The College Commons Podcast

Adam Ferziger: A Patchwork of Jews

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Introduction: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holop, your host.

Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and the special series on the David Ellenson Conference with our colleague, Adam Ferziger. Adam s Ferziger is an historian of religion, and he holds the Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch chair in the Israel and Golda Koschitzky department of Jewish history and contemporary Jewry at Bar Ilan University in Israel. He researches Jewish intellectual, social, and spiritual responses to modern and contemporary life. His book, Beyond Sectarianism, won a national Jewish book award, and his newest work, Agents of Change, American Jews and the Transformation of Israeli Judaism, was published in July of twenty twenty five by NYU Press and will form part of our conversation today. Adam Furziger, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Adam Ferziger: Thank you for inviting me.

Joshua Holo: I had the pleasure of hearing and meeting you at the recent Ellenson conference, which forms this special series in our podcast. And in your contribution both to the conference and to the book titled Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity, both of which were in honor of David Ellenson, you raised a philosophical problem. And the problem is this. We as people and as societies need the other, because only by pushing up against the other do we understand the contours of ourselves. In religious terms, for example, it takes heresy to perceive orthodoxy. I want to draw you out a bit, not only about the reality of this phenomenon, but parse out, if you would, the risks and the rewards inherent in this aspect of the human condition.

Adam Ferziger: Wow. That's that's a wonderful question that's never been asked to me in in a sort of academic context, and I I appreciate the opportunity to think about it with you,

Josh. We all have that tendency, and this is what sociologists of of deviance, Durkheim, and people who have followed in his path have focused on, to look at at people who are different than us and and to self define through who we are not. It's really a natural condition. And so often, it's done in a way where we're outcasting, and that's starting with the danger, which is to look at people of different religions, of different genders, of different skin colors, of different countries, of different abilities or disabilities as being who we are not and looking at them pejoratively, objectifying them in so many ways, even criminalizing them. But acknowledging difference doesn't necessarily mean outcasting, ostracizing, expressing prejudice. Acknowledging that there are people who are different than us, that we can learn from them, and that we can develop ourselves, and we can integrate appreciations for elements that may not be natural to us or to our social space or intellectual space, and to expand it to get out of our echo chambers can be extremely nourishing when it's done in that sort of useful way. Does that get us a little bit further, Joshua?

Joshua Holo: It does. It does. And it leads me to your loving and eloquent description of your encounter and friendship with David Ellenson. And one of the things you pointed out is that that relationship really changed you. What did David Ellenson's approach, model, or thinking do for you that so affected you so profoundly?

Adam Ferziger: David's impact and who he was was was was so expansive that anything I'm going to say is really limiting. But with that in mind, I would point to two levels. So one is intellectually. David and I both studied at different stages with a very, very important and profound Jewish historian by the name of Jacob Katz, who was a Hungarian born, German educated, Israeli professor at the Hebrew University, and he was one of the people who, following his own teachers, introduced the value of sociology as a tool in studying historical events, not necessarily from the recent past, but even from a hundred, two hundred, three hundred years, or even longer ago. But David took it further in that he used those sociological tools in in really interesting ways. Some of them I I referred to just a minute ago in terms of sociology of deviance, and he he was very on top of the most cutting edge literature in the field. And he demonstrated how useful and how enlightening it could be for studying rabbinic texts, for studying historical episodes where there were some religious conflict, where there were issues of how do Jews navigate the modern, condition. And and that was inspiring for me intellectually, and and and and I said, I wanna build on that. And it caused me to seek out David and to have our initial conversations with him to read everything that he wrote. He started out really as, a model and a mentor intellectually. The next step was he became a chevruta, a study partner, somebody that we would share our works with. So we really became friends. It's really hard for me to say he was a Boston Celtics fan, and I am a diehard Knicks fan. And, you know, those are really oppositional. And

yet, despite that othering of David, we were able to overcome those differences, and neither Bill Russell or Walt Frazier or Willis Reed could get in our way.

Joshua Holo: Well, for what it's worth, I'm an Angeleno and a Lakers fan, and so if ever we can agree that David was dead wrong. I wanna draw you out very briefly to just articulate from the intellectual perspective a beautiful encapsulation of what I would like to call David's intellectual spirit in how he managed what you call the difference between obedience and allegiance?

Adam Ferziger: Like I said, I've been reading David and talking to David and learning from David, but this was a a tragic opportunity to really think about him in terms of his broader perspective, particularly as as it applied to seeming paradox that arguably the most prominent reform figure in maybe in the world, but certainly in in in North America in the twenty first century spent not all of his in intellectual energies, but a really high percentage of it studying Orthodox Judaism, and not only Orthodox Judaism, but the the intricacies of the halakhah of Jewish law, and not like classical reform thinkers looking back at the Talmud, but but rather looking at rabbis who were part of the the modern condition or as it emerged in different stages and and how they dealt with these things. And these are people who, unlike reformed Judaism and unlike David personally, felt very much adherence to the intricacies of Jewish law. They debated about what was the law and how evolutionary it could be in certain spaces and how to apply it. But David didn't see things that way. He did have principles. I wanna make that clear. And when those principles were challenged, he stood very strong on them, and that's important to say about David. But the distinction that I felt was accurate was that you can differentiate between allegiance and obedience or loyalty and obedience. So the obedience part is clear as we will do and we will listen. That's that's how the Bible describes it, that the first thing that people of Israel do in relation to the Sinaitic revelation in the biblical narrative is that they accept it. And then they say, now explain it to us, or we can study depending on which exegetical tradition we take. So that's obedience. But David, I suggested, was a citizen of the Halakhah. He was a legion to it. It was something that for him was absolutely not only historically part of Judaism, but relevant to every Jew who took their Judaism seriously, to study, to understand, and to draw values, to draw perspectives, to think about those tensions in a rigorous manner. Esau gaining the skills, whether it be Hebrew, Aramaic, the different types of genres of of Halakhic literature. He saw that as critical not to limit the interpretations of others, but as much as possible to try to learn the text itself in what we consider to be its original form. So I think that that type of citizenship of the Halakhah, that allegiance to it as foundational to what it means to be a Jew regardless of whether one is fully obedient in an orthodox fashion or in a premodern fashion, is something that I identified within this tremendous focus that David had on halacha. And, of course, part of that is a mimetic piece, which comes from the fact that he grew up in a community where the Halacha was foundational.

But like many communities of Orthodox Jews in the mid twentieth century, that doesn't mean the majority of the people who attended the Orthodox synagogue were fully obedient, but they saw that as at the foundation, as part of the the building blocks of who they were.

Joshua Holo: Let's move to your new book called Agents of Change. Fundamentally, as I understand the book, you argue that prior to the influx of many American Orthodox Jews to Israel in a crescendo from the sixties to the eighties roughly, the conservative ultra Orthodox, in which you call redemptive Cook camps, meaning after Abraham Isaac Cook, that these two groups held sway over religious matters in Israel. Before we get into the influence of the Americans, tease out, if you would, these two camps, ultra orthodox on the one hand and the, quote, unquote, redemptive Cook camps on the other.

Adam Ferziger: I will say just to be accurate that there were people who were, I would say, more synthetic and more integrative of modernity, who were part of the fabric of Israeli or pre state and early state culture, people who emanated from Germany who actually saw themselves as proteges of Samson Raphael Hirsch. And a lot of them were associated with the religious kibbutz movement, which actually combines socialism with an orthodox religious commitment. But by the sixties, that group had been sort of surpassed on one hand by the Cook School, which was the students of Rabbi Cook's son, Smee Huda Cook, and his yeshiva and surroundings who really focused on the state of Israel as the Atchate de Gula, as the beginning of the redemption, and saw the settlement expansion of society and the military in messianic or somewhat proto messianic terms. Now in parallel to them, the Haredi, the, traditionalist orthodox groups, which were depleted terribly, many of them, just hundreds and thousands of millions were murdered in the Holocaust, and their first level of existence in in the modern state of Israel and in parallel in the United States was really just survival and trying to find a space for themselves and create a a a meaningful move further. But but by the sixties, they really had done that well, and they were beginning to have institutions, have political power, and to also impact society through the fact that many, many of the teachers in a lot of the religious Zionists, kind of modern orthodox Israeli institutions were actually from the Haredi traditionalist camp.

Joshua Holo: So let's get to your thesis. What did the American Orthodox bring with them to Israel?

Adam Ferziger: When I came to Israel with my wife, Naomi in nineteen eighty seven, we saw an Israeli, religious landscape. It was very different than the one that we had been nurtured in in the United States. We both grew up in so called modern orthodox homes. In

the United States, we we were encouraged to be committed to Judaism together with a great appreciation for broader society and its gifts and for humanism, for intellectual development, academic achievement, contributing to the world, interacting with the broader world, what each one the cross rectification that takes place when people engage with each other in positive ways. We grew up in in the golden age in America where antisemitism was really on the back burner, and we really felt a lot of freedom, and we felt that we could really go anywhere. That was how we grew up. And the persona in the Orthodox community who was most influential was Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who himself had a doctorate from the University of Berlin and wrote about the non Orthodox Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen. And when we got to Israel, we saw a society that was very ideological and very pioneering in ways, which was tremendously inspiring, and I don't wanna be derogatory. It was really inspiring to see people who were dedicated, who really saw their goal is to creating a a new Jewish society after so many thousand years, and were very much involved, at least the religious Zionists, in broader society. Society, but intellectually and, certainly when it came to, issues of exposure to various disciplines, the critical play of academia, certainly when it came to issues of feminism, the role of women in Jewish life, and many more areas, those those things were kind of foreign in the Israeli landscape. And what we did see was a much more strict religious Zionist orthodoxy which was emerging with a a strong strong focus on punctiliousness in Jewish law, something which really continued to evolve after we arrived as well. What was interesting to me, and this is what was sort of the the the backdrop from from my book, is that somewhere around the early twenty first century, the two thousands, we start to note a much stronger presence of voices that had a lot more similarity to the ones we had been nurtured upon in America. They weren't exactly the same, but they were clearly in conversation with the solovatric approach, with the world that we had grown up in. And we have seen in the last twenty five years that on a religious level and a religious intellectual level, that those voices have grown stronger and have gained a lot of traction within Israeli society. Now I wanna be clear. I'm not talking about the political realm. The question that I ask in my book is, how did this happen? What happened that facilitated from a more monolithic religious culture, the emergence of a more diverse and cacophonious and daring, religious culture that manifested in in a whole bunch of areas.

Joshua Holo: Is it fair to say that effectively, what you're describing is at least one stream of indirect influence on Israeli orthodoxy from American: Reform Judaism?

Adam Ferziger: I I I would say that, that's a very, very complicated question, but, certainly, everyone's reacting to each other. I will say, though, with great respect, the impact of the American nonorthodox denominations on Israeli society is minimal. There are other non orthodox framings that have been more influential or beginning to be more influential, but the denominational framework that was so appropriate to Protestant America really didn't

fit into the rubric of of of Israeli society. Getting back to the Orthodox though, I just want to, tease out for a second the nuance that I tried to argue in my book, which is not that Israelis, all of a sudden, the two in the two thousands and twenty first century, saw the light and they said, oh, America is really the land of all the enlightened Judaism. Let's let's just adopt it lock, stock, and barrel. What I argue in in my book is that, actually, what happened was that these American figures, male and female, rabbis and scholars who had been studied under Soloveitchik and some of his proteges came to America in the sixties, seventies, eighties. And over time, they did attract small cadres of Israeli students. And these Israeli students in internalized their ideas, but then they recalibrated them. They were Israeli. They spoke a different language. Their cultural, framings were different. And the reason why these themes have begun to gain more prominence in Israeli society and not to dominate, but to gain more prominence and to be heard more and to have more resonance is because the Israeli students knew or implicitly restated things or translated them into Israeli religion. And what we're seeing now is not a copy of American modern orthodoxy. It's what I call in the book ISMO, Israeli Moderate Orthodoxy, which is related but different than American Modern Orthodoxy, and it is very much a product of this interesting interaction between the teachers and the Israeli students.

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Joshua Holo: In the spirit of a sociological conversation separate from the American influence in Israeli orthodoxy that you ultimately focus on. Uncover for us the ways in which these earlier forms of traditionalism, which you call the ultra orthodox and Cook camps, contained liberal cross currents within themselves. I'm thinking, for example, of the fact that in its origins, Shas, the very conservative religious Sephardi party, held a very moderate position on Palestinian policy in Israel, for example. And, admittedly, Shas comes later in your timeline, but I think they represent something important. And Abraham Isaac Cook's own, I would call it, tenderness on a human level toward non Orthodox Jews.

Adam Ferziger: You know, Shas is an interesting space. Once it became a political party, it had to appeal to its constituencies almost uniformly right of center politically. So that's really not a point of contention that they would want to sort of deal with because they're interested in cultivating that constituency. Rav Ovadiy Yosef, the former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, if you read his halachic writings, he was a very tolerant man, really sought

to, give people the benefit of the doubt and not to, look down on people who were less committed than he was. That part of his legacy still has impact on the Balchuva movement within the Sephardic group, the repentance movement. Jews from the from the east, from Asia and Africa tend to be less divisive from a family perspective. Anyone shows up in synagogue however they wanna be dressed. Anyone comes to the Shabbat table and in any form, whereas, unfortunately, people who have their origins in Central and Western Europe, Ashkenazi Jewry, the denominational labels have sort of caused a lot of separation, and a lot of people do not feel that they have a place in any synagogue because of those labels. In terms of Rabbi Cook, there's a book that I would recommend. My friend and colleague, Mark Shapiro from University of Scranton, just wrote a new book about Rabbi Cook. And, really, what he emphasized was how, revolutionary Rabbi Cook was in terms of his ideas, in how many areas he was willing to sort of appreciate heresy, appreciate diverse voices, appreciate types of historical and academic perspectives. The thing about any great theologian is that there will be multiple interpreters, and the the whole question is which interpreters, become dominant and what they decide to emphasize that. We have that throughout history and certainly the case with Cook. It's the case with Soledadriq. It's the case with many such figures. And, the parts of Cook that have gained more prominence within the segment that I described previously, the Qasrath Cook camp, is more focused on the redemptive elements and the elements of how state of Israel must be moving towards the messianic age and also some of his own asceticism and his strictness. It's not uniform. There's a rabbi teacher, Ari Schwat, who I know very well, who's published some really interesting things about diverse aspects of Cook. But for the most part, what kids learn in school or in youth movements is the part that I just mentioned. So, yeah, I would say, though, people who are in that ismo camp that I describe in my book are also influenced by Cook, and they are some of the people who have integrated some of the neo Hasidic aspects of Rav Kook into their joyful post Karibach type of prayers or rejoicing into some of their intellectual endeavors, into their spirituality. So Cook is such an influential figure that, yes, people pick and choose, and people draw on on his richness in in in different ways. Having said that, Cook alone, I don't think, would have led to the emergence of these new voices that I describe. I think there there need to be an influx of some really influential teachers and institutions which could nurture students because education and training of scholars and lay leaders and religious leaders and political leaders and academic leaders. Those are the places in confluence with social evolutions where you see changes taking place. So education is so key. That's something David Ellenson understood. He was committed to it. And, these figures, we had a different worldview than David. Nonetheless, certainly, shared a lot in common with him in terms of focusing on that aspect of the meaning of scholarship and and education.

Joshua Holo: So spare a word for us, if you would, about the application and relevance of your research for those of us who may not be so thoroughly living in that world all the time.

Adam Ferziger: So the last chapter of the book, I asked the question, okay. This is a nice academic story, and it's interesting history. Is it relevant? Well, it's always relevant because Israeli society is something that Jews all over the world are fascinated with, and it's important to understand Israeli society not only through the political lens. And there could be very strong differences on the political level, but Israeli society is not just about politics. It's not just about policies. I'm not denying their importance, but it's not the whole story. And people take Israel seriously, and I wanna argue in following the work of Yossi Shane who wrote a very important book called the Israeli century, Ne'ai Israelite, that whether people are sympathetic, are pro, are activist for or against, after seventy five years of sovereignty, Israel is central to every Jew in the world. From the naturae karta, deny Israel's right to exist within Hasidic Jews, to the most post Zionist or cultural, Jews or humanist Jews who see Israel in very pejorative ways, specifically since October seventh. It's just a fact on the ground. So how do we engage with Israel? So I think part of what my book is trying to do is just to facilitate a richer understanding, engagement, and appreciation for the complexity of the society. But there's another aspect, which is that, from my perspective at least, I think it's really critical that Jews living throughout the world and certainly in the largest concentration of Jews outside of Israel in North America impact Israel and do what they can to help Israel grow, help this greatest art book experiment do better. And so one thing you get out of this story is you see people who actually did that. You see people who grew up in America who, not immediately, but over time, their impact was felt. And I think that's critical especially to younger people who are thinking about their life choices or Jewish educators, rabbis, anyone who's thinking I could only have impact maybe on the people who, I grew up with or were sort of my cultural milieu. And, actually, these people, no. They took a jump, and they sacrificed in the short term. In the long term, I think their impact was great. The final aspect, and I think this is so important, is that the reform movement in Israel is certainly evolving in interesting ways as is the conservative movement. Having said that, they are really pretty boutique within Israeli society. And as the secular scholar, Avineri, you know, said years ago, you know, the the synagogue that I do not attend is the Orthodox synagogue. So people self identify as just Israeli today. They don't identify as orthodox or foreign conservative, but it's in the context of Orthodox. So finding people to create alliances with who may be different than me in terms of being Orthodox, but they're moderate Orthodox and who are deeply entrenched within Israeli society, who are impactful in Israeli society. I think these are alliances which are positive for everybody. I'll just tell one story that, brings a lot of these things together. So there's a a a I guess I would call him an Israeli moderate orthodox rabbi by the name of, Mishael Zion, whose father was one of the founders of the Hartman Institute, and he has been affiliated with it. And he's rabbi of a of a synagogue in Arnonah in, in West Jerusalem, not far from where I live in Baca. And he was invited to Tel Aviv to a television studio for an interview on some issue a little bit more than a year ago. He's an open minded guy. He wears a kippah. He wears a yarmulke. And, the television persona that they met there couldn't sort of figure him out at first and said, you know, what kind of Jew are you? What Michelle Elyseon said was, you heard about this tragic story about this young man, Hirsch

Poland Goldberg, who was killed in captivity by the Hamas, murdered in cold blood. His mother Rachel Goldberg, who's been spoken out very strongly in a very ethical way for the hostages, people who are very active in the Israeli moderate orthodox communities. Without saying that word, he said, Hirsch Goldberg's family, I'm a Jew like them. And what Michel Sillon wrote in his article is that this television producer knew immediately what he was talking about. That's a very sad story that only through the terrible tragedy of the hostages and this terrible war with Hamas that he sort of got that exposure. But the point is that these people are impacting Israeli society, and a secular Israeli television producer in Tel Aviv could say, yeah. Yeah. I get it. I know those Jews are there, and they're important to our society and and and then not to be threatened by them. So I think that that really encapsulates a lot of things going on, but certainly the fact that this Israeli moderate orthodoxy is a big part of our society, not the dominant, but a big part. And then I think Jews of every type could talk to each other, and this is an address, certainly, for North American Jews to explore in order to strengthen the ties.

Joshua Holo: Take us out of this interview, if you would, with an expression of hope for Israelis and Palestinians on the assumption that their destinies are linked and in the spirit of a burgeoning and evolving spirit of Judaism and Israelism such as you have begun to sketch for us.

Adam Ferziger: I imagine it's come across here already that I'm not going to sugarcoat anything. And here too, it's it's a very challenging time for the most moderate people and the less moderate people. It's a very tough time. The events of October seventh and everything that has evolved since then have not immediately led to voices of political modesty gaining prominence. Having said that, there really is a lot of conversation going on that I see about humanism and about separating people from looking them purely through political lenses. People within religious squares, I'm familiar with them within the Israeli religious spaces, but they exist in the Palestinian spaces as well. One of the agents of change that I highlight in the book is Rabbi Shlomo Steven Ryskin who started the OrTorah in network. And interestingly, he moved from the upper west side of Manhattan to a settlement called Efrat, which has grown in leaps and bounds since he came there in nineteen eighty two, I believe, or eighty one. And for some people, that makes him Crassana Andrade. But, actually, he and his proteges have developed very strong relationships with some of the Muslim religious leaders in their vicinity, and he's created institutes and raised a lot of money for creating dialogue and conversation. I even had a a a graduate student who who worked on this issue. It was really remarkable to see how people who have such different political visions could find common language through humanistic values and through their appreciation for their humility vis a vis God. And it was really eye opening to me and really echoing what I said before. David Ellenson was a model of historian. He dealt with the immediate, but his eye was towards creating leaders and educating people and

believing that over time, those ideals and those values and those tools would have impact. So my optimism comes from the fact that these spaces exist, are expanding, and that over time, more and more people who value the state of Israel, who value Judaism in a variety of ways, and have universal and humanistic values, their voices will continue to grow, and they will play a part in moving forward. Will it happen tomorrow? No. Does that mean that we just give up on it? No way. This experiment is gonna continue to grow, and if we take ownership, it will grow in a better way.

Joshua Holo: Adam Ferziger, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Adam Ferziger: Thank you.

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