

Ep #22: Understanding Israel: The Power of Jewish-Christian Conversation



Full Episode Transcript

Presented by

Hebrew College

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Welcome to Speaking Torah. I'm your host, Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal, spiritual leader of Temple Beth Shalom in Melrose, Massachusetts, and 2019 graduate of Hebrew College. In this podcast, Jewish leaders from around the world, Hebrew College faculty alumni and students discuss how Torah can help us navigate the most pressing issues of our time. Together, we explore the way Torah can help us approach the world with creativity, healing, and hope.

This year, Hebrew College launched a renewed and expanded set of adult learning programs under the name Tamid. The Hebrew word Tamid means perpetual or eternal, and we chose it because we believe that lifelong Jewish learning connects us to an enduring sense of meaning and purpose. It honors our past, uplifts our present, and inspires us to face the future with a spirit of creative possibility and hope.

In this season of the podcast, we are focusing on some of these experiences. This week, we speak to Rabbi Or Rose, director of Hebrew College's Miller Center for Interreligious Learning and Leadership, and his colleague and Hebrew College visiting professor, Reverend Rob Schenck. They are co-teaching two Tamid adult education courses this year, the first, white Christian nationalism and the presidential election, and later, a new Jewish evangelical conversation on Israel. You can learn more about Rabbi Rose and Reverend Schenck on the Hebrew College website.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: We are so grateful for the honesty and bravery of both Rabbi Rose and Reverend Schenck. They are modeling the type of cross-cultural conversations we must be engaging in if we want to build understanding across our faiths, while also engaging in serious reflection over the past decades. How did you meet?

Rabbi Or Rose: I first met Rob several years ago in Lower Manhattan. We were both there as part of a gathering of progressive evangelicals, and I was a guest rabbi. On Saturday night of this weekend event, there was a

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screening of a film called *The Armor of Light*, and it featured the producer of the film and the protagonist of the film. The producer was Abigail Disney, and the protagonist was the Reverend Rob Shank.

The Armor of Light, an Emmy Award-winning film, features Rob's journey as an evangelical pastor and political actor in the D.C. Area and nationally, in which he begins to rethink his position specifically on guns, access to guns, particularly as a person for whom life before birth was a major issue in his religious and political life. And in the film, you see how he explores life after birth, particularly as it relates to young people, to teens, a disproportionate number of them being African American and Latino and other People of Color, and what I think can be properly described as the scourge of gun violence in this country.

After watching this film with my son, who was 12 years old at the time, he decided that he needed to speak with Reverend Schenck because My son Aviv was very moved by Rob's spiritual and ethical journey. In fact, he said to me at the time, I have rarely seen a person rethink so honestly their views and values and then have the courage to make life changes.

So, Rob and Aviv were in intense conversation until the wee hours and I tried not to interrupt and took notice, listened in, took notes, and said to myself, beyond the pleasantries of the moment, I'm going to follow up with this person at some point and get to know him. So that was our first encounter.

Reverend Rob Schenck: Frankly, I remember that conversation with young Aviv better than I remember my conversation with his father that night, because this young man impressed me so, and no wonder, because when I later got to know his father, Rabbi Or Rose, I said, the kid is a chip off the old block. So now I was just as curious about Aviv's dad, the rabbi. And we would meet again in Washington, D.C. when Or invited me to address his cohort of fellows who had come on their visit to the nation's capital. And we talked about a whole host of things having to do with moral and ethical dilemmas.

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I am now, and was at the time we first met, a dissenting voice within my evangelical culture. It started out with this examination of my religious tribe's embrace of unfettered Second Amendment gun rights. And in my examination of that, at the inducement of Abigail Disney, who dared me to go on camera and look critically at my community's enthrallment, really, with gun rights and firearms.

She shocked me when she said, are you aware that your evangelical subculture is the religious sector of the American populace most likely to support unlimited gun rights and have access to and ownership of firearms? That was just shocking to me. I did not grow up in a gun culture. So I took her up on her dare and I crisscrossed the country with her film crew, talking with my fellows about this subject.

And I was stunned to discover how many colleagues of mine go into the pulpit armed, ready to shoot from the pulpit. And, you know, the human side of me understands fear and danger and how we have an instinctive reaction to those things. And I even see a place for armed defense of and guardianship of a congregation. But the idea of an amateur standing at a pulpit in the moment of passion firing bullets out at his own congregation. And I say his because in my world, the dominant clergy gender is male. And so these were all men, and they were ready to shoot out at their own congregates. And it was just mind-boggling to me.

So in examining that, I realized my own religious community was in deep moral and ethical crisis, if not theological crisis, on this issue. And that would lead to my questioning of others.

And we talked, Rabbi Or and I talked about that and fostered a very productive discussion and conversation about it. I don't mind saying in that moment of time, he became my rabbi and every minister needs a Rabbi. So I really benefited so much from what he imparted. So our relationship grew from there, and then at one point, he and another colleague pitched me with an idea. And that was, what if I joined up with the mission of the Miller Center for Interreligious Learning and Leadership? I thought that was

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awfully daring of him, being who and what I am, but he's a risk taker, and risk often pays off, and it certainly did for me. And I hope it has for him and for the Miller Center as I joined the faculty and the team. And it's a wonderful fit, and personally, it's been very edifying for me. So thank you, Rabbi Or Rose, thank you to everyone at Hebrew College, and thank you for welcoming me into the family.

Rabbi Or Rose: One of the things that I was hoping in bringing Rob aboard and has proven true over and over again is to have the benefit of not only a colleague and a friend, but also a mentor. That is to say, I just entered my 50s. Rob is in his mid 60s and has seen and experienced a lot in his life. And because he is so open about his own life journey, including the mistakes, including the regrets.

He's been such a valuable mentor. And I've turned to him in several different difficult moments, both before October 7th, 2023, but certainly after. And his wise counsel has been a tremendous bracha, a blessing.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: This is the first time you've team-taught adult learners. Why did you choose to tackle such hot topics like the election and white Christian nationalism?

Rabbi Or Rose: Part of the reason why I invited Rob to be a part of our team at the Miller Center and the broader Hebrew college community relates to your question, which is to say, in Rob, I discovered a person who remains a part of the evangelical community and deeply values what we would call in Jewish terms the ethic of mahloket, of impassioned discussion and debate as our rabbis once referred to it for the sake of heaven which is to say because these are our highest or deepest ideals. And in that sense, Rob is, like Hebrew College as a whole, a pluralist.

And so he has not turned his back on his evangelical community, but has decided to stay a part of it, and in his own self-description, sees his role as being a dissenting voice when it comes to issues that are unpopular or controversial. So that to me was a part of the impetus to invite Rob. And

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when we decided how to structure his role, I wanted him to have engagement with different segments of our community. As a teacher, as a preacher, as a political strategist. He has a lot of wisdom to offer.

And as I said, in my son's words, Rob also is a person that has been brave enough to go about this process of discernment publicly. And many leaders are not willing to do that, even when they find themselves at a crossroads, personally and or professionally. So I wanted to share that with our community because I think it's a model of integrity of ongoing growth.

And when we decided on our course selections, we wanted to be as real as possible. We wanted to be as relevant as possible. We know that the issues of Jewish evangelical engagement are ones that people don't necessarily know a great deal about. There are biases, stereotypes, and fears. And so we wanted to try and break through some of that noise or static.

And then, of course, if we are being honest, there is a real issue in this country when it comes to white Christian nationalism, and the evangelical community is at the heart of that issue, of that controversy. In speaking with Rob about his experiences within the evangelical world, it was clear that he could provide our community with unique insight, that he was both a knowledgeable pastor and scholar, but also was a frontline participant in the shaping of the evangelical movement for the last several decades. And as he was rethinking his values and priorities, his commitments, it seemed like a very important opportunity to critically examine this phenomenon, which I can only describe as being terribly dangerous for the future of American democracy.

Rob Schenck: I spent more than three decades as an activist on the religious right, assisting in the politicization of American evangelicalism. I now see it as an extremely dangerous course for my fellows to have taken, my co-religionists, and I'm now working to reverse that process. I described my journey in three conversions. My initial conversion to born-again, what we called back then, Bible-believing Christianity 50 years ago this year.

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And then later, after I had been ordained to Christian ministry in the mid-1980s, took my seat at the table of national evangelical political influence. That was during the Reagan years, and I described that as my conversion from a Jesus follower to an adherent of Ronald Reagan Republican religion, which I now see as distinctly opposite of what we refer to as the gospel or the mission, message, and model of Jesus Christ.

And then finally, thirdly, a conversion back to what originally drew me to Christianity, which was the image of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount when he blessed the poor, those in the margins of society, the forgotten, those who are persecuted, who are oppressed, who are literally imprisoned, and on and on that goes. So the ethic, the core ethic, that I think is embodied in what we call the two great commandments. When Jesus was asked of all the commandments, what is the greatest? And he answered, there are two. And of course, this wasn't original to him. And that is love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, a direct quote from the Torah, and love your neighbor as yourself. And those were the two core ethical principles that first drew me to Christianity.

I watched and I participated in the loss of both focus and embrace of those two cardinal ethical principles and a trade-off to the pursuit of political power and cultural domination. I assisted in that, and I literally had to come to a place of repentance, to repent from that, from having assisted in that, and to do the work of repair. So you can see why it's such a comfortable fit for me to be associated with a Jewish institution, because I think Jews have done that better than anyone over the millennia and know a lot more about it than Christians do. So I'm learning and practicing that. But in that process, one of the acts of repair that I see as being most beneficial is, in fact, educating both sides of this conflict, both sides of this controversy and tension. So that, you know, it's the old adage, a problem defined is a problem half-solved.

So if we want to meet this challenge of the menace of Christian nationalism, this new militant Christendom that has been revived from ancient times, and we know the havoc and the disaster, the human

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catastrophe that it has been in the past and now threatens to be again in the present. To meet that challenge, we have to understand it.

So that's why when Or proposed that we teach a class on Christian nationalism, I was all in immediately.

Yes, we need to define this for ourselves, for others, because in defining it, we've already set a course towards a solution to it. So that's one big reason, but it also is, I have to admit, to a very personal motive, and that is that it helps me do the work of repair that I'm obligated to do in this season of my life. So a long answer to your simple question, why? Those are the reasons why.

Rabbi Or Rose: I want to add one other piece, which I think is important, given the context for the course through Hebrew College, which is, generally speaking, contemporary North American Jews have limited knowledge of Christianity writ large. And so a part of the experience too was teasing out the fact that there are many forms of Christianity, many forms of American Christianity, and that in itself was an important part of the learning process.

And because Jews, for so long, were the victims of Christian oppression, that had to be handled delicately in terms of people's own sense of safety and their own lived experiences of bigotry and so forth. Because as the director of the Miller Center, part of my mission is to try and bring people together across religious and spiritual traditions or generative discussion and for action for the common good.

And so I wanted to make sure that as we are entering into this thorny conversation about a particular manifestation of Christianity, that we also understood, like Judaism, that there are many forms of Christian faith and practice and many Christian communities. And that was also a significant part of the conversation and led me to think about more courses on the varieties of Christianity or Jews, that is historical, textual, sociological, political, et cetera.

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And some of that we already do through our adult learning community, but there's more to do. And so that was an exciting possibility to think about with Rob and with our participants.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Can we talk more about the phrase white Christian nationalism and the power and intentionality of that language?

Rob Schenck: In referring to this problem, and I'd like to put that in all caps and bold, if I can verbally, because it is a problem on every level of human experience. This is a massive problem. And the reason I think that it's accurate to refer to it as white Christian nationalism is because in the process of politicizing this great religious force. And as an evangelical, I have to admit to the fact that in fact, American evangelicalism, and I draw a distinction between American form of it as compared to, for example, European or Latin American or Asian and so forth, the various African forms of evangelicalism. And it's varied and diverse.

But the peculiar form of American evangelicalism has a very strong racial component to it. And I think there's a long history behind that. I am careful when I'm talking about the formation of American evangelicalism, to draw a distinction between what used to be known as New England evangelicalism, just to kind of bring it into a provincial Hebrew College, Miller Center, New England regional identity here.

In fact, some of the original forms of evangelicalism, you know, sprang up right in the Boston area. And they were the abolitionists fighting against slavery. They would later embrace women's rights. We're talking about mid to late 19th century. They would fight against abusive forms of labor practices in the United States, even to public health issues, and most certainly anti-child labor, et cetera.

They were in fact progressive for their era, but they were overwhelmed by what I now understand from the Southern historian, Charles Reagan Wilson, one of the great Southern historians, that what happened after the Civil War in the United States and Reconstruction was what we now know

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as the religion of the lost cause, trying to re-establish a slave-based economy and culture.

So all of that to say that in looking at what we now know as politicized American evangelicalism goes to the revival of this racialized, politicized, cultural force that is meant to return us to a time when racial minorities knew their place in society, and it was a subservient, inferior place in society. Whites dominated, white culture dominated, and religion assisted in that domination. So let's call it for what it is.

It's past time for giving a polite benefit of the doubt. I know from my own involvement in the movement that this was spoken about in hushed tones. Let's go back to a period in time, and in the evangelical cultural imagination, that's a time when whites dominated in every area of American culture and society, and black and brown and Asian peoples knew their subservient places in society and didn't challenge that. And that's the imagination that's there.

Some evangelicals know that, and some evangelical leaders and influencers speak of it quietly. Now, more and more openly, and I think the embrace of Donald Trump and the MAGA religio-political cult has granted permission for that and given a public stage for it. So now we're hearing blatant assertions of this objective to put people back in their places.

And let's be clear here, it wasn't so long ago when Jews were not considered white. They were of a different racial species. And that's part of the thinking here. So this is as dangerous, I believe, to Jews as it is to black, brown, and other segments of racial minorities and so forth.

So we got to call it for what it is, name it for what it truly is. I think we did that in our course, and I think it was a very good beginning.

Rabbi Or Rose: I think that deconstructing that term and spending time with each piece of that phrasing was very important in the course. So to speak about whiteness, to speak about Christianity, to speak about nationalism,

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and to do so with a primarily Jewish group, but with some Christian and secular class participants was fascinating.

My experience was that most of the Jews in the room were understandably very concerned and had a special concern in light of the rise recently of anti-Semitism. And so That was part of what animated the conversation. I think it's also the case that what we discovered, including the instructors, is that our knowledge and experience was and continues to be fragmented based on our biographies, based on our communal locations, based on our educations, again, based on biases, stereotypes, et cetera.

So I found it to be one of the most Honest and searching experiences I've had adult Jewish learning over many years. And I also feel like one of the other animating matters the class was that people wanted to know what they could do to be helpful, how they could ally with folks like Rob and work on making change. But in order to do that, as Rob said before, these people recognized that they needed more education. And I must say that part of my role in the course was to serve as host and translator and to defer to Rob based on his knowledge and experience and then to respond from my position as a Jewish practitioner, as a rabbi, as a scholar and teacher. But we tried to do a lot of listening.

And as Rob said before, to name painful elements of historical and contemporary American culture, including issues of race, issues of religion, and issues of nationals. And all of those required time and attention. But as Rob said, it was a very good substantive, deep beginning to an ongoing conversation.

Rob Schenck: If I may add that, you know, the conversation, the sessions themselves were very rich, but we also offered a lot of material to follow up with and I look forward to doing that again in future courses so that as Or just suggest this was a good beginning but there's so much more to learn so much more to know. And especially when you talk about you know what we can do about the problem. Each of us in small and large ways we want to offer resource materials for that and we did so it didn't it didn't stop with

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the end of the course. There was an invitation to read and research and understand and ultimately practice what participants benefited from inside the course.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Was there anything that surprised you about the White Christian Nationalism course experience?

Rob Schenck: I'm not sure I was surprised as much as I was impressed by the depth of curiosity, by the passionate interest of the participants across the board, but particularly the Jewish participants. But then we had Christian and specifically evangelical participation. Maybe that was the surprise. Although I'm going to qualify it by saying that there's a unique advantage here with Miller Center and Hebrew College, because American evangelicals have always been excitedly curious about all things Jewish. They're keenly aware that Jesus emerged out of a Jewish culture and period and place, and that his words were based within Jewish thought and theology.

They're very conscious of that. They know they serve, in evangelical parlance, a Jewish savior. Now that doesn't always translate to the right outcomes in terms of evangelical Jewish relations, for sure. And that's a big part of the problem and why that needs to be addressed and examined very carefully, and we're going to do that in a subsequent course. But I think it was open hearts, open minds, the deep concern, not just for self, but for the other.

So there was really a feeling that this wasn't really a class or a course. It was a community. It was a pop-up community of people who shared common concern and common cause. And I really loved that. And I got a lot out of that.

There were times, we say in our weird evangelical speak, it gave me Holy Ghost goosebumps. It was just a wonderful kind of feeling about this affinity group that was forming around this peculiar and at times very frightening

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subject matter. But I thought we tackled it in a spirit of optimism rather than... I mean, realistic optimism, not pessimism and despair.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Your next class together tackles Jewish evangelical perspectives on Israel. That sounds challenging.

Rabbi Or Rose: The subject of Israel and of ongoing, heartbreaking conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is, of course, the subject of conversation, often difficult and contentious conversation within the Jewish community. And we know that Israel matters a great deal to Christians and specifically to evangelical Christians in the United States. But we have rarely engaged together in conversation about what Israel means to us in our communities, theologically, ethically, historically, and politically. And I did not want to continue to avoid or to evade. I wanted to have an open conversation, an honest conversation, including some of what I've learned as an interreligious practitioner about the eschatological or the messianic hopes of certain evangelical and other Christians about the end times and the role of the land of Israel, the Jewish people, and so forth in that vision.

Because without having those kinds of conversations, it's very difficult to understand what motivates people to engage now in the religio-political quagmire of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of the relationship between Jews and Christians and the land of Israel.

Rob Schenck: Or is absolutely right. Israel looms very large in the evangelical imagination, and it has been a constant theme at least for the last 70 to 90 years. But there is a big shift taking place right now, and it's largely demographic when it comes to the subject of evangelicals vis-à-vis Israel.

Up until now, evangelicals of my age, in my 60s, Israel, first of all, could do no wrong. Because back 20, 30 years ago, if you were to ask an average American evangelical, who's in charge of the state of Israel, the only answer would be God. They wouldn't know the Prime Minister's name, they certainly wouldn't know the President's name. They really didn't, at least in

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my period, understand the governmental structure of Israel, of the modern state we're talking about.

It was simply a miraculous recent manifestation of God's plan for the ages that would end with a global and violent catastrophe called Armageddon, this epic battle between the forces of good and evil in the world in which most of humanity would perish. And when all the blood and dust settled, Jesus would return to the Mount of Olives and rule the earth for a thousand years in peace and harmony.

So that was what was so important. And the backstory being that God had promised this land to Abraham and his descendants, so they were the only rightful owners. There was no other way to tell the story, and the Palestinians got in the way of that and were properly vanquished. So that was the understanding.

Now, it's quite different. If you ask evangelicals under the age of, let's say, 50, or let's say 45. They're coming to a different consciousness about this, and they're seeing Israel more as a political actor in the Middle East, and at times an oppressive occupier of the land.

This is a different, certainly a minority right now of American evangelicals, but it's growing and aging. So this opinion about Israel is shifting dramatically, but in a small percentage at the moment, but it's expanding.

So, better to address it now, because I think it does portend not simply an anti-Israel disposition among some young evangelicals, but perhaps again from the progressive, more liberal side, a slippage into a form of anti-Semitism.

And that's extremely important that we call that out and address it while we talk about proper concern, compassion, and advocacy for Palestinians. And particularly, to get provincial about it, there is a small but vibrant population of Palestinian evangelicals who are crying out for attention within the evangelical community, and they're getting more and more of it. And it's critical to understand the realities and not jump to conclusions.

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So all of that makes this urgent. It makes it critically important. I'd like to say that my community, again, suffers from appalling ignorance, but I'll be more polite and I'll say we have a real deficiency when it comes to good quality information on all of this, including historically.

American evangelicals, by and large, do not know the history of Israel. They don't know the history of the region. They make a giant leap from ancient times to 1948, and nothing in between. No, very little to nothing. It's a complete void. So just telling the history of all this is a critical component for my side of the equation, is enormous.

Rabbi Or Rose: From my side, I think that we are experiencing some similar shifts demographically, and there is robust conversation, again, often painful within families, then synagogue, temple, school communities, about how we understand the place of Israel in our lives as North American Jews and our relationship to Jewish Israelis, to Palestinian Israelis, to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and the region more broadly.

And so that common piece of conversation is an important one, including how it relates to our understandings of the spillover and the slippage that Rob described before when it comes to issues of anti-Semitism, to Islamophobia, to anti-Christian sentiment, all of that is in the mix, if you will, and left unattended, it can erupt as we know.

So it feels like we have a responsibility, as I said before, to enter into this conversation, both with sensitivity and honesty, and to try and provide for people historical, theological, textual, and political information, and to engage in a dignified conversation that we know will not be easy. But the quality of that conversation, including the disagreement, matters a great deal. And I hope and pray that this small pedagogic experiment will also have its own spillover or ripple effect, which is to say that you'll become better equipped or refined at having difficult existential spiritual and ethical conversation.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Thank you for joining us for this episode of Speaking Torah. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo and Hebrew College Rabbinical graduate and composer Rabbi Jackson Mercer for our theme music, Esa Einai. To learn more about Hebrew College, please visit HebrewCollege.edu/podcast. And remember to subscribe, like, and rate Speaking Torah wherever you listen to podcasts.

This week, we share a musical version of Psalm 23 sung by Hebrew College ordination students Aviva and Julia, who are in Israel for their year of study, Psalm 23 invites us to think about the peaks and valleys of life as components of one ultimately redemptive journey.

I'm your host, Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal. Thank you for joining us on Speaking Torah.