



The College Commons Podcast

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: God Trumps Politics

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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 Holo, your host, and you're listening to our special series from the pulpit, discussions about influential sermons and speeches with the rabbis who gave them.

Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Comments podcast, and I really look forward to introducing you to our guest, Rabbi Rachel Timona. Rachel Timona serves as senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Elohim in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where she has taken a lead role in community based social justice work, promoted deep learning about antisemitism in Israel, and reenvisioned prayer at CBE. She serves on many boards in New York City, including the Brooklyn Community Foundation, the New York Board of Rabbis, and is a founding board member of New York Jewish Agenda. She's an ordinee of the Hebrew Union College, a graduate of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality's Clergy Leadership Program, and the author of *Breath of Life, God as Spirit in Judaism*. She's also the consummate sermonizer, eloquent, funny, and thought provoking, and I look forward to discussing the rabbi's role from the pulpit with Rabbi Rachel Timoner.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited for this conversation.

Joshua Holo: In your twenty twenty one Rosh Hashanah sermon, you very pointedly explicitly introduce your sermon by distinguishing it from a more typical perhaps call to action or a tokha, a moral chastisement, or a jeremiad. You offer instead, in your words, a love poem to ease the days of pandemic back then in twenty twenty one when you delivered it. Where on the spectrum between poetry and prose does the genre of the sermon reside?

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: I love that question because it's a little bit of both. I think we're looking to use words that say more than their prose meanings. We're using words to evoke

feeling and to connect the listener and all of us together in the spoken moment to what's larger than us. And I think that's what poetry does, is it reminds us of what is larger than us. But also some sermons need to speak very prosaically about the conditions of the moment, need to include analysis and reasoning, and sometimes include a charge or a call to action. And those things can be sometimes best communicated in prose. So I think it's an interesting amalgam. I've played with poetry a lot in my sermons, but I've never really thought about the question you're asking exactly as you have. I am happiest when my sermons feel poetic.

Joshua Holo: I wanna go back to the fact that you just cited that there's a place for more prosaic things, including analysis. And many sermons cite both religious and secular themes. But as a long time observer of sermons, I think I can fairly say that you, Rachel Timoner, draw both more broadly and more deeply on external sources of authority and information. And for all that you do so very artfully and thoughtfully, is there a price to be paid? Is there a cost in that approach to relying as heavily as you do on external sources?

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: I think the question is less about reliance on external sources as it is about reliance on Torah. In other words, if my sermon is rooted in our textual tradition and also is rooted in external sources, I feel that I have fulfilled my responsibilities to both teach Torah and also to ground our lives in the wisdom of our people. I don't know that I've always met that standard, but I feel that once I have done that, then putting those in conversation with external sources serves to make the case for the relevance. And not only relevance, but truth of our Torah. If our Torah is resonating and aligning with external sources of our time, it is timeless. And it is wisdom. And so I feel like I'm making the case for really bringing down that barrier and saying, Torah speaks to us in all the ways we need to be spoken to, with all the concerns we have. Now, I don't know that I always meet that standard because I remember very much in school learning about exegesis and isegesis, whether we're starting in the text and going outward or whether we're starting outward and going inward to the text, it's really considered preferable to do exegesis rather than isegesis.

Joshua Holo: Meaning that it's preferable to respect the integrity of the text. And from that starting point, bring it out into the world rather than in a way that might be viewed as projection or imposition, taking your external worldview and pasting it on top of Torah for convenience, for example. That's the risk of ace of Jesus, I think, is what you're saying.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: That is what I am saying. And I think I could be accused of that. When High Holy Days are approaching and I think to myself, what do the people need to

hear? Where are their hearts right now? Where are their minds right now? What are they struggling with? What are they in pain about? What are they confused about? What can I contribute that is going to soothe them, give them direction, help them feel understood, and remind them that they come from a tradition that is speaking to them right now and is always speaking to them? That's always my question is, where are the people? And from that question, I then go looking at the Torah. You could criticize that. I think it would be legitimate to criticize that, but that is my approach.

Joshua Holo: Rather than criticize it, I actually wanna dig deeper in it. And I wanna ask you a big question about sermons as opposed to a small question. The small question in my mind would be, what sermon has stirred the greatest controversy or inspired the biggest email response, but that's not the question I wanna ask. I wanna ask the big question, which is upon being reflected back to you in the aggregate by your listeners, your congregants, What have your sermons taught you about what a community yearns for?

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: Asking really good questions. I would say in the year after October seventh, in which I spoke almost every week and only about Israel and Palestine, or Israel and Gaza, for an entire year, I found that people in pain, all of my listeners were in pain, want and need first and foremost to be seen in their pain. Like that was the core thing people needed. And not just that, of course, they were in pain, but the complexity of the pain. The complexity that Jews are trying to navigate right now in our world is so intricate and, like, unfathomably complex that to have it reflected back to them, to have someone say, this is what you are walking through. This is what you are trying to hold. This is what you are trying to manage. These are all of the conflicting feelings and all the things that people are projecting onto you and all the things that you're defending all the time. I think that was the number one thing that people needed in that year. I think that might be true in general, that people wanna feel seen and understood, especially if they're suffering. Secondly, I think that when the world is complicated, which is basically always, it is painful to be confused. People are craving help pulling the threads of the tangle and some kind of guidance and clarity to help them see the jumble a little more clearly. I also think that when people see something that they think is terribly unjust and they feel in some way morally implicated for what is happening, you know, we call that moral injury, that a person sees an action happening that they feel somehow that they're responsible for, but they can't stop it and they're witnessing it, It is incredibly important for them to name that, to express the emotions of that, to feel not alone in that. I think that is a major thing that people need. And then to have a way to be useful. We want to be of use. All of us, we want our lives to be of use. And so to be given even the smallest thing that one could do that would be of use, I think that is another thing that people very much want.

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Joshua Holo: You spoke earlier about the fact that one might be able to criticize your approach to sermonizing legitimately. I don't have a criticism of your sermons, but I do have a bugaboo. I wanna ask you if it is fair of me to nitpick on the phrase now more than ever or variations on that phrase as a rhetorical crutch. And, by the way, not merely a crutch in its verbal formulation, which it definitely is, but also as a crutch in the compulsion behind it. That is to say the rhetorical need to communicate or even gin up urgency and by extension to imbue weightiness into one's sermon itself.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: You may have just made it, so I never say that again.

Joshua Holo: You didn't say thank you, but I'll say you're welcome.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: I've I've had thought of that before. I am sure my sermons are peppered with that phrase. I don't think I've ever consciously done it as a way to gin up urgency that I didn't feel was real. I think that I have walked through the world feeling a tremendous urgency that I've wanted to communicate and perhaps inspire in others. But having just come back from a six month sabbatical in which I had an opportunity to step away and see a bigger picture, gain perspective, I came back feeling that we want our lives to be important. And we know if we let ourselves think about it, that we are infinitesimally small. I was in the Atacama Desert and I had the opportunity to see the night sky in one of the best places on earth to see the night sky and remember how small we are. And also how recently arrived and also how soon to be gone. And we want to be important. For me, it has never been a cynical thing of wanting to make people feel urgent about something. I've truly felt that it was desperate and urgent. And now I feel that every time people say that it's like apocalyptic, or it's not, it's not. The world will go on without us, because our lives are gonna end, but the world will go on. And the human species is learning more slowly than we'd like, but actually rapidly. As we think about how long it's been since Torah, and in the scope of how long humans have been here, it's been a blink of an eye. We're learning fairly quickly about ideas of human dignity and justice and equality. Those were like recent ideas. And the fact that we feel outraged at injustice, or the degradation of human beings, that we feel that and that we communicate it and that we act on it to try to stop it is very

good. But it is not the end of the world. And it is not now more than ever. We're here for this brief moment in a grand expanse of evolution and of the evolution of the moral faculty. And our tradition is a beautiful contribution to that. And so the opportunity to be able to teach from it and learn from it and act from it and try to move our world a little bit more on that arc, that's such an opportunity. It's urgent in the way that all human suffering is urgent, but it is not urgent in a way that is unique in the span of time.

Joshua Holo: I would argue that Judaism is not a religion in as much as the word religion cannot contain it. I would argue rather that Judaism is a civilization within which Jewish religion is a defining ingredient. And as a civilization, it is intrinsically civic among other things. If my thumbnail characterization is fair, what is the role of politics from the pulpit?

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: I love that intro to the question. I'm asked that a lot and in particular by the members of my community who are more to the right, who would like me to never speak about politics from the Bimah. My understanding is exactly what you just said. We are civilization. Torah is the instruction manual of our civilization. Religion is a component of our civilization, and it is civic. And Torah itself is about how to design a society. It is about what a society should look like. That is what Torah is from my my understanding. And and the prophets are very concerned with political questions about how resources are distributed and how the most marginalized are treated. That is authentically what is happening in those texts. And so when people ask me to take politics out of the service or out of the sermon or off the bimah, I say that my understanding is that to be a teacher of Torah, I'm obligated to apply it to the moment. That's what it is. And I would be failing if I divested it of everything civic. It is about society and how society should operate. It Doesn't necessarily speak to every kind of policy that's being debated, but it sure does speak to some policies that are being debated very directly. And so I think it's an unfair request to divest politics from Torah or from Judaism.

Joshua Holo: Is the pulpit, not the rabbinate, but the pulpit itself, the place from which one sermonizes, gendered?

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: Wow. I mean It was. It is in some places. I think that power is gendered. Certainly God is gendered in our texts and in our prayers. And obviously, people have tried to change that, but that has not caught on in most places. And in our society, right now especially, power is very gendered. People have a hard time imagining a woman president, for example. And so, is the pulpit gendered? My goal, I think many people's goal, would be to be able to say totally, honestly and completely no. No, it is not gendered. I think

that often what happens if power is held or conveyed, it is characterized as masculine. And I think that we will all be more free when that no longer happens.

Joshua Holo: Well said. I interview many authors on this podcast, and I almost always end my interview by asking them what surprised them about their own books. As my interviews for this series on sermons take shape, however, I'm finding that I'm motivated by a different kind of curiosity, namely that of risk. What about sermonizing, or what specific sermon, or any datum you'd like to share with us feels risky, really risky? Like, you're out on a limb, not comfortably risky, if there's such a thing.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: Some of the riskiest sermons I've given have been about God. And a lot of my rabbinate so far, I haven't really known how to speak about it in a way that other people could connect and in a way that wouldn't make half the room shut off. And it's been something I've been longing to do more and more. And in the last few years, I have. Our second high holy days after my first year, I gave a sermon about Israel in which I talked about the occupation, which back then was still a thing that was hard to do. It was twenty seventeen, and I gave a sermon about Donald Trump, and I gave a sermon about God. And of those three, the one about God got the most complaints. And I think because for me, it is so important, and it is so intimate, and it is so internal, I find it to be very vulnerable to talk about it, and I feel that I'm going to fail. Also, it's so hard to talk about. I want so much to reach people, and it feels the most risky.

Joshua Holo: Well, Rabbi Rachel Timoner, my friend and former student Rachel, it's such a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you for taking the time and for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: Thank you. This has been a true pleasure.

Joshua Holo: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect.