



**COLLEGE  
COMMONS**

## SCOTT SHAY: RELIGION, ATHEISM & THE GOLDEN RULE

(Begin audio)

**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host.

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**JH:** Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast in which it's my great pleasure to welcome Scott Shay. Scott Shay is a leading businessman, thought leader and author of two widely read books: "Getting Our Groove Back: How to Energize American Jewry" and "In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism". The latter of which has been recognized as one of the best books of 2018 by Mosaic authors and earned the finalist award from the National Jewish Book Award. Scott co-founded Signature Bank, New York in 2001, which has become known as one of the best banks in New York for private business owners. And he joins us here in Los Angeles in his work of expanding Signature Bank nationally. Scott, thank you for joining us, it's a real pleasure to have you.

**Scott Shay:** It's a pleasure to be here.

**JH:** I'd like to dive into the themes of religion and atheism which dominate much of your work and much of the press about your work. And I wanna start by stipulating something. I think you are quoted as having said something with which I fundamentally agree, which is that atheism, as much as religion is a leap of faith. But it seems to me that that applies if we identify atheism as the kind of atheism that affirms the absence of God. There is however a softer atheism which simply does not believe in God. It seems to me that the affirmation of the absence of God is indeed as much a leap of faith as the affirmation of the presence of God. I agree with you there. But it doesn't seem to me to be the same thing as the simple non-belief in God, which strikes me as a much more rationalist scientific posture because it's a posture of ignorance and doubt in the absence of evidence and therefore reserves judgment. And it's not a leap of faith. It's actually a statement of belief. So how do you react to my formulation?

**SS:** So it's a valid formulation. I cut it a little differently in that I have no problem, and I say in my book, I have no problem with the non-believer who is a moral non-believer and by that I refer to someone who believes in the Golden Rule as Hillel formulated it 2000-plus years ago: "Don't do unto others as you wouldn't want done unto yourself. The rest is commentary. Go learn it." I can make common cause with Golden Rule

atheists. The problem is that reason alone can lead us to all sorts of idolatry. Not believing in the God of Abraham, not believing in a monotheistic God can lead us in difficult and troubling directions. And I think that this is really what the Bible came to teach us. The whole idea of the Bible was to upend idolatry. And this is the one thing that I think reform, conservative, orthodox, and I hope all Jews, in many ways grapple, get. Idolatry, in my view, is the default mode of humanity. Twisted to a great degree, we all believe in something. I mean, tonight I'm gonna debate Michael Shermer, and even he in his formulations of atheism, I think he's a very erudite and thoughtful and sensitive person. But he admits we all tend to believe in something because we can't know for sure everything we believe in, we rely on our judgments very much so and that when we lose track, in my view, of the almighty, of an Ein Sof, an infinite God, we tend to believe in other things and that's idolatry.

And here's the key point in a way for my... In my book that I think I make, that underlying, it's sort of all of my thinking is that we tend to think that idolatry in the modern eras was some quaint, we're sort of bowing down to statues or magic making, something harmless and quaint. But in reality, idolatry, I think, is the source of all evil. It's a... Idolatry is a set of lies about power. It's about ascribing super authority to finite beings, usually individuals, god-kings, ideologies or natural processes or in the ancient world, sometimes to animals. But in the modern era, we're still unfortunately following god-kings. All 20th century was a catalog of god-kings. Pharaohs, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Hitler, the Assad family, the Kim family, who created myths about their superpower, super authority and used it to harm an awful lot of people. They got away with it because people believed that they were unquestioned or unquestionable, they were like gods. So my fear is that the absence of believing in an almighty God, in a monotheistic God opens us up to idolatry. I don't think that has to be, but I do think that idolatry is our default mode.

**JH:** Okay, so what you're saying is there's a vacuum which we will fill one way or the other. If I'm... You're not admitting that I'm not...

**SS:** Yes. Absolutely I'm not.

**JH:** I'm not misrepresenting your position.

**SS:** Yes. That's our default mode.

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** And that's what the Bible came to overturn.

**JH:** Okay. So let's talk a bit about idolatry. You've articulated a kind of idolatry which has to do with... It's a version of the classical notion of idolatry, which is the imbuing of a non-divine thing with divinity that it has no right to claim, effectively.

**SS:** Right.

**JH:** And that in that falsehood is an intrinsic perversion, and that has all kinds of moral

consequences, or immoral consequences.

**SS:** Right. Potentially.

**JH:** Potentially, certainly potentially. Okay, so the "potentially" is an important qualifier. And yet you call it the root of all evil, which seems to mitigate the "potentially" qualifier. It seems to be a little bit more absolutist than mere potentiality. It seems to me that the misallocation of divinity is indeed a likely cause of all kinds of problems. I don't think that that's too challenging an argument for a rationalist, because a rationalist would say that any allocation of divinity is a misallocation because it's something that doesn't exist. And so sure, yes, you're right. The attribution of divinity to someone like that, to a pharaoh, is a bad thing.

**SS:** Can I interject?

**JH:** Yeah.

**SS:** 'Cause I think the... It is... You may or may not believe in God.

**JH:** Yeah.

**SS:** But it's rational to believe in an infinite God that created the universe, that is the Ein Sof that is without end, that's a rational idea. You may say it doesn't exist, we don't think about it, but it is inherently irrational to think that Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Kim Jong Un, or whoever had something to do with the creation of the universe.

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** That their ideology, that they are essentially deified. In a certain kind of way... How did...

**JH:** But that's where a radical atheist or radical rationalist could, the second half of your formulation, can agree and stipulate without further debate. Nobody of good faith faith-wise or of good faith rationality, even extreme rationality, disputes the second half of your formulation. It's the first half that A, is independent. By the way, the truth of the second half need not be dependent on the first half, but it is also true that the first half is the controversy. The second half isn't controversial. Now I speak to you as a religious being and as a believer... I mean, obviously I'm the representative of a theist Jewish institution, but I'm not speaking to you representationally. I'm speaking to you as a fellow Jew and as a believer. Nevertheless, it irks me as a believer that we should try to argue that our belief, or the belief, even in an abstract kind of religiously neutral way, in a creator totality, an Ein Sof, an infinite being, is rational.

**JH:** I find that I lean towards the mystics who insist on a kind of understanding of God which obviates the need to somehow justify it by virtue of it being supposedly rational. Moreover, as a rational being as well, I actually take umbrage, because if we just... At its core, if rationalism is evidence-based, and if the nature of God defies evidentiary pinpointing because God is... This Ein Sof is so... It's untestable, it's un-replicable, it's

only knowable through emotion, why do we feel the need to categorize it as rational except insofar as we acknowledge that we live in a post-enlightenment modern world where the currency of the realm is rationalism. And so that we are actually kowtowing to a set of ordered thinking that we, like Maimonides, feel the need to put ourselves in the box of, rather than courageously owning the non-rationalism, not irrationalism, but the non-rationalism of belief itself.

**SS:** There are certainly many people I talk to for whom faith and non-rational belief is sufficient. It doesn't work for me, but I totally respect that.

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** From my perspective, and this may be partially my upbringing and the like, I see that there are two possible hypotheses, one that God exists, one that God doesn't exist, and I have to look at the universe and I have to look at my life. And I think that... And what I try to argue in the book is that, there is plenty of evidence from our universe that there is a creator, because if you stack up the hypothesis of a creator God, of the God of Abraham or the God of the Bible versus the scientific hypotheses that say that the, we are one of many universes in the multiverse that sprang up from a quantum fluctuation in nothingness, when you start to drive down on the assumptions that are needed to get there on the creation, essentially, there... And you've probably heard there are six constants in the universe.

Sir Martin Rees famously wrote a book, six constants, there may be as many as 30 constants, but let's just stick with six. The likelihood of those constants just happening randomly to be able to create a universe that can potentially support life, indeed support atoms, indeed support any matter being created or that wouldn't be blown up with antimatter, annihilated the instant it was created, if you do a... Just assume it's all by random chance, you get to a number of about one over... And that we're a successful universe, so we're the one. One over about 10 to the 140th power. And that may not sound like a lot, but just keep in mind that 10 to the 78th power is the number of all atoms in the universe. So is it possible that we were created from a quantum flux? Maybe. But if you then look at... And I've spent a lot of time looking at our ability to randomly morph into existence from amino acids that may have arisen somehow through interactions and is it possible that occasionally amino acids happen?

But again when you look at it statistically, and maybe 'cause I'm a banker, I'm a numbers guy. We're all composed of proteins. And the minimum size of a protein is about 150 amino acids. It's pretty complex 'cause for a protein to work it has to fold as you may or may not know, the average size of a protein in our body I think is about... Has about 250 amino acids. They all have to be arranged in particular ways. There's a special alphabet that relates to amino acids. And to make a long story short, the chance of getting a replicatable foldable protein is about 10 to the 74th power. And if you look at what needs to happen in the time frame that needs to happen to have the Neo-Darwinist, which is what everybody is today, the Neo-Darwinist molecular mutation resulted anything that comes close to human beings, the universe would have to continue for many, many, many more billions of years. So I hear the argument for,

"Well, we don't have to worry about creation 'cause we've solved that by science. And we don't have to worry about the reason that life exists 'cause we solve that with science." But when you actually do the numbers, I'd rather save my money and buy a Bible. I think the odds are better.

**JH:** But you're setting up a contrast of opinions, which is not the one that I'm setting up.

**SS:** Okay.

**JH:** I am indifferent to the math on the likelihood that a scientist, hardcore rationalist model might indicate, "Wow, it's really improbable. There's a lower case m, miracle going on here." Great. That's one hypothesis fine, it's rational, but it's also built on probabilities and the rationalism behind it is a rationalism that understands the nature of probabilities, that is just probabilities. It's not definitive, doesn't claim to be definitive, that's the key. Whether or not actually is definitive isn't the point. The point is that the mindset behind it is one that opens itself up to not being definitive. That's a powerful approach. The theist approach is nakedly just belief. There's absolutely no testability, there's absolutely no replicability, there's absolutely nothing except another set of probabilities that you can rattle off. But I don't... I've already sort of let the probabilities cancel them out 'cause that's not where I'm going. I'm going with the principle of the notion, the principle undergirding any theism is nothing more than the emotional vacuum which you referred to in the beginning of your comments.

Now, I am a... Not only subject to that vacuum I have embraced it, I have bought into the thematization of it and the civilizationism of it, and I own and live and I'm a Jewish in it without... This is not an apology or an apologia, either one. This is simply a celebration of the fact that I don't feel the need to cast my faith in the guise of the fashion of the day which happens to be rationalism, which I also buy into because it seems to me a crutch and it seems to me a crutch of un-self-aware vulnerability. Whereas if you just embrace the fact that belief is intrinsically non-rational, you are owning your self-location in the universe, and that is powerful. And I don't have to kowtow to some half-baked, semi-quasi-rationalism that's qualified by a million other adverbs and adjectives. It's not a rationalist proposition.

**SS:** Well I'm... First of all, I'm glad that that's how you feel, I applaud you and I'm glad you've done it within the Jewish tradition, because I think that it's a moral and ethical tradition. But I do think many people like you also who may not be also considering all of the probabilities and I like that I summarized it in a Chinese Fortune cookie because it's really a much longer conversation. But they do grasp for something else, and we see that time and time again, and which is why I think we need to make the argument for a God who created all of us but B'tselem Elohim, the God who created, who essentially gave us all a divine spark because the risk is the many people, not you and not as sensitive to you they embrace something else. And almost without exception those grasp... What they grasp are ideologies or the like, that say that we've got something special that the other people don't have, which tends to move away from the golden rule. I mean, how did Stalin... I'll take him as an example, clearly an idolatrous figure. I think you'd stipulate that for sure.

**JH:** Yeah I'm happy to stipulate.

**SS:** So how did he get... Who gave him the authority and how did everybody accept, more than who gave it to him, how did everyone accept his order to kill all the kulaks, to starve a quarter of the Ukraine, to send tens of millions to the Gulag and so much worse because...

**JH:** To make an alliance with Hitler to do a million other... Yeah, yeah.

**SS:** A million other bad stuff. That's why...

**JH:** Yeah, yeah exactly.

**SS:** I could go on. But you get it. I don't... Yeah. I don't have to convince you.

**JH:** Right. Right. No. You're not gonna get any resistance. Yeah. Yeah. No. No.

**SS:** Or your listeners.

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** But how did he get that authority? Because he used the same, sort of, poetry, pageantry, miss and theater, and demonstrations of brutal power, just like the god-king Pharaoh did. It's the same trope over and over again. And people like to buy into that in a certain kind of way, 'cause they get a taste of their imagined god-king's power, because now, they're a part of the communist ideology, and if you're kulak, you don't share divinity with me, you share something with the bad god-king. And whenever the... One thing that's for sure is that when a... If you're an idolater, you know you have to defeat the other god-king. You know that that's what you have to do, because the other god-king will come after you.

**JH:** But that's true of monotheists as well. Monotheists have invested very, very much, because of the mono in monotheist. Any other belief, even if it never intersects with us, sociologically, just the mere fact of there being another belief out there which is not in the monotheist version of things is intrinsically a challenge to our monotheism, because our monotheism is a total, kind of, theology by definition, it's mono, not one, but alone. That's the... It's important to remember that monotheism does not mean belief in one God, it means belief in one God, alone. That's what mono means in Greek.

**SS:** Well, a lot of that got us into trouble, because of the disputations in the area that we study.

**JH:** But that's my point. That's my point. That's why I don't think we can put that on to idolatry. I think, monotheism is the one that is, from a sociological perspective, forces conflict, because any other belief is, by definition, a thorn in the side of the monotheistic claim. There's no way around it. And so, that's conflict right there, and it has justified horrible things, but we've deviated a bit, because I haven't gotten an answer.

**SS:** Yes.

**JH:** So here's the thing, and forgive me for pushing it.

**SS:** Go for it.

**JH:** I do have respect, and I can see the pleasure for... Of a good argument on your face 'cause...

**SS:** I'm a Jew. I love to argue. [chuckle]

**JH:** Yeah, a good machloket is... And a gentleman, I will add. I don't disagree with the vacuum. I don't disagree that Stalin can draw on desires and things, and fill them with falsities that might, in the short term, satisfy, long enough term to cause a lot of damage. I would point out a couple of other things though, that a lot of people would attribute to Stalin the fact that he improved their lives. A lot of people would argue that there were... That all dictators, all tyrants, they never get where they get, just by brow beating and murdering. They, also make sure that they have allies, and they... It's a patronage model. It's a... And so, they... There's other things going on, which the raw moral lens on his criminality fails to contend with. Now, the reason I wanna contend with the other things that are... He did that were useful is, because for us to fight the Stalins of the world, we have to contend with the good things they do, because otherwise, we're just fighting a paper tiger. The dimensionality of the problem deserves our attention, because otherwise, we won't really tackle the problem. And the problem is, that prior to Stalin, they were living in the dark ages. I mean sociologically, I mean agriculturally, I mean in the distribution of wealth, I mean in a million things.

**JH:** And fine, we can stipulate that Soviet Union was no great leap from where we are, but it may have been for a significant subset of the Soviet population. Indeed, a move forward from the prior status quo. Now, I don't feel the need to defend it. Don't get me wrong, please. All I'm doing is I'm analyzing the pros and cons from an objective perspective as to answer your question. Why would someone like Stalin so patently monstrous, how do they get traction? How do they achieve such power with such horrors under their belt? And clearly, if we just attribute it to idolatry, even though we agree it's idolatrous, we're gonna miss some of the things that we need to have better answers for.

**SS:** Well, let me rephrase your question, because I do think that idolatry shows itself up everywhere and always, and I'm certainly not gonna excuse Stalin's choice, but I'm gonna rephrase your question. What if I said to you that the medical director of a major insurance company told me who will remain nameless, that, "You know what? Scott, if we wanted to, in this country, we could send everyone to college for free. You know how? We just stop giving medical care, all but routine medical care, to infants under 30 days and the elderly."

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** He will save all those neonatal center... Those are really expensive. Keeping people

alive at the end of life, really expensive. I've just reformulated, essentially, without sending people to the Gulag.

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** What an enlightened person would say, what an enlightened person did say. Not would say, did say to me, and... But the problem is, and it's the same problem, and my idolatry is such a commonality is it requires someone decide who should live, and who should die, to play God. Stalin got to play God, and by saying those other people are not like us. Well, Peter Singer says babies with problems, I think he believes in infanticide, up to like two, I'm not sure exactly, one or two, years old, but if you discover that an infant is severely disabled, society's costs are too high. Those are all rational by the way, cost and suffering.

**JH:** Yeah.

**SS:** It's a totally rational calculation that one can do, which is why I worry a little bit about reason. Communism, whether you like it or not, is absolutely a reasoned ideology. There's no question about it. Responding to some of the issues that you're saying. So, I come back and come back every time I look at evil, even when I look at evil in our country, I look at evil in the modern era. I'll give you a micro example. I'll give you a micro example of why I'm pressing so hard on this issue of idolatry. Let's leave the macro basis. Let's talk about how did Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer, Harvey Weinstein, Eric Snyderman, and Kevin Spacey, and I could go on and on. It's a long, unfortunate, sad list.

**JH:** Right. Right. We know... Unfortunately, it's a very long list.

**SS:** How did they get to abuse so many people? Because they set themselves up as idols, as gods, in their businesses. They were unquestioned and unquestionable in their industries. Now, they weren't sending people to the gulag like Stalin, but they could certainly ruin someone's career. All of the people I mentioned could ruin someone's career 'cause they were given super authority. They told, they picked up the phone, and they said, "Fred, or Jane, or Charlie, or Samantha, whatever, you're not booking this person ever again." And you know what? They didn't get booked ever again. Demonstrations of brutality at work unfortunately.

**JH:** Yeah, but there was no attribution of divinity, it was...

**SS:** Super authority or super power, is what I said.

**JH:** It's not super. It's unwarranted, it's certainly abused. The list that you give... A select list of people by definition abused, but there's no attribution of anything other than the exchange of goods, services, abundance, and absence, and Joe or Jane, victim...

**SS:** I disagree with you.

**JH:** Understands that Kevin Spacey has a lot of power, a lot of resources, not numinous



power, but resource power that comes from the earth, that has to do with money and exposure. There was no attribution to these people than... Now, sure. Of course, there are gonna be individuals who are star struck, or people who are susceptible or whatever, but you're... But most people, they make a rational calculation based on what this person can give me or withhold from me, not because they're intrinsically endowed with anything above me, but because they have achieved stuff that they can now distribute, and that they will distribute as they see fit. And I wanna be on their good side to get that distribution. That is not the kind of idolatry I'm talking about. And maybe, we can metaphorize and call that a kind of idolatry, which I'm comfortable with, but I'm resistant to my understanding, and I maybe misunderstanding it. So...

**SS:** Okay. So, let me press a little further.

**JH:** Okay.

**SS:** They aren't actually real Gods, 'cause they can be toppled, just like Hitler, and other people can be toppled.

**JH:** Right. Well, we know that they're not Gods.

**SS:** Right. We know that they're not Gods, but I would say if you contemporaneously listen to people describing their powers, they didn't... Harvey Weinstein just didn't just have the normal power that one would have with normal authority, and it went beyond his ability to distribute roles and the like, it was an industry power. He could make calls, just... And I'm taking him as an example, and destroy someone's career, because of who he was, because this is what Harvey Weinstein wants. And sadly, in my career, on Wall Street, and other situations I've heard, this is what so and so wants. And so, so and so gets it. It's not that they're distributing anything to me, but it's this aura of, again, it's not pageantry, and poetry, in the same way as Hitler used it, or as Assad uses it, or as the Kim family uses it, but it is the same idea, and I'm taking from micro to a macro basis of any time we do that, we tend to slip very, very quickly into idolatry. Even in the United States, right now, I will say to you, people take truths from whoever they're, I don't wanna say that their god-king pharaohs, but whoever their leaders are, and that happens again, and again.

**JH:** I, in my experience, and, no. I'm not... I can't speak with any authority here, just as a social being who has friends and conversations. That's not the dynamic that is at play. When you use the word super power, super authority, or deification, or idolatry, all of those evoke numinousness. The sphere above the atmosphere, and not spatially speaking, but religiously speaking. The word... I used the word numinous, 'cause it's religiously neutral, but it refers to the religious impulse. I just don't agree that for the vast majority of people who willingly or unwillingly or semi-willingly, or whatever, subject themselves or find themselves subject to these powers, these people who do have power.

I'm not questioning the power. I'm not questioning the power of the phone call, or that they couldn't actually do damage or indeed, help. I'm acknowledging that. That's the

distribution part, but I'm saying that the people who are victims of it, in my experience, which is second hand, or it's completely unscientific, they don't... And when they go home and have a beer with their buddy, what are they saying about Weinstein? They're not saying that Weinstein is, actually a human being in whom resides anything. They're saying, "God, blanket. I got this schmuck of a boss who wants everything," and they see right through it, and they may, or they may not play the game, and they may be pressured and they may have all kinds of... There may be real genuine victimhood here, don't get me wrong, but the majority of them do not concede to these powerful, powerful people, no doubt about their power, anything remotely idolatrous.

If anything, they're constantly knocking them down, but exceeding to them because they... Because of the distribution of stuff. We agree on the power, the raw power, micro or macro, you name it, that there is a real power, an exercisable power that people can actually make other people, or other things happen in certain ways because of this power. Power is a real thing. It is the capacity to do things. We don't disagree about that. I think, where we disagree is the attribution to those powerful people by third parties, or second parties, as to the nature of that power. It may be humongous power, it may be very readily violated power. All of those things, to be sure, you and I agree completely, but the source of that power is radically different in our perspectives. I think, most people are fundamentally skeptical about the source of that power. They understand that that power came from either ruthlessness, or great skill in one thing, and willingness to be papered over by other, whatever the dynamics of human interactions are that we all know, but not the attribution of something even remotely god-king-y, or even special.

**SS:** So, let me even drill it on to another place that I think we'd agree. So, all the folks that I just mentioned, certainly didn't follow the golden rule, because...

**JH:** Agreed. Clearly. We agree.

**SS:** Okay. So, if I said that my fundamental [chuckle] desire is to make common cause with people who follow Hillel's formulation of the Golden Rule, don't do unto others which you wouldn't want done unto themselves.

**JH:** We agree.

**SS:** We agree, right?

**JH:** We agree. And we should promote that. Yes.

**SS:** Right. So, I think, at a very fundamental level, that's what I'm looking for people to do. And I don't... And if so, if you don't believe in God, and you don't believe in anything, but you believe in that, you believe in common humanity. I can make common cause with you.

**JH:** Yes. Here. Here.

**SS:** Not everybody gets it right.

[Hebrew]

**JH:** That's good.

**SS:** So, but the issue is that so many people who we look up to as people of reason. I did a... I had a great time, I went to... I did a Google Talk, which is... Was a lot of fun. And I met a lot of Gen Zers, and millennials, before and after the event. It was a lot of fun and all, and... But I had a common question that I heard many multiples of times, numerous times, not numinous, but numerous [chuckle] times, which is people saying, "Well, we have reason, that's enough." And I kept telling them, "I'm okay with that as long as, again, you follow the golden rule." "But what about Kant?" And I would have to say that Kant hated the Jews. He said he wouldn't lecture to the... You probably read of him, he hated the Jews, he was an absolute sexist, he thought 'negroes,' as he put it, 'negroes of Africa have feeling that only rises to a trifle.' I think, I'm... If I didn't get the quote exactly, it's something like that. He's a racist. He's a sexist. He's a misogynist, too. I think he said something like, 'In marriage, he is the party to direct, and she is the party to obey,' something along those lines. So, again, and again, this is the fellow we look to for the moral imperative. And any time, and I really worry... That's why I worry so much about non-belief in God is because, I think, it's so easy to morph into idolatry, and I think Kant, who did a lot of good stuff...

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** Did, but I honestly couldn't make common 'cause with him because, clearly, he doesn't think of the golden rule. He excluded a ton of people.

**JH:** You can... I think, what I hear you saying is you can imagine how, from a purely rationalist perspective, you could arrive at something a functionally equivalent of the golden rule, because there are all kinds of rational reasons not to do unto others that you wouldn't want done unto yourself, because there are risks. There's all kinds of purely rational... And Scott's nodding his head.

**SS:** Yes.

**JH:** So, we can... And those are the people with whom you can make common cause. And we can also agree by the other side of the coin, or the inversion of the same thing, we can also agree that there are people whose faith in God is genuine, and sincere, and coming from a good place, or whatever, but who don't follow the golden rule.

**SS:** Well, from my perspective those are idolaters in monotheistic garb. And I do think...

**JH:** So, they're misled idolaters.

**SS:** They're misled, 'cause... And let's go back to... You touched on this before, Josh. And it was an interesting point that I wanted to follow up on. I think people, and Jews in particular, don't focus enough on the third commandment, which is not to take God's name for shav. No, not to take it in vain. Not to take God's name in vain.

**JH:** In vain. For no purpose. Or just gratuitously.

**SS:** Well, but, I think, it's a little deeper than that. And what I try to argue in the book is that any time... This is where religion goes off the deep end and becomes idolatrous, because any time I say, or someone says, "I've got a direct line to God. I've got a direct intercom to God, and I know what he's gonna say. Listen to me, because I... "

**JH:** I'm the vicar of God.

**SS:** I'm the vicar of God. I'm the spokesperson from God. I'm the sole spokesperson to God.

**JH:** Trust me.

**SS:** Then, that's when the real horror start, because then, you weaponize monotheism to turn it into idolatry. So, that's my theory for when monotheism goes off the deep end, and we have no shortage, again, of the Ayatollah...

**JH:** Right. Of course.

**SS:** That created a mini... Forget about all the other stuff. Nobody even talks about the mini-Holocaust right after the Ayatollah Kameini took over for the Bahai.

**JH:** That's right.

**SS:** So many things just happened. Because he said...

**JH:** A complete attempt to genocide of the Bahians.

**SS:** He said that anybody... Any religion after Islam is... The people have to be slaughtered, essentially. I don't think I'm even making it worse than what he said.

**JH:** No, that's my understanding.

**SS:** And people did it, so... Because the Ayatollah was the sole spokesperson for God, literally, and we've seen that unfortunately with the Crusades, and we see it with the KKK, we saw here sadly, in this country with the KKK, Jim Crow. And so I think we have to... And that's why I say in the book that see I think there is a theory, an overarching theory of evil, and I think it relates to monotheism and to... It relates to idolatry. And when monotheism becomes idolatrous, and we no longer look at everyone as B'tselem Elohim. Clearly, Ayatollah Kameini wasn't thinking of the Bahais as B'tselem Elohim as being created in the image of God. Right?

**JH:** Obviously.

**SS:** So, and clearly crusading popes didn't think of the Jews or the Muslims as being made in the image of God. That's when you really get the horse.

[music]

**JH:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click "sign up" at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

[music]

**JH:** What's religious about any of this? I get the golden rule part. I get why that is the keystone to your argument for the fundame... And embedded in your commitment to the golden rule is the recognition of the divine spark and all of humanity by mere virtue of being human. End of story, full stop, no qualification, great. That's comfort food. We're good. That's...

[overlapping conversation]

**SS:** Not accepted by a lot of people. I'm glad we agree. And I'm...

**JH:** I don't know. Maybe I travel in very circumscribed circles. But I don't know anybody who would say, "No, you know what? That's dumb."

**SS:** Well, let me just say this. And I'll take our current political situation. I don't care which side anyone's on. There was a recent study done by two professors. And actually, David Brooks wrote about this a while back in the Times. And he asked about the people in the opposite party, so Republicans, Democrats. He found about four... I may be getting this physics off a little bit 'cause I don't really memorize. But he said 40%, if you ask 40% on each side, they think the other side is not only wrong but actually evil. And I don't remember whether it was Republicans or Democrats but I think it were related to 16% and 20%, whichever side, thought that it would be okay if large numbers of the other party just went away, died. And that's an indicator that idolatry is raising its ugly head here in this United States. And that worries the dickens out of me.

**JH:** That's worrisome. I agree with you. And again, I suspect by the way that those same people who perhaps flippantly and it's the one thing that I...

[overlapping conversation]

**SS:** Yeah, yeah. I hope so. Believe me, I hope so.

**JH:** They would also lament the polarization of the American political conversation. So I'm sure there's all kind... 'Cause that's the one thing both sides agree on, that we're too polarized. And...

**SS:** Right.

**JH:** So who knows? I agree. I find that there's an opportunity for us. I'm sure you're familiar with Stephen Jay Gould, formulation of NOMA, non-overlapping magisteria.

**SS:** Yes.

**JH:** Wherein religion, by the nature of the religious sensibility, really can't comment on, not convincingly or meaningfully on the science. Nor can really, science... The way science is structure to understand the universe, it can't really... It has no authority based on the parameters that it puts on its own authority voluntarily as science. But the nature of doubt and the nature of ignorance and all of these things is a scientific good such that it really... God has formulated it in such a way that it can't be tested by science. It's not really in the cards. I like that because it affords tremendous dignity to both ways of looking at the world, which really says that faith, it's Augustinian.

**SS:** I agree with you. But when you listen, and I've now had to read and have read Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Michael Shermer. And the list goes on, Victor Stenger. Except for Christopher Hitchens, all are scientists in one form or another. They all disagree. Sam Harris said something close to, religious people need to be put in cages because they're dangerous to others. They could fly into buildings. So no, we can't just ignore.

**JH:** But maybe we can reformulate our argument in such a way that... I mean the religious argument, the religious sensibility, in such a way that can, in a serious, thoughtful way, re-engage with very active atheists. By the way, Shermer, if I'm not mistaken, is of the softer type of atheist, meaning the pure scientific atheist as opposed to the religious atheist. The pure scientific atheist being that, "I do not believe in God," as opposed to, "I affirm the absence of God."

**SS:** He is, yes. He's one, softer...

**JH:** Yeah, yeah.

**SS:** Than saying, "For sure, there is no God." 'Cause in the end, you can't prove there's a God and you can't prove there's not a God...

**JH:** Right.

**SS:** In the end.

**JH:** That's why I love your formulation that atheism, as much as religion, is a leap of faith. To me, that is an accurate descriptor, I don't... Neither one bothers me. But I think it's accurate. It's important to recognize that. But I also think it's important to embrace that and then to talk about that. And if you really, really embrace that, what happens is that the religious sensibility, we cease trying to bend over backwards to cast ourselves as rationalists. Let's not pretend we're something we're not. We have chosen the spirit of the religious sensibility. So what's this? Maimonides did us a disservice by insisting that you could rationalize religion. When in fact, when you're doing that, what you're really doing is kowtowing to a sociological fad, not that science is a fad. I think it's here

to stay. So I shouldn't call it a fad, a sociological stream. I don't feel the need to kowtow to it.

**SS:** Well, here's the reason why we need to take this seriously is that, the fastest growing segment in the United States in terms of religious category is nones.

**JH:** None.

**SS:** No religious category.

**JH:** Does that map on to atheism at all?

**SS:** It does to some degree. Only 30% of Gen Zers or millennials feel that God is important. So a rapidly growing, and I think the statistic is something like, overall, it's something like 16%. Again, your listeners will correct me if I'm off a percentage point or two. But I'm directionally correct. Over all, it's 16%. Among millennials, it's something like 25% non-believers. Among Gen Zers, it's 33% non-believers. And when I've gone on some campuses, people have told me that the zeitgeist is to stop believing once you get to college. And I'm gonna paraphrase what one person said to me, which is... Who said it, who is a believer, a present believer, he's not a believer, said, "When you get to campus, the professors look on you with charity if you're a believer," but they say, "Don't worry, we will educate you, because you either just are ill-informed or you've been clinging to your parents' superstitions." So I do think it's important to make the case that your case is fine to say that the case you're making in science and religion are separate magisteria or Steven Gould's... Steven J Gould put it or coined it is great, but that's clearly not what's being taught. What's being taught in many colleges and universities is...

**JH:** One trumps the other.

**SS:** That's a failed hypothesis. Victor Stanger actually titled one of his book, "God: The Failed Hypothesis". Now, I'm just gonna say one other thing...

**JH:** Please, please.

**SS:** Because as long as I'm on this train, which is that the thing that's curious to me 'cause I've read so many studies. I cited a couple of them, more studies where people try to evaluate, does God exist? By intercessory prayer. By all sorts of different means. And I read these studies and I'm almost laughing because the scientists create a God, and then they say, "How can we study whether this is God or not?" And I'm thinking, "Well gee, wasn't that covered in the 10 Commandments about creating God." No, I don't believe in created gods either.

**JH:** Whatever you come up with, isn't gonna be any thing that I'm...

[overlapping conversation]

**SS:** I don't believe in that God. Why are you spending money? [chuckle]

**JH:** Right. What's the word? It's not... What's the word when you set up a false hypothesis merely for the sake of knocking it?

**SS:** A strawman.

**JH:** Strawman, thank you.

**SS:** Although they don't say that.

**JH:** No, they don't.

**SS:** They say, "This is is God." You mean Charleston Heston's...

**JH:** They're acting in good faith in the sense that they don't think they're setting up a strawman. They think that they're responding to the described entity, that they're then testing.

**SS:** Right.

**JH:** I don't think that's dishonest.

**SS:** Oh, it's not. I don't think they're doing it in bad faith, but they just...

**JH:** It's ill thought out.

**SS:** That's for sure.

**JH:** Because the strawman, I don't believe in that God either, but that's why I say it's untestable. God, the idea is untestable. And I'm saying that we religious people have invited that kind of strawman test upon ourselves, by arguing the rationalist argument. We have entered into that arena and set ourselves up because the proposition of God simply will not conform to the categories of science.

**SS:** Science is a methodology based on observation, and empirical evidence, and science has really started. And some scientists, I don't wanna say science, but some scientists have really said, "Well, I'm a scientist, I'm here to help. So I'm gonna tell you about other things that really aren't relevant." For example...

**JH:** This is what you call scientism.

**SS:** This is what I call scientism.

**JH:** It's effectively what you're saying is that perhaps there's been some slippage from science as a methodology into science an ideology.

**SS:** Yes. And here's where it's a danger. Scientists are so worried... Obsessed is the wrong word, but almost about giving succour to the creationists, that to a certain



degree, they've ossified Darwinism and Neo-Darwinism in particular, so that even when there're advances in biology that are outside of the orthodox scientific framework, and I use that word advisedly.

**JH:** Yeah, I hear you.

**SS:** They tend to dismiss them. Lynn Margulis came up with this idea of symbiogenesis, were some cells would actually take in DNA whole from other cells, and that's how the juvenile slug, for example, actually was able to utilize photosynthesis and the like, and a whole bunch of... She brings a whole bunch of examples which are really amazing, remarkable examples brilliant and was a major and really a major contribution to make to science, except, because the idea of symbiogenesis didn't fit the traditional Darwinist, Neo-Darwinist model that there would be cell mutation. Cell mutations with some would be good and they would create a new morphing of a species over time, over gazillions of years. She was rejected, she was almost sent practically to go teach middle school biology, the scientific community castigated her, threw her out, told her she was nuts.

Not of which I'm saying is an exaggeration, either. Yet finally though she kept working on the data, sending the data, and it became irrefutable. Well, that cost science a number of years, because it didn't fit and it didn't fit the Neo-Darwinist framework. And now people are still fighting, and frankly saying, Well, this only applies to plants." So, when science takes on its own orthodoxy, then it's also an issue for science. I think this is a...

**JH:** Because scientists are just as subject to the vacuum that motivates belief as are religious people. And so they have the same needs that they have to fill, but when in the social sphere, in the policy sphere, it can become tyranny of itself.

**SS:** Yeah, news flash, scientists are human. [chuckle]

**JH:** Right, right.

**SS:** And they like power and they like not being proven wrong and it's a big problem because it's a problem in other places in science, but it's particularly become a problem. And this may be a sort of symbiogenesis between religious folks and scientists because we seem to find ourselves in the ring together. When maybe it'd be a lot better if we had a separate magisteria, and each said, "This is what we can say about our areas, we're not gonna say something that we feel we can't say."

**JH:** And the non-overlapping magisteria argument is a prescriptive argument. What it says is religion as it understands its own limitations has no right, has no capacity legitimately to impinge upon the scientific or and vice versa. It doesn't mean, however, that in fact, in the social doings of a group of people that they respect that and that religious people don't overstep their bounds and scientists don't know what they do.

**SS:** Yes.

**JH:** And in the realm of public policy, it becomes extremely contentious. And I think a lot

of us religious folks who are deeply committed to the scientific community's undeniable and life-changing contributions to our world. I think we're gonna end up siding with the scientists, as I certainly do in this because as much as I'm a religious person, and belong to a religious community, I do voluntarily subject my religiosity to the circumscribed confines of disenfranchisement when it comes to public policy.

**SS:** Sure, I like vaccines. I make sure I'm vaccinated and...

[overlapping conversation]

**JH:** I don't want my government to be choosing anything religious 'cause there's no way to choose anything religious without favoring something religious.

**SS:** Totally agree. And just a more of on a separate subject, but it's related, which is... That's why I think with the danger is of the [Hebrew].

**JH:** Yes.

**SS:** In Israel.

**JH:** It is.

**SS:** Again, you should never give religious institutions state power. On the other hand, I don't think you should do a state power to go a little crazy and proscribe religious expression when it's part of citizen's rights as well. I think that's where the rubber meets the road and it's very difficult. And that's a whole other podcast.

**JH:** Right. And that's where interests come into play. And we're gonna have to disagree on the rational part, but we can agree on the reasonable part that it is a reasonable thing to squeeze the very, very best beauty of our tradition out for the sake of being a moral compass to do our work, which is to shed light on the human condition with our best moral selves and to have people like you as interlocutors and partners is a privilege and a gift. Thank you.

**SS:** Thank you. Hopefully, to be continued at the Shabbat table.

[music]

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