENSON: Oversubscribed. And I had an interview with Sandy. I had written a book on Esriel Hildesheimer, *The Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*. Sandy and I described it. I am positive at least 13 people saw it. But I should tell you, there was a dentist who saw it who enjoyed it, who bought the book. And we had free dental care in Los Angeles for many, many years as a result of that television show.

HOLO: That is living Torah.

ELLENSON: That is living Torah. So I don't know if I'll get free dental care as a result of this, but I am very appreciative. Okay.

HOLO: Thank you David.

ELLENSON: Thank you.

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