



CHARLOTTESVILLE: HUC HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

(Begin audio)

HOLO: You've tuned into a special edition of the Bully Pulpit podcast from the College Commons, a production of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. I'm your host, Joshua Holo, Dean of the HUCJIR Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles. And we've compiled an episode to address recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia. In point of fact, the word Charlottesville will never again be just the name of a city. It will now enter the dictionary as an historical watershed, like Gettysburg or 9/11. And sadly, like Gettysburg and 9/11, it will carry overtones of a battle, a conflict that forces us to draw lines and take sides. Sharon Gillerman, Professor of Modern Jewish History, crystalizes the disagreement.

GILLERMAN: The vision of this group, or this alliance of groups, was for the restoration of a monocultural, as opposed to a multicultural society.

HOLO: The question before us, however, goes far beyond abstract considerations of political philosophy. We Jews are implicated directly as explicit targets. But also indirectly as part of a wider set of minorities threatened by the racist ideology that triggered Charlottesville.

GILLERMAN: One of the things that's always astonishing is to see just how prominently Jews feature in their arguments and protests. Despite the fact that Jews comprise such a tiny proportion of the larger population, particularly as compared to blacks, Latinos, and Muslims who these groups see as destroying America. So Jews in the protest chants function as powerful symbols most of all. And this idea of Jews replacing "white Americans" is perhaps the most central, powerful idea modern anti-Semitism in the last 150 years.

HOLO: So it's not surprising that Jews from all quarters have voiced resistance and called us to action. Well, here at the College Commons we act by teaching. So tune in to learn from and be inspired by HUC's teachers. Your teachers of Torah. But also join us in the next step. Act with us to face down the blasphemy of hate and to move our communities in the direction of decency by teaching these lessons together with your own and by arguing with these arguments of Torah and history. We're going to start off with a lesson from Rabbi Michael Marmur, the Jack Joseph and Morton Mandel Provost of HUC to help frame the problem, and to give us our charge.

MARMUR: The Book of Esther is fake news.

HOLO: (Laughing).

MARMUR: The story it tells has only a flimsy connection for the particular historical situation. Do we think that there really was a duped king called (Hebrew) Ahasuerus, and a villain called Haman, and a wise courtier called Mordechai, and his beautiful and brilliant relative Esther? Was there, for that matter, a wholesale score settling with those who had plotted against the Jews? There really is scant reason to believe that any of this actually happened.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest like much of our tradition, and most traditions, the Book of Esther speaks truth even when its accuracy may be considered shaky. In every generation, and certainly in ours, there are Ahasueruses and Hamans and Mordechais and Esthers. There are rash politicians, pompous and puffed up, and unscrupulous advisors, and exceptional men and women, and revenge fantasies. Like much that is best in ancient traditions, the Book of Esther, if we read it with the right cocktail of irony and seriousness and comedy and tragedy, forces us to face up to ourselves and to the world around us. And I find myself in these hours and days in the immediate aftermath of the events in Charlottesville and the response to those events thinking of the Book of Esther.

Now there's one particular verse in the fourth chapter of the Book of Esther where Mordechai is trying to persuade Esther to step up and take an active role. And he says to her, "*(Hebrew)* Who knows? Perhaps you have come to a position of power for such a time as this." He's encouraging her with a thought that she's destined to live in interesting and challenging time not just to live in them or live through them but to mold and influence them. He's suggesting that her life has meaning precisely because it is lived against the backdrop of ominous political developments.

We Jews have often had an ambivalent attitude to our politics and to actuality, the political and social realities of the day. We've been tempted sometimes to eschew the uncertainties of time for the attractions of eternity. The ebb and flow of empires, the intrigues of politicians and power interests, all of this has been seen as a distraction from the real business of doing God's work and doing the right thing by our neighbors, or to be less spiritually exalted about it. Making a decent living and leading a decent life have often taken precedence over engaging with the messy world of politics and affairs of state. But there are moments – there are moments in the life of American society, and God knows there are moments in the life of the society I am part of here in the State of Israel, where we are called upon to face up, to stand up, and to respond.

We should acknowledge the fact that we live in a period of history which we as Jews enjoy, for the most part, unprecedented levels of acceptance, success, and agency. To use the imagery of the Book of Esther we have married into the royal house and taken on the trappings of sovereignty. The situation in the United States, as I view it, is that these events may indeed, in retrospect, be seen as one of those moments in which we have to choose whether we hide behind our privilege or whether we use our positions of privilege to step up, to stand up, and to speak out. Is everything about this situation clear and unambivalent? No, in my view of life, nothing is ever completely clear and unambivalent. But much is. The idea of a moral equivalence, the idea that this is simply a matter of thugs and hooligans on both sides of a

barricade is an idea so repugnant and so absurd, so redolent both of the Book of Esther and the Book of Lamentations that it has to be rejected. It has to be resisted.

So the verse I would like to suggest is being beamed at us at this complicated and shocking time in the political history of the United States is to ask Mordechai's question, "(Hebrew)." Who knows? Perhaps it is precisely for dramatic and awful moments such as these that we have come to enjoy the power, the agency, the influence we do. Now the question is, how are we going to use them.

HOLO: We just heard Rabbi Marmor teach us that we can draw from the Book of Esther to find strength in our ability to act. Yaffa Weisman, Director of the Francis Henry Library and Adjunct Associate Professor of Jewish Studies argues from the Book of Exodus that not only do we have the strength, but that the forces of oppression actually can make us stronger.

WEISMAN: The first thing that came to my mind was that verse that we say actually during Pesach, which is "The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grow." I take the first part of the translation, you know, as pharaoh oppressed them as they grew. But I don't like the translation into English, "they multiplied and they grow," because if you say they multiplied, why do you say they also grew?

HOLO: Ah! Why repeat?

WEISMAN: It's not. (*Hebrew*) in Hebrew has a totally different meaning. It deals with strength. But something that breaks through that is very forceful. Right?

HOLO: That's right. (*Hebrew*) to break through.

WEISMAN: So what I take away with it is okay so we were multiplied but what we get from it, and I've seen it all around, is that almost renewed strength like, you know, you don't push us around. Not in this country anyway.

HOLO: We're not lying down. That's right.

WEISMAN: Not lying down. We – we will grow in numbers but we will also push back.

HOLO: Even in oppression we can find strength. Rabbi Rachel Adler, the Rabbi David Ellenson Professor of Jewish Religious Thought, and Professor of Modern Jewish Thought and Feminist Studies, together with Henry Woodall, the Library Technical Assistant remind us precisely how high the stakes really are.

ADLER: I noticed that there was a quote from one of the alt-right websites that excused the killing of Heather Heyer on the grounds that she was "a waste of space". This Mishna would say there's no such thing as a human being who's a waste of space. Everybody is necessary. Everybody is precious.

WOODALL: Sanhedrin, the Mishna Sanhedrin, at the end of Chapter 4.

ADLER: It points to the text, the biblical text in Genesis.

WOODALL: When Cain killed Abel, the verse says (*Hebrew*).

ADLER: The voice of your brother's bloods cry out to me from the earth.

WOODALL: It doesn't say blood in the singular. It says bloods in the plural.

ADLER: So why the plural?

WOODALL: That not just his own blood but all the blood of the descendants that he would have had is calling out of the earth.

ADLER: You can't ever think that when you kill a human being you're killing one human being. No. You're killing every human being that might have come from that human being.

WOODALL: So it is as if one has killed the entire human race (*Hebrew*). Therefore, Adam, the original human being, was created alone.

ADLER: We all come from that single earthling. And therefore, nobody can say, "My daddy had more status than your daddy."

HOLO: Because we all have the same daddy.

ADLER: Yeah, we all have the same daddy.

WOODALL: Also, for the sake of peace among creations so people should not say, "My father is greater than yours." And also so that idolatrous or other religions should not say, "There are many gods and my God is greater than yours, and therefore, I have the right to kill you." And to proclaim the greatness of God which is that (*Hebrew*). If a person makes a stamp or a mold and molds many, uh, images or vessels in that mold they all look the same. But God, when God molds all human beings with the stamp of the original Adam, they all look different.

So having different – so having people who look different is actually and expression of the greatness of creation and the greatness of the Creator. So if you see a black person, if you see an Asian person, if you see a Latino person, if you see a transgender person, if you see anybody who by virtue of their appearance in our society is considered inferior, you're actually looking at God and you're actually looking at an expression of the greatness of God and the greatness of creation. And to do an act of violence against that is literally to do an act of violence against God.

HOLO: So we know that human dignity itself is in the balance. And Rabbi Richard Levy, the Director Emeritus of the School of Rabbinical Studies on the Jack H. Skirball campus, and Rabbi Emeritus of the synagogue insists that we have to be prepared to defend that dignity even when our leadership and our governments may not be.

HOLO: You were jailed in St. Augustine, right?

LEVY: Yes.

HOLO: What year was that?

LEVY: 1964.

HOLO: 1964.

LEVY: I was at a rabbinic convention of the CCR and Martin Luther King sent a telegram asking for rabbis to join him in a demonstration to integrate a pool at a motel in St. Augustine on the occasion of it was the oldest city in the United States and they were celebrating. And he wanted to have a kind of counter celebration. So I went with about, uh, 15 other rabbis. We were ushered into a black synagogue where King was speaking. And as we came in he said, "Here come Moses' children." The next day somebody jumped into the pool. Some other people went into the restaurant of the motel. The police loaded us into police wagons and we went to jail. They fed us with little bottles of baby food. And it was June so it was very hot. And you know, we watched as – as the African-American members of his group were being booked, and, you know, they shocked them with cattle prods. It was absolutely brutal. We absolutely still have our work cut out for us.

HOLO: Alright. Well what do the rabbis have to say?

LEVY: (*Hebrew*). Be wary of the authorities for they do not come near to anybody except for when it serves their own needs. And I think it's a reminder that we can't count on other people or on the heads of a community to ward off prejudice. That we need to be vigilant all the time.

But quoting Jeremiah, "One should pray for the peace of the city, for the welfare of the city where you have been carried to. Because without it people will eat themselves alive." And it's literally (inaudible) will swallow each other alive. And that – that sense of how close we are always to – to total chaos, uh, is I think present in – in that one. And that we need to be eternally vigilant.

HOLO: We can't always find the support we need in the powers that be. So Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, President Scholar National Director of Recruitment and Admissions points to the ancient teaching of Rabbi Hillel.

BEIT-HALACHMI: The text that I think is most significant for all of us to consider in these very, very important days is an ancient text that actually asks the questions that the events are asking us to answer. Which is essentially, who are we? If we are only for ourselves what are we? And if not now, when? This ancient text that comes from the Mishna second century rabbinic text, uh, actually asks these very important questions. (*Hebrew*) “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Or who am I? If I am only for myself, then what am I?” And of course, the final question, “If not now, when?”

The first question, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” is an ancient way of asking the question of identity politics. You can’t even begin to be for yourself until you know who will be for you. And if you’re not able to stand up and at times, perhaps even risk your life for what you believe to be your identity and your truth and your right to existence, then you can’t expect others to be for you. So we must be for ourselves. And we cannot necessarily count on others to be for us.

But first and foremost, we must recognize who we are. And this is something that I think is a struggle for many Jews, young Jews in America, which is the identity of saying, “Who is the myself that I am going to be for (*Hebrew*).” The second question, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” This is the notion of the ethics of selfishness or the ethics of being for the other and having a sense of responsibility for the other. So in a sense, this is a deep philosophical and ethical question which is we might be for ourselves. It might be very clear to us who our group that we most identify is, but if we are not for others, and if we are only for ourselves, if we only stand up for that which we believe in when our identity is threatened, then what are we? What are we as human beings if we see ourselves in such a – a vacuum of selfishness.

And then the last question, of course, is the question of enormous urgency. “If not now, when? (*Hebrew*).” If we’re not ready to stand up and be both for ourselves and for others now, then the question is when will we ever do that? There may not be a future time when we can do this. This is the urgency of now. It’s also a kind of ethical demand not to put off doing that which is right. In our capacity to positively respond to these questions is, in fact, what is being asked of us, what is being demanded of us, what is being commanded of us as Jews in this time, in this place, and in this hour.

HOLO: Rabbi Hillel famously asks us to balance our individual interests with those around us. But according to Rabbi Dvora Weisberg, Professor of Rabbinics and Director of the School of Rabbinical Studies on the Jack. H. Skirball campus, we find that commitment much earlier in the person of Abraham himself.

WEISBERG: I have a text from Genesis Rabbah, in which Rabbi Yitzchak is trying to understand why – why God picks Abraham. And he says Abraham is like a person who is traveling from place to place and sees a palace on fire and says, “Is it possible that there’s no one responsible for this palace?” And suddenly the owner of the palace pops up and says, “Yes, that would be me. I’m responsible.”

And similarly Rabbi Yitzchak says Abraham looked at the world which he clearly thought was on fire, metaphorically, and asked isn't there someone who is responsible for the world. And that's why God appeared to him and said, "Yes, I'm the master of the world. I'm responsible for it." And from this I – I think I would draw three lessons for Charlottesville. The first is that it's upon us to acknowledge there are problems and name those problems. The second is that we have to be aware of who's the person we need to go to, who is going to take responsibility for these problems? Who is in charge? And the third is that the fire doesn't need to be on our property before we ask what's going on. And I think, particularly for Charlottesville, my concern would be that this would be the moment where Jews, having seen neo-Nazis and hearing the word Jews would suddenly say, "Oh, now – now prejudice is our problem. Now it's coming home." And what I really admire about this is it's not Abraham saw that he was having problems and said, "Who's out there?" But that there were other problems in the world. That I think it's incumbent upon us to recognize prejudice, to recognize racism, all of these things before they hit our house.

HOLO: Sometimes it just feels like the world is burning down. But Rabbi Adam Allenberg, Assistant Director of Recruitment and Admissions, asks us to imagine fire as a source of light and learning.

ALLENBERG: There is something really hard to see about that long line of people carrying torches that felt medieval. More than anti-American it felt anti-modern. Like we were really being reduced to our most base selves. You know, you're either in or out. You're one of us or you're not. Blood and soil.

In thinking about it, I reflected on teachings of ours that are about people who carry torches, but for positive reasons. I mean I need a reversal after Charlottesville. I need to see those torches in a different way. And I don't want to be too generous to the folks who shouted such hatred, but they're – maybe they're also shouting for something, you know.

The election brought out all kinds of pain in this country that maybe we weren't talking about openly. And I'd like to think that those people carrying torches are really asking for help in a – in a different kind of way. I know many of them have been raised with hatred in their heart and that's hard to overcome. But I have trouble believing that that many of thousands of people showed up just because they truly believe whites are superior. And maybe I'm wrong, but I, you know, I want to use the torch as – as a sign of optimism, you know, light in the night.

You know, that light is the only thing that can – that can erase darkness. Which leads me to my text about King Saul – so this is from Vayikra Rabbah, it's in the Midrashim, and of course that means that it's pure imagination. But the rabbis try to understand how it is that Saul merited kingship. And so they – they attribute it to his grandfather who we are told is a torchbearer. His name was Ner, a light, torch. And he was a torchbearer. And they said that he used to light the dark alleys between his home and the Beit Midrash.

HOLO: The Beit Midrash being the academy.

ALLENBERG: The academy. The most important place, right. So that others, at night, wouldn't fear and they could go out into the world and – and participate, you know, and join others in the Beit Midrash. I fear that we have not lit torches. We have not lit the way to get opt institutions that matter to us, that uphold democracy, that care for people in their greatest need. And what would it mean for us, instead of lighting torches out of anger to – to sort of rekindle the pathways to help others, to hold up institutions that matter to American democracy, like free press and a healthy court system, and checks and balances in government. But also on an individual level, you know, what would it mean to look around your neighborhood or your city and – and see what institutions are threatened. What are we missing? What else needs to have a light cast upon it that needs repair? Because there are too many fractures for something like Charlottesville to attract the numbers that it did. To have the impact that it had.

HOLO: When we're warmed by light we find hope. As in this poem recited by Sheryl Stahl, Senior Associate Librarian, and Library Webmaster at the Frances-Henry Library on the Jack H. Skirball campus.

STAHLEVY: I love these words of Judy Chicago, the Jewish artist. "And then all that has divided us will merge. And then compassion will be wedded to power. And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind. And then both men and women will be gentle and both men and women will be strong. And then no person will be subject to another's will. And then all will be rich and free and varied. And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many. And then all will share equally in the earth's abundance. And then we will all care for the sick and the weak and the old. And then all will nourish the young. And then all will cherish life's creatures. And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth. And then everywhere will be called Eden once again."

HOLO: We naturally tend toward hopefulness. But Dr. Sivian Zakai, Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, argues that hope is a necessary element in finding solutions. One that we can learn from our children.

ZAKAI: So one question that is on a lot of parents' and educators' minds is should we be talking with kids about what happened in Charlottesville. And there's a real desire to protect the sanctity of childhood, the magic of childhood. And often that becomes a desire to shield children from the real horrors of the world. Sometimes that becomes a misguided approach which says let's not tell them what's been happening this week, this month, this year in the world.

But we actually know from researchers who look at how kids process current events that helping kids understand current events is really, really important. And that's always been true but that's especially true in the digital era because in this era of easily accessible information even if adults want to shield children from the harsh realities of the world it isn't entirely clear that they can.

As kids now have access to these images about the world, which are going to include images of what happened in Charlottesville, there are two options. Kids can either make sense of these images and these events without the guidance of adults, or they can do so with careful and deliberate facilitation. We have to help children without undermining children's ability to be hopeful and optimistic in the face of difficult news. Because another thing that we know from research on children's understanding of really difficult current events is that kids and adults process news in different ways. As adults we often look at the world around us and we see what's happening and we feel despair. But kids can see the same exact things that adults can see and see hope. The exact same images. They can see moments of racism and they can see, great, that's where I see an opportunity to jump in and teach them about the importance of tolerance.

But we also have to hold space for their optimism for a better future. We have to let children encounter the existence of serious problems in the world without masking that, without ignoring that, and we have to let children see and themselves become a part of efforts to mitigate racism, mitigate anti-Semitism. That we have to let them become inducted into the world as it exists and also become partners in creating the world as it should be.

HOLO: If we need hope we also need clear eyed vision. A teaching that third-year rabbinical student Meir Bargeron derives from Parshah Re'eh.

BARGERON: One of my mentors taught me that when I don't know where to start a conversation Torah is the right place to begin. And as it turns out, Parshah Re'eh feels to me as exactly the right place to begin to understand what's happening in our nation right now.

So we're in the Book of Deuteronomy in Chapter 11. And up to now in this book Moses has been orating a lengthy preamble to his recitation of the law. And he ends this opening with "(Hebrew). See, I set before you this day blessing and curse." Now the very first word of the parshah is the command form of the verb seeing, which can also be translated as behold or even pay attention.

Biblical commentator Rabbi Sforno teaches us that this verse tells us to pay attention so that we do not relate to everything half-heartedly. Always trying to find middle ground. Perhaps even moral equivalency. He teaches that we are presented with two extremes, opposites, blessing and curse. We have the choice of both before us and all we have to do is to make a choice. So the events in Charlottesville and their aftermath show us very plainly that our society has struggled and is struggling with the curses of bigotry and racial hatred, and all of the injustices that flow from these. But as Americans we are also blessed with the principle of freedom and justice for all, for everyone, no exceptions. We have the choice of both before us. And our task now is to make a choice. But before we can choose we must see, re'eh. For me, and I imagine many others, I can't unsee what I saw this week, even though part of me really wants to. By seeing we have become witnesses to injustice. And as witnesses, our Jewish tradition calls us to act, to bring repair to our broken world, and to restore peace.

HOLO: Only with vision can we act with purpose. And Rabbi Aaron Panken, President of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, calls us to act in the spirit of our tradition by teaching.

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