RABBI NOA SATTATH: THE ISRAEL RELIGIOUS ACTION CENTER

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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. You're listening to a special episode recorded at the URJ Biennial in December of 2019.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast. And I am delighted to welcome Rabbi Noa Sattath. Rabbi Sattath is the Director of the Israel Religious Action Center, known as the IRAC, which is the social justice arm of the Israel Movement for Reform Judaism. She's charged with developing social change strategies in the fields of separation of religion and state, women's rights, and the struggle against racism. Rabbi Sattath Noa, welcome.

Noa Sattath: It's great to be here.

JH: I wanna talk about LGBT rights in Israel. A friend of mine who wrote a book about gay stories in Israel called Independence Park... I don't know if you know the book...

NS: Yes, yes, of course. It's a great book.

JH: Yes, it's a great book. Stories, individualized stories of gay experiences in Israel. He once gave a presentation at the university where we studied together, and this is in the '90s, and he said, "Israel is a [Hebrew] for gay rights." And he described it in a very sincere way, and he's a thoughtful, critical person. And I wanna know, how do you feel about that statement coming from an accomplished, gay, published leader in Israel 20 years ago, then and now?

NS: I think that maybe that will be a theme of our conversation, that you never speak about one Israel. I think that, certainly, there are gay men, and maybe other LGBT people for whom Israel's fantastic and very safe and welcoming, and that's one of the realities in Israel. And it's a big reality, certainly, in Tel Aviv and the surrounding areas. But if you're talking about Palestinian citizens of Israel, if you're talking about the ultra-Orthodox community, and together that is 40% of the population, that's a whole different story in terms of acceptance, in terms of access to care and community, in terms of risk, in terms of their ability to live the lives they were meant to live. So I think that it's definitely true in some places, and it's totally untrue in other places.

JH: Right, okay. Help me break down the nuance that is helpful for us to understand, these... You just enumerated three Israels, so to speak. The urban metropolitan Tel Aviv, the religious Jewish, or the ultra-religious Jewish, depending on how you wanna call it, and the Arab-Israeli.

NS: These are very, very broad strokes. In Israel, like in the US, there are so many layers. But if we're talking about the LGBT community, that seems, to me, to be the easiest separation. 21% of the Israeli population are Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. And also there, there is great diversity between in the cities and people in rural areas, people who are Christian, people who are Muslim, people who are secular. There's a great diversity. But in general, that's a population that is more conservative in terms of LGBT rights.

JH: More conservative than the cosmopolitan Tel Avivians?

NS: Than the Jewish population in general. And also, that is being transformed in these years by the leadership of the Palestinian LGBT community. In general, I think that the leadership of the community wants to identify primarily as Palestinian and then, only secondly, as LGBT, so they are in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. Initially, when I was the head of the LGBT Center in Jerusalem, we had one community, and the Palestinian community chose to form their own organizations. Certainly, the ultra-Orthodox community, that's also a very separate community. In Israel, ultra-Orthodox school system is separate, Palestinian school system is separate. So, if we're thinking about the ultra-Orthodox community, they have separate schools, they forbid access to internet, they don't have TVs, they have separate radio channels and separate newspapers. So, access is very difficult. And actually right now, IRAC is taking a case against what is called kosher cellphones. Kosher cellphones are what the ultra-Orthodox community uses, which is fine, and they have limited access to internet and other things. But one of the things that they have is they also block out the ability to call LGBT hotlines and domestic violence services hotlines.

NS: So, there's a huge effort from the leadership of the ultra-Orthodox community to deny any access to LGBT information. And so, as you can imagine, that's a very different life from the life of the rest of the LGBT community in Israel. And we need to remember that there was a murder at the LGBT Pride march in Jerusalem, where a 16-year-old was murdered by an ultra-Orthodox man, which is the result of incitement and homophobia in the community.

JH: If I may, at this juncture in the conversation, I wanna point out a really eloquent saying, brief statement, that I heard from my colleague at the Hebrew Union College which your comment inspired, because you referred to the fact that the kosher phones prevent not only LGBT hotlines, but also domestic violence hotlines. And he shared this quote with me that, "Homophobia is a room in the palace of misogyny."

NS: Absolutely.

JH: And it's a very eloquent articulation, and your example seems to validate. At least, as one example.

NS: Exactly, exactly.

JH: I didn't mean to interrupt, but please, continue now with some of your other experiences.

NS: We were talking about the experiences of LGBT community in Israel. We spoke about the Palestinian experience and the ultra-Orthodox experience. And then the Orthodox, and secular, and everything in between experience, I think, is more open, because people have access to internet and can find the community and find each other and find information in a different way. And so they have access. Even if the experience in rural Israel is very different than the experience in Tel Aviv, these are not great distances and people can travel and have access to a community.

JH: One of the great tools at the disposal of the IRAC, the Israel Religious Action Center, has been litigation, has been to take cases that have social weight to court and to change the experience of the social polity in Israel. What's on your docket? What's first and foremost on your mind? We've spoken about the kosher phones.

NS: On Sukkot, the Supreme Court justices choose the most important cases of the year. This past Sukkot, they published 28 cases, four of whom were from IRAC.

JH: Wonderful.

NS: Two of those dealt with the disqualification of Jewish supremacists, followers of Meir Kahane from running to for Knesset.

JH: Explain to us who Meir Kahane was.

NS: He basically developed the Jewish racist ideology.

JH: And he backed it with a violent philosophy.

NS: Yes, absolutely.

JH: And founded an organization.

NS: He founded an organization called Kahane Chai, which was then outlawed as a terrorist organization, and his students keep founding other organizations that hold a similar...

JH: To find loopholes in the rulings?

NS: Yeah. One organization is considered a terrorist organization, so you found a similar organization with a different name. And they keep trying to run for Knesset, and we've been trying to disqualify them for many years, both because this is an atrocity, it's a shanda for Jewish values, and because we see that one of the major dangers to democracy is when extreme-right ideology filters into the center-right. Which is happening in Israel and it's happening everywhere around the world.

JH: Around the world, yes.

NS: It's very dangerous and we're trying to block that. So, that was one of our major achievements this year. We had two election cycles, so we had two petitions on that. We also had a petition to remove segregation signs, gender segregation signs from Beit Shemesh, which is now the capital of Fallujah extremism is Israel. We won that case. Another case was an

immigration case about immigrant women who were victims of domestic violence. Those were the four cases that were on the list of the most significant cases in the past year.

NS: This year, we're continuing to hold a case against one of the most racist rabbis in Israel, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu. And I like talking about his case because it exemplifies the unique role of Judaism and how it plays in Israeli society. He, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu, was a civil servant. He is the chief rabbi of Safed, a beautiful city in the north of Israel. Every Jewish city in Israel has either one or two chief rabbis, and that's a very high ranking in civil service. It's equivalent to a judge.

NS: So, this guy, from his office in City Hall in Safed, he operates a hotline and you can call that hotline if your neighbor rented an apartment to an Arab. When you call that hotline, the rabbi will use city resources to track down the neighbor and tell them that that's not a good idea, that it risks our daughters, the fabric of our society. He would give his own, very innovative interpretation of Jewish law, saying that it's against Jewish law, against Halakha, to rent apartments to Arabs. And if the neighbor persists and rents their apartment to an Arab, then the Rabbi would issue a Herem, an excommunication, so that that person can't go into any of the synagogues in Safed. So, that's an example of how Judaism is manipulated to be a force for racism in Israel. We've been trying to get this person fired for a long time.

JH: Is the person appointed or elected?

NS: Appointed. But it's a lifetime appointment.

JH: Oh, it really is like a judge.

NS: Yes. So, we have been working for a long time to get him fired, and now this is an ongoing petition in the Supreme Court that will continue to be heard in 2020. Also, next year we have a big conversion case that's been in court for 14 years and we're hoping there will be a decision this year. Since the '90s, conversions that have been performed outside of Israel are accepted for the Law of Return, meaning if you convert somebody here with your [HEBREW], convert somebody here in Chicago or in Los Angeles, they qualify to make Aliyah. But if I convert them in Tel Aviv, then they don't get that same status. So, that's the case that's been in court for many years now, and we're very optimistic about the result and we are hoping there will be a decision this year.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we want to 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, 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. 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.

JH: I'd like to ask your opinion about the rule of law. In my circle of friends and conversations, this is something that comes up, our concern about the rule of law. And there are two reasons why we're concerned about it. First and foremost, we're concerned about it in principle and in solidarity with Israel. As caring Zionists, we want to see the rule of law. We believe in it. But also because rule of law is such an absolute necessary key ingredient to democracy in the first

place, we care about it from the point of view of advocacy, because one of the great arguments for supporting the state of Israel is its democratic standing in general, and certainly in that region. And so for Israel to have to fight for its own status of rule of law is something that we feel very invested in. And so I wanted to ask you how you're feeling about these trends that are coming across the pond to us as if undermining the rule of law.

NS: In general, in the world, we're seeing an erosion of democratic practices and democratic norms, and that's not new in Israel. But the impact is a two-way impact. So I think that, Francis, the impact of the results of the 2016 elections here was felt immediately in Israel and maybe more intensely than here, because the US used to play such an important critical role in protection of Israeli democracy. And there's no interest in doing that at all under the current administration. That's had a huge impact on the way Israel operates and also on the para-farm movement. So in terms of the erosion of democratic principles, it's both the rule of law, and the importance of truth, and the extremist ideologies, incitement against minorities. We see that all over the world. We've been experiencing it in Israel for almost two decades now, coming and going. And much more so in the past Knesset since 2015, and much, much more so since the American elections in 2016.

NS: And I had dinner with the German commissioner for human rights who came to visit Israel. It's a political position in Germany, and she's a woman who was in the Philippines and then came to Gaza and to Israel and Palestine, and was going to Brazil, and so she's had a lot of knowledge on what's going on. So I asked her, "Who figured it out? What are the good methods against populism? Why don't we learn from each other?" And her response to me was, "Nobody figured it out." Populism is very strong around the world and we're seeing it get stronger and as a progressive camp, we've not yet figured out the right response. I think that the first inkling is that it's not enough for the non-democratic camp to be bad. We, as a progressive camp, have to be good. So that's, I think, the first key. And I think that one of the things that we at IRAC are doing and we as the reform movement are doing in general, is that it's not enough to offer rights-based agenda, we also have to offer an identity.

JH: Please elaborate on that.

NS: So let me tell you about what brought me to be a rabbi. I was born in Jerusalem to a really secular Israeli family. Our Shabbat tradition in my household was that my father would go to the non-kosher butcher shop and get bacon. That's what we did on the mornings of Shabbat.

JH: [Hebrew] Shabbat.

[laughter]

NS: Exactly. Exactly. That was our thing. And my path to the rabbinate went through social change work. I was the head of the LGBT center.

JH: Before you were a rabbi?

NS: Before I was a rabbi. In Jerusalem, back when we only had one organization, so we had ultra-Orthodox gay men, Palestinian lesbians, everybody that you can imagine in Jerusalem. And I really got to witness how religion can be a destructive force ruining people's lives, and how it can be a positive force for liberation. And when I left there, I wanted to look at social justice issues from a broader perspective than the LGBT perspective. And my background is in engineering. And so, I joined an organization called "MEET", which was founded in MIT in

Boston, which was an extracurricular program in computer science for Israeli and Palestinian high school students. That was a very interesting learning experience, and the idea was to build a leadership that knew how to work together, Israeli and Palestinian. And one of the major challenges I had there, one of the major roles I had in the organization, was looking at the reluctance of the Israeli teens to engage with the Palestinian teens.

NS: This program, like most encounter programs, was built in favor of the Israelis. The Palestinians had to cross check points in order to get there. And while we spoke English, it was held at Hebrew university in a Hebrew-speaking world, which was familiar to the Israelis and alien completely to the Palestinians. And also in computer science, the Israeli education system is really focused on computer science and preparation for computer science, and the Palestinian education system is focused on other things entirely. And despite all that, the Israelis were petrified.

NS: And the more I looked into it, and I brought consultants and I did workshops and I had conversations with the different students, the more it became apparent to me that the Palestinians students came with a really strong narrative about their national identity and about their religious identity. And the Israeli students who were brilliant, we chose 20 out of 600 applicants, it was a free program from MIT, they couldn't articulate anything about their identity that didn't have to do with the Holocaust. So, responses to questions like, "What does it mean to be Jewish? Why am I Jewish? Why is it important to have a Jewish state? What are the Jewish values?" They had very weak answers and very negative in their nature. And I got to see in front of my eyes in these students how people build big walls around themselves when they're not secure on the inside. It's not only about an external threat. If you don't know who you are, it's very hard for you to meet somebody else or have contact with somebody else.

JH: Have the confidence to allow yourself to engage fully with someone.

NS: Exactly. And so that's what led me to IRAC, and the reform movement, and the rabbinate, where I get to think about how we as a progressive camp in Israel develop an identity, a Jewish identity.

JH: That led you to the rabbinate?

NS: Yes, I needed to dive deep.

JH: To the Hebrew Union College, I should say.

NS: Exactly. That led me to the Hebrew Union College where I got to dive deep into my own identity and develop it.

JH: I couldn't agree more about your very eloquent illustration of how you have to have a robust and positive sense of yourself before you can engage richly and generously with the world around you. I completely get that and I think most of us would. I would think that there's another dynamic going on, which is the very particular kind of fear that one experiences when you encounter the person who feels oppressed by you. It's a very distinctive thing. We see it in stories left and right in the United States. About white fear of African-Americans, even though it's African-Americans who suffer tremendous threats routinely. And I don't know if that is part of your story or not and I wanna ask if it is. And if it is, what does that look like in Israel with respect to this anxiety that you described about Israeli Jewish students encountering Palestinian students?

NS: I think that the Israeli story is a little more complicated, and that also relates to the democratic crisis that is a little more complicated. Because one of the things that populist leaders do, is that they invent an enemy. And in Israel we have an enemy. Now, certainly, the vast majority of Palestinians and the vast, vast majority of Palestinians who are citizens of Israel are not our enemy. We, a few years ago, issued a report about Palestinian Israelis in the medical industry. Right now, in this moment that I'm speaking to you, there are more Israeli-Palestinian citizens who are working in hospitals saving people's lives, than there ever were Palestinian citizens of Israel since '48 who were involved in terrorist activity.

NS: So it's all about how we look at our co-citizens. But in terms of Palestinians who live in Palestine, there's definitely also a real threat of bombs and rockets, and so that's interesting to ask. But I think that my students didn't perceive themselves as oppressors. I think they perceive themselves as oppressed, my Israeli students. Same for the Palestinians of course. But I think that in Israel, that the answer is even more complicated and it's more complicated because both are true.

JH: Right, right.

[chuckle]

NS: The Israelis are, by far, the most powerful side. I think that the Israeli education system works very hard to disguise that fact from the students. And I think both sides are engaged both in violence and oppression, and not in an equal way but in both sides.

JH: Take us out of this interview with a ray of hope. Something that's happening in Israel or with the IRAC that really has you energized and convinced of a great story.

NS: First of all, I think that we are in a difficult time. But that specifically in Israel, there's so much to do. So much is changing all the time. And it's the people who are there with their bodies like me or with their impact and support, like Jews in North America who can vote in the WTO elections or support organizations in Israel that promote their values. That will make the ultimate difference. We're in an early stage, though. Any impact on the trajectory will have a long-term effect. And I'm very excited by the new partnership between Jews and Arabs in Israel. I think we're now at a point where if we're looking at the leadership of the Arab community and looking at the moderate leadership of the center, that people are leaning towards each other more. And I have great faith that that is the only way out of the democratic crisis and out of the long-term right wing governments that we've had to endure. And I'm very inspired by the leadership that can do that, that can overcome long and painful histories and look at the future.

JH: Well, Rabbi Noa Sattath, thank you for the partnership and your amazing work. It was really a pleasure to speak with you and to learn from you. And I look forward to future conversations.

NS: Thank you. Thank you for the work that you do.

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JH: You've been listening to the College Commons podcast, produced and edited by Jennifer Howd and brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. For this URJ biannual series, special thanks to Mark Pelavin, the URJ Chief Program Officer and Biennial Director, and Liz Grumbacher, Director of North American events. We hope you've enjoyed this episode and please join us again at collegecommons.huc.edu.

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