The College Commons Podcast

Joshua Leifer: The Jigsaw Puzzle of American Judaism and its Future

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Introduction: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series, a partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations

Joshua Holo: Joshua Leifer is Joshua Leifer is a journalist, editor, and translator. His essays and reporting have appeared widely in international publications, including the New York Times, the New York Review of Books, the Atlantic, the Guardian Haaretz, and elsewhere. A member of the Dissent editorial board, he previously worked as an editor at Jewish Currents, and he is currently pursuing a doctorate at Yale University. His first book, Tablets Shattered, the end of an American Jewish century and the future of Jewish life, which came out from Dutton in twenty twenty four, won a national Jewish book award. Joshua Leifer, welcome to the College Commons podcast, and thank you for joining us.

Joshua Leifer: Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor to be on the podcast.

Joshua Holo: Congratulations on your award for tablet shattered. And I wonder if you would kick off the interview just by articulating the heart of your claim.

Joshua Leifer: The basic argument of the book is that there was this thing called an American Jewish consensus and that it took shape largely in the postwar years and that it rested on three pillars. One pillar was Americanism, which was a kind of American Jewish exceptionalism, the belief that America was an exceptionally good country and that its goodness was confirmed by the experience of Jews there. The second pillar was Zionism. And I don't actually mean the complicated question. One states two states that everyone's debating right now, but actually the idea that Israel is an encapsulation of Jewish values and that it's a a moral exemplar on the world stage or kind of an an inspiration of sorts. And the third pillar was liberalism. By liberalism, I don't mean political liberalism. And this is the pillar that I've gotten the most criticism of as I've talked about the book in part of different audiences, but I actually mean religious liberalism. And as I understand it,

religious liberalism itself is composed of three parts. It's the unit of religious practice is the individual rather than say the community. It's voluntarist, rather than being oriented around obligation. And at its best, it's pluralist, but at its worst, it can become a kind of relativism where it's very hard for people, for example, to tell their children why it's important for them to be Jewish rather than all the other kinds of ways of life that exist on the marketplace of experience in the in America. And my contention in the book is that these pillars, which took shape in the post war period, so after the end of World War two, consolidated over the second half of the twentieth century and then began to crumble. And I think were crumbling rather spectacularly when I completed the book, which was two weeks before October seventh, roughly, and have continued to disintegrate in the two years since.

Joshua Holo: So you name these three pillars of the Jewish American experience of the twentieth century, and you add only a bit as kind of an appendix, the Holocaust. Is that because you see the Holocaust as filtered in among the other three, or rather simply that it rates less prominently in your schematic?

Joshua Leifer: I call in the book the Holocaust the mortar that keeps together these different pillars. And what I mean by that is that part of why America appears so exceptionally good to American Jews over the course of the twentieth century is that they're juxtaposing it well first to the places where they're coming from before that generally before the Holocaust because most American Jews come to the United States in the period of time between eighteen eighty and nineteen twenty four when the immigration restrictions are implemented. And then after the Holocaust, America appears even more, a beneficent vis a vis, you know, Europe in the wake of the catastrophe there. And then also, I mean, almost immediately going forward into the fifties, the Soviet Union where the other large chunk of Jews are left also in a kind of state of oppression. And so that's the way the Holocaust bolsters Americanism. Naturally, the Holocaust also bolsters the pillar of Zionism because Israel, you know, in kind of colloquial American conversation becomes to be thought of as maybe American Jews and certain insurance policy slash a kind of even a form of compensation for the the tragedy. I don't know if religious liberalism per se is related to the Holocaust except for the sense that I think that the way that the Holocaust and Nazism comes to be remembered by Americans and American Jews is as an example of how totalitarian ideology, the analysis of which is applied to the Soviet Union is uniquely inhospitable to Jews. And so a liberal, open, pluralist society comes to be understood as the kind of society in which Jews flourish the most. I would have long conversations with my editor, Mayazeev, about the place of the Holocaust in the book in part because actually, I think the place of the Holocaust in American Jewish identity and more broadly in, let's say, the American political imagination is undergoing a really big change, and has been, I think, over the course of, say, the last two decades.

Joshua Holo: Would you agree that the Holocaust contributes to liberalism insofar as you have made pluralism a constituent component of liberalism insofar as the holocaust encourages us to hedge our bets in terms of vulnerability, and the distribution of vulnerability amongst many minorities benefits any one of those minorities. And so it behooves us in the wake of the holocaust to invest in pluralism, which correlates to liberalism because of the holocaust in that way.

Joshua Leifer: Yeah. I mean, I think that is certainly the way American Jews understand the holocaust in its immediate aftermath. And I think that this might be a little controversial to say in the historiographical literature. I think it's true, which is that the strategy that American Jews took in the nineteen fifties and into the mid sixties as participants in the civil rights movement reflected precisely that understanding of liberalism. That was informed by the catastrophic memory and recent experience of Jews in the holocaust. In the nineteen seventies, there is something that I call in the book an inward turn where a new form of Holocaust memory comes to, if not challenge, compete with this other memory. And this has become a banal slogan in our time, but when never again is first kind of promulgated in the late nineteen sixties, it's a militant cry, and it's not a cry for let's maintain the liberal order because a multiethnic democracy where no one group is privileged over the other is the best kind of one where Jews flourish. It's it's actually that Jews are in a fight for recognition against other minorities and need to compete against them. And I think that American Jewish organizations in the last quarter of the twentieth century and onward kind of vacillate between these two interpretations of what is the political lesson of the Holocaust for American Jews.

Joshua Holo: Stephen Winbuhler, my colleague at the Ebony College and a Jewish sociologist, has also been thinking about the twentieth century as a Jewish century, and he has some similar ideas about the fracturing of that model that you raise as well. But he also points to the pretty persistent mapping of religious liberalism onto political liberalism, even though you're for the sake of exposition distinguishing between them. And he points out that even in this last election, Trump won about thirty two, I think, percent of the Jewish vote, which puts this election squarely within the normal range of the statistical Jewish commitment to the Democratic Party in the post war years if you treat the ninety plus percent support of Jews for FDR as breaking the curve. If you start with Truman, these numbers of consistent Jewish liberalism being both internal Jewish and external, meaning the Democratic Party. Those two things really are very correlated and very consistent even into this second quarter of the twenty first century.

Joshua Leifer: I agree with that. I think this is where the books, not just argumentative component, but also it's, let's say normative component comes in. The book contains a

somewhat engaged and also, I would say internal, because I understand myself in some ways as also a religious liberal, a critique of religious liberalism that says something like political liberalism is indispensable to Jewish flourishing, the neutrality of the state, non establishment, all of this is absolutely essential to Jewish flourishing. However, there are limits to religious liberalism internal in the community. And I think that some of those limits have become more acute over time. And since to the extent that there's a critique of religious liberalism in the book, it's an engagement or an attempt to understand how have those limits come to be and, you know, how are they affecting Jewish life in the present. I've spent a lot of time debating, thinking with people about the the Jewish vote. And I think we need to understand it better before making a summary judgment for lots of reasons, mainly because I think that and this is also related to the central paradox of writing about American Jews, which is that I think that if you were to poll people who interface regularly with say communal institutions or Jewish institutional life, the political breakdown is probably less overwhelmingly liberal than it is in the general population. And I think the discrepancy between those populations is also having a very significant impact on American Jewish politics. I mean, what has become of the anti defamation league is probably the most spectacular example of this, but there are, of course, lots of others.

Joshua Holo: I'd like to ask you to imagine a Venn diagram with two circles, anti Zionism in one and antisemitism in the other. And I'm inviting you to feel free to resist this thought experiment's reductiveness, but nevertheless to indulge me at the outset. So first, define each term as you feel is most useful. And second, tell us what percentage of these two circles overlap in the Venn diagram.

Joshua Leifer: I define anti Zionism as the rejection of the right of Jews to collective self determination. Antisemitism is many things. One of which, and this is where there is overlap, is the denial of Jews as a rights bearing collective. Anti Semitism is also many other things. It's a fantasy of, exorbitant Jewish power. It's a conspiracy of Jewish malevolence. And then, of course, also kind of racial inferiority that we see with Nazism. But actually, in the long duration of anti Semitism, I think the biological racism that culminates in Nazism is spectacularly heinous and anomalous perhaps in its articulation. But the overlap of anti Semitism and anti Zionism is is precisely in its denial of Jews as a rights bearing collective.

Joshua Holo: And therein, you see the overlap?

Joshua Leifer: Yes.

Joshua Holo: Allow me to push back on your notion of the racial definition of Jews per Nazi antisemitism as anomalous. I think if you remove the specific use of the word race to refer to the kind of nineteenth and twentieth century pseudosciences, but you expand the notion of race to mean a radically determinative essentialism as applied to a given group, an inescapable determinism, I think you'll find that it, in fact, is a pretty solid component of traditional anti Judaism going back centuries, wherein people felt that no matter one's profession of faith, if one was a Jew, one was somehow irredeemable.

Joshua Leifer: Right. I agree. I mean, I should also say that, you know, of course, this Venn diagram are there is overlap, but there are also significant distinctiveness. And I think there are people who call themselves anti Zionist who don't fall into the anti Semitic part of the Venn diagram. And I think part of the problem, not the only or certainly not the biggest of our current moment, is a a lack of precision about what people mean when they use these terms.

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Joshua Holo: In your introduction, you make a really evocative statement. You write referring to your youth. We were an outpost of Israel in New Jersey's northwest Bergen County. Identification with the state of Israel was total, even if it wasn't Israel, frozen in time, roughly the nineteen seventies, the years of our Israeli teachers' childhoods. I am one of those Israeli teachers' generation, meaning I grew up in the seventies in the United States, And I completely identify with your experience and the experience you refer to in the nineteen seventies, and I still strongly identify warmly with Israel for all her her flaws. Nevertheless, would you agree that the problem we face now is not that the soft focus memory of Israel is out of date or frozen in time, as you say, but rather that the memory was a baudelarization at best in the first place. That is the problem is not strictly speaking the problem of Israel, but rather the problem of educating about it.

Joshua Leifer: I would agree with that one hundred percent. I made life choices and been back and forth and never was able to quite escape the upbringing that I had for whatever it's worth. But I agree that there is a problem in education. One of the things that I I've often found myself telling Jewish audiences as I've spoken about the book is that American Jews

by and large are people who value inquisitiveness, intellectualism, rigor. Don't look kindly upon ignorance or misinformedness, but there's always been a kind of strange paradox, which is that when it comes to their Jewishness and especially to Israel, American Jews have, I think, and this is the crew one of the critiques that the book makes, opted not to think so hard about it. And I think that that has left the community in a very bad place. Not only because of the moral challenges of being related to a country that is flawed like many countries, but also because it left the community basically defenseless, and it certainly its children's incapable of having a serious conversation about it in a way that they wouldn't accept not being able to have a serious conversation about most other things in their lives. I think this is true of theology as well, although that's, like, less of a popular thing to harp on.

Joshua Holo: And less and less of a vulnerability these days as well.

Joshua Leifer: Yes. Yes. It's less of vulnerability. But, certainly, the not only mythologization of Israel, but, basically, it's a removal from serious education, history, learning, rigor, etcetera, I think has been a huge disadvantage to generations of American Jews.

Joshua Holo: I'd like to follow this line of inquiry and ask you about something you write almost in passing and certainly matter of factly, characterizing the American Jewish Zionism of your youth as bellicose nationalism. Is it possible that our incapacity to apply the critical lens that you called for just now to Zionism with the same degree of rigor and clarity that we're so willing to apply it in every other aspect of life. Is it possible that that paradox is fundamentally one of goodness, goodwill, earnestness, and incapacity to see oneself as bellicose as opposed to being some kind of cynical project whereby we feel we have to defend our national endeavor at all costs.

Joshua Leifer: I don't think there's very much cynicism at all, But I don't know if I would also say that it's derived solely from earnestness, in the sense that, like, I think that the phenomenon may be psychologically more complex. And I think part of what I mean by that is that, it's it's funny, like, I am thirty one years old, which means that I was an infant when Yitzhak Goebin was assassinated, actually not so far from where I'm talking to you. So I grew up not really knowing in Israel that could be said to have been earnestly pursuing peace that I did grow up with. And this might be the particularities of the school I went to and of conservative Judaism or whatever conservative Judaism was at that time, where like wearing the IDF t shirt was part of the experience. And I don't think that's because people in their hearts thought the IDF was peace seeking. I think there was more to do with it. I think that the reason why that was such an important emblem of say my upbringing had to do with maybe the experiences of Jews, feeling vulnerable in America and in the world.

Certainly, I was a child with the second intifada in the backdrop. And so there was much more grief and pain. Because I was born in nineteen ninety four, I was also a child in the post nine eleven period, which where some kind of parallel processes were happening in America. So it was not an optimistic time and it was not an earnest time. I would say it was an aggrieved time. One that comes out of grief and trauma and woundedness, and so the desire to feel strong and be strong and maybe even exercise strength is part of why the identification with Israel is the way it is or takes the forms that it is. No. I think that's in competition with the vision that you're articulating here too of we believe that this is a good place because we believe that Jews are good. I still encounter people generally older who will say things to me after I, you know, have talked to them about some of the reporting I've done in occupied West Bank that, like, I'm not sure what you're saying is true. They might say to me, but if it is, I can't believe Jews would act that way. Sometimes I think that also American Jews underestimate just how radical a revolution in Jewish, subjectivity, to put it in an academic terms, Zionism is. Having a Jewish army and a sovereign state, these are not things that we had very much experienced with before. And so it has taken time to catch up to that reality.

Joshua Holo: Mark Katz, in his review of Tablet Shattered for the Jewish Book Council, which awards the National Jewish Book Award, summed the book up as a thoughtful critique of the fault lines of American Jewry. I found it a very apt description, and more importantly, one that makes me feel that your book is representative in many important ways of the big Jewish American middle. I think that most Jews see themselves amidst fault lines that require the nuance you bring and, frankly, the ability to dance a bit of a cultural jig, something typical of all diasporic minorities, and I think certainly of Jews. For those reasons, do you think it's fair to say that tablets shattered more than revelatory is representative, especially after October seventh, and in that way is particularly important.

Joshua Leifer: I mean, I I hope so. I hope that what you're saying is true, and I, you know, be very grateful in that way for what you said. I will say that when I started out writing the book, I think I was farther away from the middle that you're describing and and the book details.

Joshua Holo: Which side were you leaning toward before you wrote the book?

Joshua Leifer: I think that I was coming out of a place that wasn't able to sit in the place of being conflicted and not really believed that it was necessary to choose a side on all of the moral issues that the book charts. That in some ways, if I was writing a narrative of a fracture, then there was gonna be one side that that the book was gonna come down on.

And in the end, that's not what happened, partially because I grew and learned through the process of writing and also because world events changed, and I had a responsibility to adapt to those changes. It's been my experience as well talking to audiences over the last roughly eight months that there is a really large segment of Jews. I think probably the majority who have conflicted feelings about a lot of things and also are looking for some kind of political and religious leadership on those issues that they aren't finding as much as they'd like to be. I have been grateful and pleasantly surprised by the reception of the book because I initially was afraid that because it's critical of certain elements of current Israeli policy and it's a critique in a lot of ways of Jewish politics, the second half of the twentieth century, that American Jewish audiences would be not so willing to hear it. And I I have been really heartened. Speaking of things that changed, I think that I had written some of the people in that middle off as less open minded than they actually turned out to be.

Joshua Holo: I'm less surprised than you. And in both your case and mine, I think it's cause for optimism. So thank you for giving voice to that, even though we have a lot of work to provide that spiritual, communal, and political leadership to chart the path, given the fractures you described. One theme that you touch on that I would like to investigate as a possible direction for that kind of leadership is communitarianism. I think you offer occasionally direct, often oblique critiques of a certain kind of unbridled individualism, both in American society and in Jewish American society. So I wonder, is it possible that the great lesson that Judaism itself as a civilization might offer American society today is precisely that of communitarianism, by which I mean the refusal to validate the untempered radical individualism that undercuts all meaning making and social growth in favor of communal obligation that doesn't swing to the extremes of collectivism.

Joshua Leifer: One hundred percent. I am a left liberal communitarian. And because the book was written for a wide audience, I didn't hash out as much as maybe I would have liked to the normative implications of what that stance is. But I think the way you put it is exactly the way that I would put it. I think one of the great advantages of of communitarianism is that I think it gives the best and also the most real and also because it's the most real, the most best understanding of how human beings locate themselves in the world as then related to the past, related to others, to community, to family, to nation, and to world, and that these relationships entail actually binding obligations. And that in observing those obligations, we are able to live a better life. And that I think is you find throughout the traditional sources of Judaism. Now Judaism is also a polyvocal tradition. So there are lots of tendencies that militate against all those nice things. But speaking of of rabbis and religious leaders, I had a conversation early when I was writing the book with the Hillel Rabbi at Yale at the time, Rabbi Jason Rubinstein, he's now the Rabbi at at Harvard Hillel. And we were talking about a book by he's a Catholic around the communitarian, literature named, Alasdair MacIntyre who has a very useful definition of of

tradition as a conversation that makes, moral judgment possible. And MacIntyre in his book After Virtue basically argues that the West tradition of moral coherence fell apart. And then rabbi Jason, as I as I call him, said to me, but it actually struck me that Judaism that conversation has remained intact. And I think that's something that's absolutely true and felt much clearer to me by the end of the process that I went through working on the book.

Joshua Holo: I often think that Judaism offers a model for moral negotiation without moral relativism or nihilism, because we have a core which is more or less axiomatic and non negotiable, but most of the square footage covered by the concentric circles outgoing of the moral conversation are negotiable in Judaism, and that suits the pluralist conversation for shared purpose without the extremes of nihilism or dogmatism.

Joshua Leifer: Right. I agree. I mean, one of the things that I write about in the book is that to the extent that the book is a critique of religious liberals and all that also contains a critique of religious fundamentalism. Although people have not talked about that part as much as I I wish they had. I think that there's been a kind of tacit cooperation or collaboration between, say, people who reject the idea of this normative core and in the name and theory of inclusion, and then also people, let's say, on the religious right or on the dogmas or fundamentalist side who say that the Jewish tradition is incompatible with inclusion. And so you end up with this kind of strange dialectic where the traditionalists say, you can't have inclusion with tradition and the kind of radical maybe non foundationalist view says, see, the tradition is inherently exclusionary in all these ways. It's misogynistic, it's homophobic, etcetera. And we have to get rid of the concept of obligation with it if we wanna have any relationship to it. And I think that, like, those polls have both been bad for Judaism as such, and there's a lot more work to be done in negotiating between inclusion and pluralism on the one hand and normativity and obligation on the other.

Joshua Holo: I agree as well. And I think you walk us through the case of LGBTQ rights and the Jewish religious sensibility in great depth and really fascinating and enlightening detail. You point out, by the way, that some of the greatest advocates for the inclusion model that you just cited, like, Rabbi Brad Artem, for example, are the personal promotes a sense that the inclusion side of the spectrum is not Jewish in its core, but rather just circumstantial in the prevailing culture of American demography and and life. I wanna ask you about what I think is the genius of diaspora, which is rather than deny the fact that, let's say, LGBTQ rights, that that is an external source of inspiration to Judaism rather than an internal one. The genius of the diasporic experience in any civilization is such that we're forced to internalize and make organic rather than pretend that these things were organic, original, certain external values that mutually enrich the minority and the majority. And it seems

like something that the Jewish experience, by virtue of being perhaps one of, if not the diasporic civilization par excellence, might also be able to communicate and illustrate.

Joshua Leifer: Yeah. I think that's true. I mean, certainly, I think the way that you have put it is the intellectually honest way to understand the relationship between the the challenge of inclusion and the resources of tradition. And for this reason, the work of Rabbi Stephen Greenberg takes up a pivotal point in the chapter that it does because he and his book on homosexuality and the sources of Judaism is, I think, one of the most profound investigations of the nature of this problem. I also think you're totally spot on that the ability to have this kind of double vision is a product of diaspora and that part of being Jewish, now this is maybe arguable, I think that it's true for ninety percent of the cases. Part of being Jewish is part of negotiating between two different kinds of societies, between a Jewish society and a non Jewish society. That's where part of a large segment of where we get the Talmud from is from the negotiation between those different things. And that dialectic, so to speak, has has powered Judaism through the ages and probably is the reason why it still survives. Which is to say that being able to hold on to that normative and core and to the sources and to the languages of the tradition and being able to make certain kinds of, let's say, paradigmatic moral leaps in keeping with the civilization and the times. We see it born out in the sources and in the history, so we know that it's happened.

Joshua Holo: Indeed, the main contention of reform Judaism is not that it itself is authentic, but rather that orthodoxy is also reform.

Joshua Leifer: As we've talked about, I mean, the book has both both critiques of of a certain kind of religious fundamentalism or or anti pluralism and also a kind of religious anti foundationalism or relativism. And one of the things that I've wanted to say to people who are criticizing me from both directions is that I'm actually arguing that both are modern, you know? Yeah. Like, it isn't true to say that the tradition has always been x y z progressive incompatible with progressive causes. And it's also true that the way that, say, ultraorthodox communities look today is not the way that they looked even seventy years ago.

Joshua Holo: Okay. So let's wrap up this interview by you sharing with us What surprised you? What delighted you? What troubled you in the course of writing this book?

Joshua Leifer: So I set out to write the book in part to rebut some of the, let's say, professional Jewish prognosticators of doom who dominate the intercommunal discourse,

who certainly dominated it when I was like a teenager. I'll get to the net to the doom in a sec, but what I think surprised me in a good way is actually just how many American Jews still wanna be Jews and care about being Jews. I mean, if I were to say this in Ross's sociological terms, if you look at them and when American Jews came over and you compare them, say, to Polish Americans or Italian Americans or, I don't know, Ukrainian Americans who came over at the turn of the twentieth century, American Jews are a lot more Jewish than those people are Ukrainian or Polish or Italian today. In a really striking way, and in a way that I think the doom and gloomers really discount and aren't interested in enough. I think it's very interesting, but that's the case. And I think we have to understand why and how and and what counts for the continuing activity of American Jews as Jews, kind of despite all the sociological odds. So that's the that's the positive side. On the negative side, I wasn't able to write the kind of rah rah partisan in defense of your average Jewish person's practice book that I maybe set out to write in part because I think by nature I'm a critic, and I think that that was not the kind of book I was going to write anyway. But also because, and this ties back to what we talked about earlier in the conversation, I I I I was demoralized by a lack of serious thinking about why Jews do what they do. In other words, a lack of self reflection, of self critique, of asking those hard questions, and really trying to think what does being Jewish right now obligate to me? How do I want Judaism to look in the future for say, my children or grandchildren? I think that those conversations are happening, of course, but they're not happening with the kind of intentionality, depth, or leadership that they really should be. You know, part of the reason why the book contains snippets of memoir that it does is that I initially was going to rely on other people to kind of tell certain parts of the stories. And it was hard to get people to reflect about certain elements of why they do what they do, what their hopes are for their endeavors. And so I kind of had to step in to narrativize it for them. Maybe that was overstepping, but I think it was my authorial prerogative. And I do worry about a kind of complacency about the meaning of Judaism and its content among American Jews that I think could jeopardize its vitality in the future.

Joshua Holo: Well, Josh Leifer, thank you for tablets shattered and its effort to discuss seriously these things and give us tools to get out of that complacency and adopt some of that leadership. And thank you for the pleasure of this conversation on the College Commons podcast.

Joshua Leifer: Thank you so much for having me. It was really a pleasure to talk with you.

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