

RABBI GEOFFREY MITELMAN: SINAI AND SYNAPSES

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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. For this episode, we're in a for treat. We're going to have a conversation with Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman who's an alumnus of Princeton University and, of course, our very own Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. And he currently serves as the Founding Director of Sinai and Synapsis which was incubated at CLAL and which seeks to bridge the religious and scientific worlds by offering people worldview that is scientifically grounded and spiritually uplifting. Geoff, thank you for joining us.

MITELMAN: Thank you Joshua. It's a pleasure to be here.

HOLO: So, one of the things you talked about in your ELI talk is the simple fact that there are different models for understanding the relationship between science and religion.

MITELMAN: Uh-huh.

HOLO: A couple of points you made, I think, are really compelling. First of all, the vast majority of Jews, certainly American Jews, but probably Jews worldwide simply do not accept an oversimplified version whereby either science or religion. We just don't live that way.

MITELMAN: Uh-huh.

HOLO: I find that compelling. I also found compelling the notion that most American Jews are both urban and urbane, and sophisticated and they don't feel a radical emotional need to harmonize science and religion either. That we can live with a certain compartmentalization. We don't actually lose sleep over the fact that Genesis may not work in science. It's just not exercising us. But you're clearly tapping into a thirst for some kind of mutually enriching conversation. Tell me about the demand, the emotional cultural demand, that you obviously perceived and that you're trying to address.

MITELMAN: Sure. Thank you. So, one line that we often use is that the challenge is not getting Jews excited about science, the challenge is getting Jews excited about Judaism.

HOLO: Yeah.

MITELMAN: There's actually some research that suggests that about 25 percent of American Jews view science and religion as being in conflict, which is about the same number of Evangelical Christians. What's interesting is that conflicted Evangelical Christians are going

to pick religion over science. And the numbers about three out of four. The conflicted Jews are going to pick science over religion. The number there is about 15 out of 16.

HOLO: Oh wow!

MITELMAN: Yeah. Because there's disbelief that on one side is the educated urban scientific and on the other side is uneducated...

HOLO: Literalists.

MITELMAN: Literalists.

HOLO: Yeah.

MITELMAN: And religious. And because of this public discourse now there's a belief that not only do you have to – if you pick one you've got to pick everything else in that column. You've also got to demonize everyone on the other side of that column.

HOLO: And do you think the Jews who engage in the conversation bind to that demonization?

MITELMAN: Not to the level as some other people do. But there is, at best, ambivalence because conflict sells in the public sphere. Jews are actually going to pick the educated, urban, scientific piece which then means they may reject religion or demonize religion there. Which for those of us who identify as religious and find value in religion, it creates a real internal conflict. It doesn't necessarily play itself out on a day-to-day level but part of a larger cultural shift. And we live in a culture with beliefs, values, and the media diet that we receive. So Jews have to say well if I buy into science then everyone's telling me I have to reject religion. But I think I like religion but I'm not sure. And so it creates a real tension. So what we're trying to be able to say is, "Hold on a second. Let's start with the science. If you want to value science, you don't have to reject religion. And if you embrace religion, you don't have to reject science."

HOLO: But your tendency, because of the culture that you're engaging with, is to start with the science first - to say think differently about religion. I already know more or less how you think about science, which is that you basically accept its fundamental applicability to the reality in which we live. So, this is a production of the Reform Movement. This thing that we're doing, this Bully Pulpit podcast is a conversation produced by the Hebrew Union College, which is the institution for higher learning for Reform Judaism among other things. Are we patting ourselves on the back or is it fair for us to congratulate ourselves a bit and to point out that the Reform Movement itself has gone a long way to bridging this conversation? And in fact, the Reform Movement comes out of the enlightenment's struggle with this early on and tries to, in different ways over the generations, but clearly Reform Movement is fashioned in a way which is attuned to the bridge that you are also trying to build.

MITELMAN: So I am a very proud part of the Reform Movement. And philosophically and historically, I think there's a strong reason that the Reform Movement has embraced science in a lot of ways. What's interesting though is that the Jewish community as a whole embraces science. There's actually not that much difference between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews in terms of their view on science as compared to, for example, the Christian community. There is much less diversity in the Jewish world because there is much more of an embrace of science. One of the most common questions that I get asked is, particularly from scientists and scientists who are Christian will ask, "Why are so many Jews scientists?"

HOLO: Right. Right.

MITELMAN: That is not just in the DNA of the Reform Movement, that's the DNA of our Talmudic back and forth.

HOLO: Right. The critical apparatus whereby we're not constrained by the words on the page but that the words on the page are a launching pad for really rich conversation and questioning. And I also got that. I taught at a consortium of Christian seminaries and I always thought that it was Jewish self-congratulation whereby we always told ourselves that we question. But then I found out in the Christian conversation that there really is a difference. Christians when they encounter the openness of our questioning are actually quite amazed.

MITELMAN: What's interesting Evangelical Christians, even Evangelical Christians who like science, tend to view science and religion as more collaborative versus Jews who see them as separated out. And I think in a large part because Evangelical Christians are living a religious Christian life on a day-to-day level. And Jews tend to say I've got my science on the one side and Judaism on the other, and they don't have to interact. What happens though when there is a point of conflict? What happens if you're looking at a text and it doesn't quite make sense? Or what happens if there's some sort of medical event that happens? Then you've got to bring in the science and you've got to bring in the religion. So, trying to think through how do I live a Jewish life and what is that going to look like. And trying to say, "Hold on a second. Let's start with the science and use that as an entry point to be able to engage on big questions," because Jews, particularly a lot of Jews don't know a lot of Talmudic texts, don't know a lot of biblical texts. And you've got to study. And it can be very arcane and challenging. But if you start with something that people are already interested in and excited about, my experience is that Jews are much more likely to be reading the Science Times and Scientific American. I don't have a Ph.D. in science. I'm reading Scientific American as much as anyone else. I have the same level of scientific knowledge. We can engage that. We're now at the same level here. It breaks down that power dynamic. And now we're all on the same level. And now let's use that as an entry point to be able to say, "There was a really interesting site that talked about free will. Now let's talk about that for a little bit. And now let's look at what traditional Jewish texts have to say." Let's start where we're all on the same page.

HOLO: So with that conversation in your ELI talk you're a very open spirited presenter, and warm and mild mannered. But you made a very, very tendentious claim which because of your manner would have gone unnoticed in its tendentiousness, which was that there's

basically a ladder of sophistication between the conflict model, the harmonizing model, the Stephen J. Gould model, and then the contact model. I encourage all of you to check out Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman's ELI talk on – what's it titled?

MITELMAN: I think it's Science and Judaism.

HOLO: I found that very tendentious and very aggressive in an engaging way. I love a good fight.

MITELMAN: That's right.

HOLO: But I want to advocate for the non-overlapping model of Stephen J. Gould. I figure I'm in good company with Stephen J. Gould. So I...

MITELMAN: Smart guy.

HOLO: Right. Right. I got it right off the top. The non-overlapping model argues that religion simply cannot ask the same questions that science can ask, at least not if when you ask it you intend there to be an answer. Sure, anybody can ask any question, and you can ask it from any perspective you want. But fundamentally, religion poses an untestable proposition. And that the minute you wiggle out of testability, then it's not something science can even ask. And in that sense, they simply will not overlap.

MITELMAN: I agree with that. And I would say that you don't want to conflate the two. They do different jobs. They have different methodologies here. But they are both at the root trying to ask, "Who am I?" They're ultimately trying to be able to place ourselves in a larger context. What I do a lot of presenting, when I talk about the contact model, one of the things that I always bring up is the question of how does science progress. And science progresses through scientists. And scientists are human beings. You ask a scientist, "Why are you studying the Hubble Telescope?" and it's "Well, when I was six years old my mom gave me a telescope and looked..." The point of connection in a lot of ways is the issue of awe. Awe and wonder. And that then becomes a conversation where it becomes very productive because non-religious scientists can talk about awe.

HOLO: Yes.

MITELMAN: And I'm a big fan of Abraham Joshua Heschel who talks about awe being the root of faith. So, when we look at those questions, they deal with different methodologies. And absolutely they should not be conflated there. But if we're trying to say let me look at the stars, let me look at the way that my body heals, that's both a scientific piece and there's a religious element too. And that then can create a level of integration. I think the more that we bifurcate, because that's not just happening societally, I think that happens within ourselves as well, the more we separate out the less productive our conversations become.

HOLO: Interesting. So you're really saying that a radical compartmentalization at the psychological or the psychic or the spiritual level is not productive.

MITELMAN: So, I'll give both here. I'll give both the scientific and a religious piece of this to be able to talk about this. So there's a lot of research that suggests that our minds are modules. This is a theory from Robert Kurzban, and a couple of other people, that we have different – they're called a modular mind. When we're thinking about what do I want to do - we always have on this side I can do this, and on that side I can do this. We have different parts of our brains that want to protect ourselves and some of us want to explore. And so there's always – there's different ways to be pushing. And different parts of our modules are going to be taking the lead at different times. But we have a lot of different parts of ourselves there. So, we are ultimately, actually not integrated in our brains there. But one of my teachers, Rabbi Irwin Kula, who's one of the Presidents of CLAL, has said that the goal, the religious goal, is to be able to create integration. And we think about the Shema - *Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad* - that God is one. We are also created in the image of God. Usually that's taken to mean there's only one God. There's no other gods as well. But it could also mean that at our core we should be integrated. We should be one in the way that God is one. In the same way God has multiple different names throughout biblical times, rabbinic times, lots of different descriptions of God take precedence at different times. Whatever the job is, God needs to get done, that's God's name.

HOLO: Persona that God assumes.

MITELMAN: But God is still one. It is still the same God. So how do we both integrate ourselves and integrate God?

HOLO: Are we creating distinctions where there really is no difference though? To talk about a modular mind, we're still talking about a single mind. It's a very, very fine line to talk about the difference between a modular unit versus a multi-faceted unit.

MITELMAN: Sure.

HOLO: And somehow to indicate that one is less or more integrated than the other strikes me as not just cutting it fine, but potentially sort of creating a problem where there isn't necessarily.

MITELMAN: I'm terrible at making decisions. I mean my wife and I make so – we analyze over everything. And pros and cons and this. We were watching Property Brothers the other day and there was a couple that was arguing about two inches in an island. And my wife and I were like, "Wow! If we were to do this, would we do it this way and that?" Because we have different parts of ourselves that are trying to make decisions. And ultimately there's only one decision that we can make at a given time. We can only do one thing at any given moment there. And we can always feel when we feel disintegrated. You can feel in your gut when things are not feeling right. And you can also feel when there is a sense of wholeness and peace.

HOLO: But when I'm feeling disintegrated it's not because the scientific side of my brain is competing with my religious.

MITELMAN: Sure.

HOLO: It's because competing religious goods are vying for my attention. Two ethical imperatives are competing. It's not because, you know, the light is refracting through the window at this frequency and I'm seeing blue instead of red. So, I'm still trying to get at the problem.

MITELMAN: I'll give an example of what we're finding sort of in terms of our sociological data of how this is working. One of our big projects is a project called Scientists and Synagogues. This was a grant that we got from the John Templeton Foundation to do work that we wanted to see - could we use science as a way to engage the Jewish community in a different kind of way? Would anyone be interested in doing this kind of work? So, we did an open application. We were hoping we were going to get 25 synagogues to apply. We were going to select 10. And we got 40 applications. So, first of all, there were people who wanted to be able to say, "I'm looking for this kind of stuff." We ultimately selected 11. And the programs that they selected were not on the how do I think about science and religion. It was not high level. It was not very abstract. They were questions of how is technology changing our relationships. What's the difference between the natural and the man-made? Questions of kashrut and GMOS. Or Jewish and scientific views of eternity and the eternal. About time. So not only did we get many more applications than we thought, these synagogues are now doing programs in their congregations. Across the board, every synagogue is getting anywhere from 25 to 100 percent more people coming for different programs than they would normally because they're looking for these kinds of...

HOLO: Yeah, that resonates with me. I can totally get why you raise the questions as artfully as you just did. And why synagogue goes and non-synagogue going Jews in general, I can completely - I would have predicted that you would get a great response because I find those things entirely interesting. And I suspect everyone would. But to me it feels rather than - it just doesn't feel like an integrating task. It feels like a mutually poking task. Like, you know, how does the fact of a cell phone effect etiquette? From an ethical perspective, not just an etiquette perspective. So, okay, that's not really about how science - there's an interaction there. And you do, to be fair, you talk about the contact model and yeah, they're always in contact. And I get it. But the beauty to me is the provoking. Not the impinging.

MITELMAN: Well, and to be able to look at it in terms of *tachlis* questions. 'Cause Jews are not - Jews are, as you said at the beginning, Jews are not really thinking about how do I read Genesis in the light of Big Bang. Teenagers are reading - are grappling with that. Most Jews are not thinking about that on a day to day level. But if they're thinking about questions of GMOs in their food or if they're thinking about wow, how did my children grow up so fast? Why is time going by so quickly?

HOLO: I got that one.

MITELMAN: Right. And we have a synagogue in Chicago doing a question of how free is free will. These are questions they are really struggling with on a day-to-day basis. The way that we look at this is trying to be able to say, let's look at these very specific kinds of questions, and we say where does the science come in and where does the religion come in. And

sometimes they need to be separated. Sometimes they do need to be in different worlds. But the way that I'm using my cell phone is very different than it was 10 years ago. And there are different ethical questions that need to get raised. What's the role of Shabbat?

(Break in interview)

HOLO: I can see why these are inspiring questions. I get it. I guess I'm pushing the more abstract fundamentals. But they wouldn't lead me to a different direction than where you're going with these.

MITELMAN: We did a pre-program survey and a post-program survey. And only a couple synagogues have done the post-program survey. But we asked them, do they view science and religion as conflicting, contrasting, or collaborative? Before the programming, it was about – most people were viewing them as contrasting and only about maybe 40 percent were viewing them as collaborative. By looking at these specific questions, the number went up to about 50 to 60 percent as viewing it as collaborative. That's, I mean, that's, again, we believe that we need to be able to have the wisdom from both traditions, but we're finding that rather than saying you should be viewing science and religion as collaboratively, we're not trying to do it as a top down element. We're trying to do it as bottom up. And we're seeing that by exploring big questions and personalizing these discussions that's changing the conversation as well.

HOLO: And people feel enriched by it and you're elevating the conversation.

MITELMAN: Exactly. Exactly.

HOLO: I'm glad you're doing it. I really think that the times call for it. Congratulations. *Kol hakavod* for that. I want to ask you my question. So you come, you bring some scientist to synagogue and I'm in the pew. This is what I want to talk about. I want to talk about a theme that emerged in another video about the internet access and authority. Really important question for all kinds of authority. Not just religious authority. The most common one that comes to mind to me is journalism. Now that anybody can write whatever they want, who's the journalist and more importantly, what's the value add of a journalist if anybody can be what we now call citizen journalism? But which maybe a euphemism for just some dude writing whatever he feels like. From a religious perspective, of course, authority is really important because we attribute authority to something else. I want to ask you a question about this total access world which at this stage in its development we are challenging authority. We are breaking down the gates and there are no gate keepers. There's no publishing house which sifts through the manuscripts to be an arbiter for either factual truth or taste. Do you think that connoisseurship, expertise, depth and wisdom will win the day so that as the internet matures, and as our culture matures with it in our midst it's no longer that there will be gate keepers who are arbiters of culture and knowledge? But that the marketplace itself, now that it's the wild west, we are actually going to reassert authority figures and gate keepers from the bottom up. That we're going to end up choosing to pay for sources despite our potential ability just to produce it ourselves. We're not going to want to anymore. That I'm going to stop watching the blog. I'm going to stop listening to

those things, whatever, reading the blog because it's dribble. Do you think that we're going to revert?

MITELMAN: I think we might. It's a question of ownership. The phrase, and it's being batted about a lot is now called prosumers. That we're both producers and consumers. Ultimately, I think being a prosumer is going to be outstanding for Jewish life and for synagogue life. The analogy that I want to give is from a professor named Dan Ariely who talks about Ikea. Almost everyone has built something from Ikea. And one thing Ariely talks about is people feel more pride in something that they built. The process of putting it together, of solving it, of creating it...

HOLO: Is a way of investing in it.

MITELMAN: Right. You invest not just your money but even more your – even more valuable – is your time. And trying to be able to say, “I'm trying to solve a problem here.” So, in Jewish life, if we can have people investing their time and their energy in creating something new from the bottom up, that's ultimately going to create a level of ownership of Judaism and the Jewish community. There always need to be guides and experts and, to an extent, quality control, but you don't want to stifle the creativity. I think it's one of the things about science. How many experiences fail? Failure is really, really valuable because it then gets us closer to what we're actually trying to figure out. When there's fear, “Oh my God! Is anyone going to show up? I don't know. Are we going to be able to pay for this?” that stifles creativity. But if people are able to say, “I want to own what my Judaism is going to look like,” and create that level of spark, that I think is going to be very valuable for the Jewish community as well.

HOLO: The failure being the arbiter. As opposed to the top down arbiter of what's going to be kosher, it's going to be a bottom up of that which bubbles up and succeeds. It's still a sifting out.

MITELMAN: Yeah, absolutely.

HOLO: There still is a quality control source but it's market based or bottom up.

MITELMAN: Which also though, you want to make sure that just because something's popular it's not necessarily going to be good.

HOLO: But popularity does become a measure for quality. Not *the* measure.

MITELMAN: Right. And people vote with their feet and their pocketbook.

HOLO: And their pocketbooks. Right.

MITELMAN: People will pay for something that is valuable.

HOLO: That's no less true in the top down model. It's just that the arbiter is placed differently in relation to the product.

MITELMAN: Right. So, this is what we found with scientists and synagogues. We wanted lay people who were scientists to be invested. Some of the synagogues are certainly using some grant money to bring in big speakers, and that's a valuable piece. But what we wanted was, okay this is the scientist who's a paleontologist. He's going to speak here. So one of the scientists, he's the President of his Reform synagogue and is one of the discoverers of the Higgs boson. So, he did a presentation in conversation with another rabbi called, "Is God a Particle Physicist?" And they were hoping they were going to get about 100 to 150 people. But it was a rainy afternoon and Brett Stevens from the Wall Street Journal was there. And there was a memorial for Shimon Perez and so they – we're not going to get 150. We're going – maybe we'll get 100. They got 175 people. Why did they get 175 people? Certainly, some people were interested in learning is God a particle physicist. But more importantly, Pekka said, "Hey, I'm coming and speaking. Do you want to come?" "Sure I know Pekka. He's the President of the schul. I want to come and see it." They're invested in a different kind of way. And it's the personal relationships. That becomes the vehicle to be able to really get people to explore some of these really deep, intellectual kinds of conversations.

HOLO: You write a review on Baba Brinkman's religion and science rap or rap...

MITELMAN: A rapper's guide to religion. Yeah.

HOLO: And you have an interesting critique of him. It's largely positive. But you also say that one of the things that inspires you is that Baba Brinkman is open to wanting religion when it's at its best. When it can really enrich. I think we all want things when they're at their best. But I want to ask you, what does Judaism look like when it's at its best? When you're most inspired by it? You.

MITELMAN: That is a great question. One of the things that I always love that I find deeply inspiring and it's hard to be able to – not many people are able to do this. But particularly when somebody finds a text or a verse or even, ideally, a word that I hadn't thought about before. And they use that as a jumping off point to be able to spin out a life lesson.

HOLO: A drash.

MITELMAN: A drash. Yeah. I mean I'm thinking of a sermon I heard at I guess it was Rosh Hashanah where, I forget what the Hebrew word was, but reading the story of Hagar and Ishmael. And that Ishmael was a bowshot away. And so what does that mean of how far we are from somewhere? Why that word of a bowshot? And how much of it is that we are – we start from where we are and somebody is far away, and we're not necessarily directly with them. That I find so inspiring because, unfortunately, we tend to use a lot of the same language over and over. We tend to go to the same text. We go to the same well over and over. But when we're able to really go deep in a new way that changes the way I think about things. So I find that incredibly inspiring.

HOLO: So, true to your nature, clearly, the science and the love of religion, you think we're at our best when we're curious and we're digging. And then we come up with these gems that – well I can live with that. That's a great vision for Judaism. We're on the same page. And I really want to thank you for two things. I want to thank you for joining me and talking. But I

also want to thank you for doing the world you do. And for helping to realize that Judaism that inspires not just you but all of us. It's really an honor to have you.

MITELMAN: Thank you very much, Joshua. It was wonderful to be able to talk with you.

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