

## RABBI DENISE EGER: TORAH FOR OUR TIMES

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**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. I'm thrilled to welcome today my friend and colleague Rabbi Denise Eger from Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood, California, as well as the sitting President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Denise, it's really great to have you. Thank you for joining us.

**EGER:** Thanks for inviting me today.

**HOLO:** We're going to talk about Torah. And I want to ask you why or how Torah is relevant today given the fact that it's roughly a 2,500 year old, 3,000 year old set of books, or book. Tell us how does it relate to today.

**EGER:** Well the Torah really is at the core of Jewish life. And I think that what makes it timeless and eternal are the things that's always made it timeless and eternal and that is that the stories and the truths that it speaks to speak of the human condition.

**HOLO:** When I think of the human condition in Torah I think mostly of human frailty. The failings and the unfulfilled hopes and broken promises.

**EGER:** And I think that's exactly what the Torah addresses are the human frailty and broken hopes. That is what makes it timeless. I think a lot of people think the Bible, or the Tanakh Jewish scripture is filled with examples of what to do and always the perfect story of goodness. But the reality is that the Torah is filled with difficult stories, stories of family troubles and how people navigate those family troubles. Sometimes the Torah's teaching us what not to do by simply describing the frailties that are there. And the humanity that exists in the stories is in part what I think makes it so timeless.

**HOLO:** You think maybe that's what makes it different from mythological culture where the heroes are less multidimensional maybe and more - although sometimes there are pretty dimensional in Greek myth too.

**EGER:** I think sometimes the Greek myths or the Roman myths or if you want to look at Aztec or Mayan myths I think those stories also have - they speak to certain ideals and ideas. But I think one of the things that has made our Bible speak to us so greatly is that we can see ourselves in the stories. They are not stories of perfection. And the Jewish tradition, I think, does not emphasize the need for perfection like other religious traditions do. But recognizes

that with all of us that we all have flaws. And what's so powerful, I think, about the Torah in particular, we see this in the dialogues between God and Moses, or God and Abraham is that even the divine has flaws.

**HOLO:** How does it?

**EGER:** And that to me is something that is really mind-blowing because we think of God as omnipotent and omniscient.

**HOLO:** (Inaudible).

**EGER:** Exactly. So perfect. And yet what does it mean to deal with a deity, if you will, that reflects the flaws of humanity. They can get angry. They can rush to judgment. These are things that human beings do. And so for me, the Torah is almost a mirror that we hold up to ourselves and to look at how we're reflected in the story. As a result, I think it makes some of the stories more relevant, if you will, in contemporary times than have ever been.

**HOLO:** So spell out one of the stories that you think really captures this flawed God or this God that surprising reflects human frailty.

**EGER:** Well I think, you know, one only has to look at the encounter of Moses at Mount Sinai, the top of Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments. And, you know, God already knows what's going on with the people down below with the story of idolatry and the golden calf. Here Moses is away for 40 days and 40 nights and they tell Aaron to make them a God. And will that man Moses ever return? In the meantime, God and Moses are having this incredible encounter, something other worldly literally. So much so that Moses' face will radiate that glory of God on the way down. That he's changed physically as well as spiritually. And what would have happened if the children of Israel had just waited and they didn't do anything? What would have been the response? But that story shows God's anger, quick to anger actually. Not quick to love. Not a story that shows that God has this open heart, if you will. It's Moses that has to change God's mind not to destroy. And Moses does it very cleverly. If I haven't found favor with you in your eyes, you know, Moses plays it up I think in the ways that one expects and earthly king's ego to be flattered.

**HOLO:** That's right. And he plays to kind of petty qualities in God about, you know, God what will people think?

**EGER:** What will people think? You brought these people out of Egypt to destroy them. That's such an appeal to a human nature not a godly nature.

**HOLO:** So what do we do with a God who reflects us? Does it undermine the transcendent power of God?

**EGER:** No, I actually think it's something – I don't think it undermines the transcendent power of God. But what I do is I think it really reflects Genesis that says, and we only think of it in one way. We think that God – we talk about human beings created B'tselem Elohim.

See we talk about human beings created in God's image. But I think there's another piece of that as well.

**HOLO:** It's logical that there's another piece because it's reciprocal.

**EGER:** It's reciprocal. And that is about the deep partnership that we Jews believe that we have with whatever the eternal is.

**HOLO:** The covenant.

**EGER:** The covenant. That it's not one way. It's a two-way street.

**HOLO:** It's a true relationship.

**EGER:** It's a true relationship. And ultimately why is the Torah so relevant still in our time? Because ultimately relationship – in relationship with another is where you find God.

**HOLO:** So I get that. And it certainly resonates with me. But I still get stuck on the aspect of Torah that are kind of irretrievably time bound, and by virtue of that hard for me to connect to. So when I read certain laws, let's look at animal sacrifice.

**EGER:** Yeah, they were tough.

**HOLO:** There were channels on the side of the altar that would carry the blood away in rivers. And, you know, killing and soldering so many beasts and then burning them and the smoke being a pleasant odor for God. That's really hard for me to connect with. And it's not – yeah, I can connect with Abraham trying to defend the righteous before God. I get that. That's kind of easy to connect with. But what's going on with a God who enjoys the wafts of smoke from burnt animals?

**EGER:** Well there's a reason that barbeque is one of the most popular foods in North America 'cause, you know, there's nothing like good smoked meat, right? I'm being funny and flippant with you. But I think there is something not to say that this is what we pray for, or this is what God still wants, or that this is what God maybe ever wanted but it is the human beings of its era trying to grapple with what will appease the Gods. And clearly we've borrowed from other traditions in that notion of appeasement of the God. So that, yeah, it's in our books too that there was a formula that they used. That's the whole book of Leviticus. Formulas for atonement. Formulas for the sacrifice. Formula for how to offer well-being. And, you know, do you update? Do you update your formula? Well I guess so. We must update our formulas.

**HOLO:** We're not doing it.

**EGER:** We're not doing that. And we can give the credit due to the generation that survived the temple and the (Hebrew) and the reshaping of rabbinic Judaism. But that's the challenge for a religious and spiritual person today. And I kind of use those terms interchangeably. I don't necessarily see...

**HOLO:** Religious and spiritual.

**EGER:** Religious and spiritual. I don't see them as opposed to one another like some do.

**HOLO:** Tell me about the opposition that some people imply and tell me...

**EGER:** Some people imply that to be a spiritual person is something other than being a religious person.

**HOLO:** As if the religion were institutional and rigid and spiritual is somehow dynamic.

**EGER:** Dynamic and free flowing. And I don't necessarily buy that divide. I think that the human impulse – there is a human impulse to try and sort through, to figure out what life's meaning's about, to try and order things, and to give an order to things. I think that's what religion has always tried to do. There are institutions about religion that perhaps are antiquated and old-fashioned, or simply not appealing. Just as you said, the rivers of blood of sacrifice. But that's because there's a rigidity that's happened among some of the elites in all religions.

**HOLO:** So let me recap what I think I hear you saying. On one hand the relational part, I think especially for a Reform Jewish audience, but I think for a modern audience in general, I think we can wrap our minds around the dynamic relational part of the stories in the Bible about God. And I think they are inspiring in the way you indicate. But I also hear you saying those parts of the story that actually turn us off, that actually make us raise an eyebrow at the very least, and certainly don't necessarily make us feel connected we should interpret those as other generations expressing their connectedness to God in their time, and that that fact of their connectedness, even if the formula doesn't apply, the fact that they were engaged in that process is where we find the meaning in Torah even when the specifics don't apply.

**EGER:** I think that's absolutely right. I think that's exactly the perfect recap. And I'll tell you one – I'll go back to your sacrifice, animal sacrifice. I think particularly, you know, we Jews are urban people. We've been urban for many, many centuries now.

**HOLO:** That's right. A couple millennia.

**EGER:** Yeah. And so we're far away from the farm and raising an animal. And then raising an animal and then slaughtering the animal to eat it. And how precious that you knew Bessie the cow. I mean this isn't just any cow on your plate or you picked up wrapped in cellophane at the supermarket. Like which is most of our experiences. So to create a ritual of holiness around a slaughtering an animal for food, because let's not forget this wasn't just wanton killing of animals. Must of that sacrifice when it was of meat was for food.

**HOLO:** Right. For the priests.

**EGER:** For the priests. It fed people. And sometimes the families of those who brought the sacrifice. This isn't just as it's often painted in popular culture just slaughtering of animals to

kill them. This was about food, and about honoring the life of the animal, and what it brought to the family both in spiritual nourishment and physical nourishment to the family and to the priest. And also to say it was worthy enough to offer the same nourishment to God through the physical and the spiritual. So look at our day and time. Okay, we're far away from slaughtering Bessie the cow who we raised from birth. How do we offer that spiritual nourishment both to receive it and to give it in our day and time? To offer it to others. To take processes and make them holy, imbue them with holiness, as well as offer that spiritual nourishment to the divine, to the eternal, to that power and source in the universe that flows through all things. Yeah, we describe it in different words. We have different understanding of science. We have a different understanding of all kinds of things than the ancestors who wrote and read the Tanakh millennia ago. So it makes sense for me, I believe in my day, to also grapple with those same stories, those same things and try and figure out how am I going to build those kinds of dynamic relationships in all I do? How am I going to honor those relationships as holy? It's the food we eat or the person sitting next to you on the bus.

**HOLO:** And I hear you saying something really even more almost political. You're not saying about those dynamic relationships; you're saying dynamics are by nature dynamic. And that they require both the mutuality but also evolution, change. You cited the fact when you were talking about even in the biblical day it's not necessarily clear what God wanted was the sacrifice. And we know that the prophets sometimes castigated the Israelites when sacrifice was in fact the norm saying, "You're missing the point. You're doing the sacrifice but you're forgetting this relational piece."

**EGER:** Exactly. That's what we read on the holiest day of the year in the Book of Isaiah is this is not the sacrifice I want. What about caring for the poor? What about clothing the naked? Isaiah's very clear about that. He among many other prophets. So I think this is part of the balance. And I think one of the gifts of Reform Judaism to Judaism, to the larger body of our people has been reemphasis of that within our tradition. You know, we were once called Prophetic Judaism not Reform Judaism and there's a part of me that believes we ought to reclaim that. Enough with the Reform. We've reformed a lot. Maybe what we really need to emphasize is we are the movement of Prophetic Judaism again. Many things I've come to see among the early Reformers in the early 1800s both in the United States and Germany, they were actually really brilliant. They really knew the traditions.

**HOLO:** They knew it, yeah.

**EGER:** They knew the tradition in a way that those of us who grew up within the Reform (inaudible) have had to learn in a different way. And so this notion of Prophetic Judaism that that's a good thing to answer to to balance both the sacrifice on the one hand and the relational on the other.

**HOLO:** So I'm going to make a pitch for keeping Reform as our capital "R" Reform title because what we do, one of the functions we serve in the Jewish civilization is not merely that we claim the right in an organic fashion to shepherd the evolution of Judaism by reforming it, but we do something very important for the consciences of Judaism itself. We remind, as you just did, all Jews that Judaism has always been Reformed Judaism. And that

it's always been going through this process of sacrifice, questioning the sacrifice, then the impossibility of sacrifice by virtue of the destruction of the temple, and reforming yet again with rabbinic Judaism to answer a new reality. I think that that's the real message which is not just the message you articulated but our imposition of that message on the memory of all Jews for all time passed because in fact that's what we do.

**EGER:** Well I'm really glad you brought up the concept of memory, which we know is also an important pillar of Judaism that we don't forget, that we do remember. And that's one of the reasons we read the cycle of the Torah even though that those sacrifices aren't things we are even going to reenact in any way, shape, or form. But that memory plays such an important role. And so you can't move forward without, as we know, understanding and appreciating the past. And I think that is the gift that Reform Judaism has and continues to also remind us that our tradition taught and (inaudible) did teach that each person, his or her own time, must grapple with Torah. It wasn't just for the past. Every generation has to come to the Torah in their own way, in their own time. That's just a basic Talmudic principle that rabbinic Judaism said. And I love the commentators who, you know, put these little side notes, almost asides in their commentary. You know, like (inaudible) those who understand will get it. You'll get it. If you really get it, you'll get it. Which is, you know, kind of their (inaudible) language for asking you to not be so literal all the time. I think American Jews, North American Jews in particular have succumbed to the larger society pressure for literalism. And I think that's made it difficult to grapple with Torah.

**HOLO:** Where do you see that? I'm curious about that. Where do you see it?

**EGER:** I see it with the huge ignorance of the average Jew today. I don't even want to put a label on what branch they come from. It simply is so unfamiliar with the intellectual history of our people and how we look at texts that they do what they see in the larger society. So they believe that the Bible is an errant. Well that's not a Jewish – you know, that's not how we grapple with it because as critical biblical scholars will tell us well there's many clues that it's a human document.

**HOLO:** Or even as pious sources tell us that Midrash and Rashi, or even Ezra whom you quoted (inaudible) those who understand will understand. The multi-facetedness, and there's the fractured quality of Torah is what we inherit as much as the wholeness.

**EGER:** Correct. And one of the things I love about Reform Judaism in particular is its honesty about it.

**HOLO:** Yeah, I hear you. And I couldn't agree more.

**EGER:** I feel like, you know, because actually you mentioned politics earlier, the politics of Judaism has impinged upon our access to Torah in many ways because then you'll get the "Orthodox" versus the "Reform" versus the "Conservative" view of how Torah operates. And Torah is and halakha, Jewish law, and how that functions because the truth of the matter is is that throughout our rabbinic tradition there was this understanding by some of our greatest teachers that Torah had, God forbid, flaws.

**HOLO:** Right.

**EGER:** Just like...

**HOLO:** At the very least conundrums.

**EGER:** Conundrums for sure. And to be honest about that is, I think, a gift that Reform scholarship has brought to the table.

**HOLO:** More reminding I think that we're doing. So we have a problem because this incredible dynamism, this relational dynamism, which by the way you've articulated so beautifully as multi directional. It's not just dynamism in a relationship between God and Israel, but amongst Israel and with God and Torah, and Jewish people and time and the world. It's so rich and so textured the way you've put it that I love it. But we're talking about today our discussion is about Torah being vital and relevant. And the truth is Torah was written in a language which most Jews don't know, in a time thousands of years ago, in a place many Jews have never set foot, in a cultural reality which is both claimed by us as our own and foreign to us by virtue of being so far away. So you're a rabbi. You actually have to translate your own tradition to the tradition's very own heirs.

**EGER:** Yes. That's what rabbis do. That's why rabbi's teacher not priest because that's the meat, if you will, of our task in the world.

**HOLO:** So how do you do it?

**EGER:** To translate Torah into everyday settings. Whether it's the story of relationships and to make that relevant to the relationships that people have in their own day and time with their fractured families. And we know the families are very fractures in our urban 21st century world. To try and show that the human nature has a need for rest and the Sabbath in a world where we're asked to go, go, go, go, go, go. To be in 12 places at once. These are the things that are, yes, not only the challenge to translate but then the challenge to actualize. That's as difficult as any task there is. But these are the things that will, I believe, ultimately sustain the Jewish people and actually sustain the world because they're not just Jewish at the end of the day. The Bible is a gift for the whole world.

**HOLO:** So I hear an undercurrent. I'm going to tell you what I think the undercurrent of your comments is and you tell me if I'm just projecting it or if I'm actually hearing it from you. I'm hearing an undercurrent in your comments and especially your comments about bringing Torah to its very people, the Jews which is your job, I'm hearing you say that one of your tasks is to present Torah not only as a source of demand and requirement and edification in that way but really also a source of solace. Am I hearing that?

**EGER:** I do think you're hearing that. I do believe that Torah helps us navigate the process of living. It's not just a set of rules, do this, don't do that, thou shall, thou shall nots. There are those in there.

**HOLO:** And they're edifying.

**EGER:** And they are edifying. But there are also opportunities to uplift the human condition. And whether that's observance of a Sabbath, to give permission to go against the cultural tidal wave of constantly doing, or it's to encourage as we talked about the Prophet earlier. Don't just think you're going to sit in synagogue or say your prayers or your daily affirmations to your mirror and that's enough. You have to roll up your sleeves and truly help the poor. You must pay attention to income inequality in our country and around the world because that is what God wants of us. And see I think that is the challenge. You know, a lot of times we go back to the spiritual, religious discussion we touched upon. Often times people talk about their being spiritual but not religious. I get nervous because for a lot of people that's like, "Well I give great gratitude for the world around me. And I appreciate nature and I feel close to whatever that higher power is, you know, when I..." fill in the blank. But one of the powerful, powerful messages of our tradition and our Torah as Jews is that it's not just about the gratitude. It's also about the recognition of the grave injustices that exist in society. And that you can't sit idly by the blood of your neighbor. And so while we are commanded to say 100 b'rakhot, 100 blessings a day and to give thanks for the rainbow, or give thanks for seeing a great leader, political leader, or the ocean, or to have the mindfulness to bless our food. Right? I always laugh when people talk to me about the mindful revolution. Be more mindful. That's what Judaism was doing. That's what Torah's teaching us to be a mindful human being in this world, not to just plow through it every single day. Thank God for your food. Be appreciative of what you have. Your money's not only yours. Share it with – you have a command to share percentages with others. It's not just for you. So that spirituality, if it's only about gratitude or connecting you to nature or your higher power is not enough. What makes Judaism different, at least – and I can only speak for Judaism. I think there are good Christians that do this as well and good Muslims that do this as well. Good Buddhists that do this as well.

**HOLO:** Also commanded.

**EGER:** You know, that have social justice ministries of those kinds of sorts. But that if I'm only doing that it's not enough, that I also have to be worried about my neighbor.

**HOLO:** Okay, so the title of this program is the Bully pulpit. You've got yourself a bully pulpit, a virtual one with a big audience. Give us an example of Torah's application today that people really, really need to hear. And your experience, you're out there rabbi'ing and you really live the encounter with people who need something from, of, and for Torah. So what do you find rises to the list of what they need to hear and know about Torah for their own wholeness or their own lives?

**EGER:** I will tell you it's my mission statement. I have it sewn on my collar of my tallit, of my prayer shawls. I have it written on the wall in my office so that, you know, when I look up every day from the papers on my desk or the phone call it's there and that's the verse from the Prophet Micah, "What does God require of you? Only to do justice, love compassion, and walk humbly with you God." And if I can do those three things then I can be in relationship with others, I can ensure that that relationship is based on dignity and justice, that I have a place in my heart that's not filled with just judgment which is I think is a natural human tendency. That you have to be compassionate, to love mercy. And that if I do that and walk



humbly with my God and remember my place in the world that I'm not, you know, with whatever accomplishments I have in the world it's not my ego that allows me to walk and lift my head up, but it's my relationship with the divine, with the eternal, with that source that makes for all life, then I can really live Torah out for me. And that's what I try and teach people is to live Torah in that way because it is about at the end of the day that encounter with the other, with the divine that helps us, I think, walk in holiness. That's the reminder.

**HOLO:** Well thank you very much for teaching that to us. It's been a tremendous pleasure. And I'm so proud that you my friend and colleague here in Los Angeles represent all of us at the national level as President of the CCAR, that you are our friend in the Jewish communal life here in Los Angeles and the College.

**EGER:** It's a privilege every day. Thanks for inviting me.

**HOLO:** Thank you. Thank you.

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