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Secular Israelis are obsessed with traditional Judaism. Micah Goodman helps explain why.

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Micah Goodman (Shalom Hartman Institute/JTA Montage)

(JTA) — The Jewish Telegraphic Agency has partnered with the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, a center of Jewish thought and education in Israel and North America, on Identity/Crisis, a podcast about Jewish news and ideas.

After Micah Goodman published his latest book, “The Wondering Jew: Israel and the Search for Jewish Identity,” in Hebrew last year, he enjoyed a resurgence of interest in his previous work by his fellow Israelis.

Over the previous decade, Goodman had released a stream of books introducing secular Israelis to foundations of Jewish tradition, from the biblical Moses to Maimonides. In his latest book, he laid out an

argument for engagement with those texts by Israelis who don't see themselves as religious — about 44%, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics.

“Many secular readers, after they read this book, they said, ‘Oh, we want to be that kind of secular Israelis that are connected to their past without being controlled by the past, where can we start?’” Goodman recalled during his appearance on Identity/Crisis, a podcast produced by the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America in partnership with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. “This wasn't planned. But my books about Deuteronomy, the Kuzari and Moreh Nevuchim were there for readers that finish this book [and] realize they want to connect to Judaism — and stay secular, and be liberated from Judaism.”

In a conversation with Yehuda Kurtzer, Hartman's president, Goodman explains why traditional texts are so appealing to secular Israelis right now.

The conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity. You can listen to the original full episode [here](#).

Kurtzer: In your trajectory as an intellectual, you did three big books on Jewish thought: a book on Deuteronomy, a book on Maimonides and a book on [Yehuda] Halevi. And then you shifted your focus to the politics of Israeli society with “Catch 67,” and then to the story of Israeli Jewish identity today in “The Wondering Jew.” What explains the shift?

Goodman: I thought that my role in life is to write books about books. So I wrote a book about “The Guide to the Perplexed.” For some reason, people were actually reading my book, and I thought that it doesn't tell the entire story because the Guide for the Perplexed is the best of Judaism, [but] it's only a part of Judaism.

And the best way to tell the side of a different Judaism — which is also the best of Judaism, the less rational, more mystical — is another great

book called the Kuzari. So I wrote a book about the Kuzari. And then I was on a roll.

I love Tanakh, I love the Bible. I thought the greatest window into the philosophy of the Bible is Deuteronomy. I think it's the greatest introduction to biblical philosophy. So I wrote a book about the Tanakh through a book about Deuteronomy.

And then I was thinking, OK, so I wrote three books about Great Books, and what's my next project? And here's what happened. After I gained confidence, I decided to stop hiding behind books about books and start to write my book about Israeliness. Which is probably the thing that I care about the most, trying to understand Israeliness, trying to be in a role where I can help heal Israeliness. And I realized that the greatest division in Israel is between the secular-religious, national-universal, that divide.

And I started writing that book a month after the 2014 operation in Gaza. So that was the summer of 2014. And then when I was writing this book about the secular beliefs in Israel, I realized you have to write a chapter about the right-left divide because you can't understand the secular-religious divide without understanding the right-left divide. And then that chapter grew and grew and grew and grew and grew, and it turned into a book of its own. So "Catch '67" was a branch of "The Wondering Jew," it turned into a book of its own, and my editor Shmuel Rosner had this great idea: Let's just say this was the first book, and it will come out 50 years after the Six-Day War.

So that book was out, then I went back to write what's called "Chazarah Bli Teshuvah," the Hebrew version of "The Wondering Jew," and now it's out in English.

Got it. So when someone ultimately does a source critical analysis of your publishing history, they'll be able to identify the source of "Catch '67" as part of "The Wondering Jew," before it got extricated.

I think we did a good job hiding the traces.

Is it crazy to say though, in some ways, your first three books basically, in some ways, translating some of the greatest books and greatest ideas of Jewish intellectual history into an Israeli idiom. Because you were writing more for Israelis than for your English-speaking audience. That's not to disrespect your English-speaking audience. But that's where your heart is. And I want to talk about that at some point today.

In some ways, those books are almost like a primary source text of this book, in the sense of how do I give Israelis access to Moreh Nevuchim, to the Guide to the Perplexed, how do I induct them into a conversation about universalism, particularism, which is not a new question. It's actually an old Maimonides, Kuzari question. So in some ways, it felt like reading this book was almost helping to explain to your readers over the last 10 years, this is why I wanted you to read Maimonides. Does that make sense?

This makes a lot of sense. This is what I got from a lot of readers in Israel. They read the Hebrew version of "The Wondering Jew," and I spoke there about their sources of secular identity, like the founding fathers of secular identity: Ahad Ha'am, Bialik, Gordon ... they thought that the deepest secular identity is a kind of secularism that is inspired by Jewish tradition. And it's connected intimately to Jewish tradition. But it's not controlled by Jewish tradition. It's connected to our past but not controlled by our past.

And many secular readers after they read this book, and they said, "Oh, we want to be that kind of secular Israelis that are connected to their past without being controlled by the past, where can we start?" And many of them started with Moreh Nevuchim, they start with going back. So this wasn't planned. But my books about Deuteronomy, the Kuzari and Moreh Nevuchim were there for readers that finish this book, they realize they want to connect to Judaism — and stay secular, and be liberated from Judaism — and the way to connect was to start reading ideas of Maimonides, the ideas of Halevi, I got this all over the place. And this wasn't planned, I didn't say, "Oh, I'm going to write

these three books, and then I'll get a lot of readers for these books for this fourth book," but that was a great unintended result of "The Wondering Jew" in Hebrew.

And in fact, by doing so, you're also telling secular Israelis that the people who they viewed as their icons — whether it's Bialik or Ahad Ha'am or whoever else — those people of course are Maimonides also. So even to be a learned reader of the Jewish secular tradition is to be knowledgeable of these pieces.

I'd love to understand a little bit, what do you think has driven the whole economy of ideas, the return to Jewish tradition, in Israeli society?

It reminds me of our mutual friend [Rabbi] Shay Zarchi. His parable on this is a people wandering through the wilderness accumulates a whole bunch of stuff along the way, cherished possessions. And when they arrive at the place they need to get to, it turns out it's at the bottom of a hill, they have to climb to the top of the hill. So they leave their cherished possessions at the bottom of the hill until they get to the top of the hill, until they build out their home. After a few decades of dealing with actually building the home, they start to miss their stuff, their carpets, their jewelry, all the things that they left at the bottom of the hill, and it goes back down. So Zarchi, a secular teacher, says that's basically what's happened. We built a home, and we missed our cherished possessions.

I love that image. I wonder what else happened over the last 20, 30 years that made this search for Jewish identity that you've been such a major leader of in Israeli society, what made it come alive?

It's a very important question, I want to answer it. But beforehand, it assumes that all our listeners know that this is happening in Israel. So let's just first say that out loud. There's something very big happening

in Israel that maybe no one told you about, that some of you don't know about, and that is that there's a new generation of Israelis, most of them secular Israelis, they're searching in a very serious way for Jewish identity, they're connected to Jewish sources, and it's not causing a "chazarah b'teshuvah" movement. It's not secular Israelis becoming religious Israelis. It's Israelis trying to become more Jewish. My book is about how can you explain that philosophically. And your question is, how can we explain that sociologically, emotionally, psychologically, what's going on here? But this is something big and promising that's happening in Israel.

I have never heard Rabbi Zarchi's parable, and I think it's really beautiful and really powerful. For me, that parable is a combination of two other parables.

One is of Theodor Herzl, and the other is of Amos Oz. So Herzl describes in "Altneuland," in his Great Utopia, how he imagines the future of the Jewish states. And he imagines these two people wandering about Israel and seeing an amazing, amazing state of the Jews. And they asked one person, how could you do this? How are you so successful? And he said, "It was easy. We weren't carrying on our backs the weight of tradition."

This reminds me, I have a brother, and he is a marathon runner. And I remember there were a few years after he finished the military, where he was running with a bag filled with weights. And he said many of his friends thought he was insane.

And he explained to me, when you run with weights on your back, when you get to the real thing, to a marathon for a race, you take the bag off and you feel like you could fly. You're liberated from all the weights.

And that's how I think Herzl imagined the power of secularism. Where for thousands of years, we're carrying on our backs the weight of tradition. And finally we took that bag off our backs and we can fly.

So that's one fantasy. And that's one part of Shay Zarchi's parable, right? You take it off, and now you're light, and you can build and you

can do things at once. And that was the fantasy of secularism. Where in order to build the country, in order to liberate the energetic and creative and productive forces of the Jewish people, we have to throw the bag filled with the weights of tradition, and rabbis and halacha and books. So throw the books away, throw tradition away, throw all that weight away and be light and start flying.

That's one image, but Amos Oz has a different image — and the image I think Shay Zarchi is playing with. It's the image of being an inheritor. And this is how Amos Oz plays with it, he says it like this: Imagine you had a complicated relationship with your grandfather and your grandmother. You love them, but they were threatening, and you had a complicated relationship with them. And then they die. And everything they own, you're inheriting. So what do you do?

So let's say there's one person that is so connected to his grandparents because they're his precious, sweet grandparents. He can't give anything up. So he or she would just take everything that their grandparents own — all the chairs, all the stools, the weird lamp, everything that's just, all their junk, everything goes into their house.

How will a person's house look like if he puts all the junk of his grandparents in? It will probably be messy, and it won't be their house, it won't have their own feeling and they won't have much room, right?

Imagine someone else. There's a person, he had issues with his grandparents. So he decided he's not taking anything they owned. That means because you don't want anything that your grandparents owned, they're not going to enjoy the jewelry, and the treasures, and things that are very valuable.

So Amos Oz says, Israelis lost the art of inheritance, the art of a cultural inheritance. On the one hand, we have the datiim [religious]: Everything that Jews have ever created is going to be inside our house. It's gonna be a part of our life, which means you have no room for yourself. And the angry leumi [secular], because they have a problem

with rabbis, and legislation, and all those issues, everything is outside of our house, including wisdom and treasures and everything.

And Amos Oz is like, OK, now let's learn the art of inheritance. How do we put into our house, our Israeli modern house, the best of our tradition? And we also have to know what not to keep. Let's not be automatic. Now automatic rejection and not automatic adoption.

Now that movement from angry secularism — you throw everything out — to smart secularism — let's start identifying the treasures of our paths, of our tradition, and make them part of our life, and understanding that by doing that we're not less secular, we are more secular.

Because being secular, in the Israeli understanding, is being liberated, being free. And it's expansion of liberty. Instead of only being liberated from my tradition, I'm also liberated to adopt things from my tradition.

The English word for this is actually quite powerful because that has the same double-edged connotation, which is baggage. Baggage can just mean the stuff you carry with you, but can also mean the stuff that weighs you down and it's heavy. And until you figure out what's the right calculus between the baggage of the stuff you have to carry and the baggage that you actually want to take with you and bring with you, you can't get there.

And actually once, I was teaching Brandeis students who were preparing to teach in Jewish day schools, and I was supposed to teach them a kind of introduction to Talmud. They weren't supposed to be Judaic studies teachers, but they had to understand culturally the meaning of Talmud, Rabbinic Judaism, etc.

I remember for a few sessions of this class, there was a person in the room who just was fighting me — you know, you're a teacher, too. But it was fighting, but unrelated to the text, couldn't get into it, didn't like it, was angry, and

then finally had this outburst. And basically, it just went on for about a 15-minute monologue about what ultimately was an abusive teacher of Talmud who she once had. And as a result, Talmud was baggage.

And then we spent the next two hours, it was one of the greatest teaching experiences I've ever had. I said, "OK, guys, let's get everybody's baggage on the table. What's your baggage with Talmud, with Rabbinic Judaism, with religious Judaism?"

We talked for two hours. It was therapeutic. And then we had the most magnificent class for the rest of the semester.

And there's something of a metaphor for the Jewish people here post-enlightenment, of we had to deal with like 200 years of shedding all the baggage of this stuff. And now maybe we have to figure out psychologically what's our relationship with all of this stuff because it's actually quite beautiful. And it's not just decoration, it's not just jewelry. It's actually the stuff that gives your life meaning, that makes you feel tethered, that makes you connected to a bigger story.

Exactly. First of all, I love that. We have our baggage where we put all our things, which we cherish, in baggage, and it's also *baggage*. We've been there, we've had students that are angry and they don't even know why we are so angry.

In my book, I make a distinction between two types of secularism. There's Ahad Ha'am secularism and there's Berdichevsky secularism. Berdichevsky secularism is that angry student at Brandeis, where the only way to liberate the Jew and to create a new, healthy, fearless Jew is to take tradition and throw it out the window.

And Ahad Ha'am said, no, the only way to create a new Jew is not through ending your relationship with Judaism, but through healing our relationship with Judaism.

And obviously, I think Israel's now moving from the Berditchevsky to Ahad Ha'am. From ending our relationship with our tradition to start to heal our relationship with tradition.

What does that mean? I think secular people healing the relationship with tradition is taking tradition, stripping it from authority, from power, and then seeing it for what it is.

Now in my book, I tell the story. And I don't know if this story resonates with Americans. But let me try and share with you a way I experience it.

When I was in the military, in basic training, I had a very, very tough commander. And in the book, I call him Nachshon. And I was the worst kind of soldier because I always lose things. I forget where things are. Now you can kind of get through life losing things, but not in the military because when you lose something, you get in real trouble. I used to meet Commander Nachshon at night, when everybody went to sleep, and I used to run up and down this hill carrying all the things I lost that day. Carrying them up and down, up and down. And I remember the only way I could actually do this was to cheat.

And then he caught me cheating. And he took me to a mishpat, like a military courtroom. So I have all this trauma from this commander. This guy was like the symbol of military authority to me, and I was afraid of him. And 10 years later, I'm walking down the halls of Hebrew University, and talking to my students about Rambam, and Aristotle, and I see him.

Now my heart starts, you know, I said, "Shalom, shalom." I see him and I walk away. And while I'm walking away, I'm thinking to myself, "Micah, he's not your commander anymore, there's nothing he can do for you. He's not going to tell you to go running now."

But here's the thing. When I saw him, I saw his authority. So Berditchevsky argues, Judaism carried authority for so many years, every time we'll see Judaism we'll see authority. The only way to

liberate ourselves from the authority of tradition is to liberate ourselves from tradition.

But Ahad Ha'am said, no, we can take tradition, strip from its authority and heal our relationship with tradition.

In the book I tell how 20 years later I was in Shuk Machane Yehuda, and suddenly I see Nachshon, and like, my heart's not beating. Like it's just a guy. "Nachshon, mayin yanim?" We sat in a coffee place. He's such a cool guy. We had a great laugh.

[laughs] It didn't matter if you lost anything on the way to the shuk. He doesn't care!

He's not angry at me, and I realized I could now see Nachshon without the authority. I realized it took me 20 years to finish the army. Now I'm done with the army.

So my metaphor is like this. First-generation secularism, every time you thought religion, you thought the commander, it's authority. Today, we're three, four generations into secularism. Maybe secularism is so mature in Israel that when it sees Judaism, it can see something exciting, something inspiring, something interesting, it doesn't see the commander anymore.

This is what I try to explain to Israelis: Secularism is really staying connected to Judaism. It doesn't mean that your secularism is weak. It means it's strong, and it's mature. It's mature enough to reconnect to tradition without it echoing its authority.

One piece about this book that I really struggled with was your chapter called non-Diaspora Judaism. So here's what I struggled with, which is on all the ideas of your book, as a Diaspora Jew, as very much an American Jew, in this American idiom.

All of your ideas about Judaism made sense to me as true for the State of Israel and Israeli Jews, and true for Diaspora Jews also. Because you're making a much larger

post-enlightenment argument than just about Zionism. You're arguing this reconciliation between a mature secularism that doesn't see its job as shattering religion and a mature religion that understands that it can offer, as you say about religious Zionism, it offers tools for religious modernization that in some ways secularism can't do.

By living in the framework of religion and engaging with the world, it's doing something that secularism can't do. So I felt very connected to this story, I felt I identified with this. And yet, I couldn't figure out whether there's actually a place for Diaspora Jews in this project or whether this is only something that could be coherent in Israel. And if it's OK with you, I'll read just the two sentences on this where you said, on page 113, "Thanks to Zionism, Jews can begin to carefully peel away from their Judaism the mechanisms that have burdened and beleaguered it. In Israel, Jews can worry less about how to preserve Judaism and wonder more about what its purpose should be. If the Diaspora burdened Judaism, Zionism might be a way to unburden it."

So I guess you can see why I struggle with this. Does it have to be in the framework of Zionism? There was some parody of Diaspora here. Is it possible that there's some version of an American Jewish story which is parallel? Or do you believe — and that's OK — if I were to say to an American audience, no guys, this is our project. And what you're doing is holding on to a version of a story that is just different.

Yes. So this is a very good question. I'm not really sure what the answer is. Because in this book, my hope was that American Jews will read this book and find their Judaism for them also.

But it also serves a different purpose for American Jews to understand what's powerful about Israeli Judaism today. When many of us are so disenchanted from Israeli politics, should know that while Israeli

politics is dysfunctional, and we're just entering our fourth elections in two years, there's something very, very powerful culturally and spiritually going on in Israel.

And my book tried to explain the philosophy behind this cultural renaissance in Israel.

But yes, there was a chapter I wrote in Hebrew, which was a critique of the galut [Diaspora]. And I not only kept it in for English, I even expanded in English, hoping to trigger a conversation. And it's a sad conversation.

So I hope, by the way, the result of the conversation is that I'm wrong. But here's the argument.

Ultra-Orthodoxy is very serious, very deep, and had a very important prediction: that modernity is dangerous for Jewish identity. And being exposed to modern ideas, to modern values, to modern heroes, it will be like an earthquake. Even very stable buildings collapse. And modernity is an earthquake, and the building of Judaism might collapse. And the best thing to do if you know an earthquake is coming is just to go somewhere else.

And I think ultra-Orthodoxy was the following impulse: It knew an earthquake is coming and we should go somewhere else. So we shouldn't be there mentally, spiritually, identity-wise, when the earthquake happens. So the best way to protect ourselves from the earthquake of modernity is not to be in modernity. It is to shut Judaism down and to protect itself from modernity.

Which takes us to a second conclusion of ultra-Orthodoxy: The best way to close Judaism so it won't be exposed to modernity is to freeze Judaism. Because modernity is about constant change, and the best way to guarantee that we won't modernize Judaism and therefore threaten Judaism is to block change. Which creates a paradox. Judaism always changed. And the declaration of "Judaism is not going to change" is itself change.

This is a paradox. And this is all the work of Yaakov Katz, an important historian from the last generation of Hebrew U., and here's my problem. I think they're right. This is a problem.

I think they were right in the following sense, if we look at the data. And this is something that Ahad Ha'am understood before seeing the data. And you see American Judaism today — and I hope you prove me wrong — but it seems like the more your Judaism is frozen and closed, that's the double impulse of Orthodoxy, close Judaism, freeze Judaism — the more the continuity of your community is guaranteed. And the more it's open and dynamic and changes, the more your continuity is threatened.

And I think, unless I'm wrong, I think the numbers here are very clear. Which they take to the following conclusion. In modern times, we have two very bad options. Bad option No. 1 is to distort Judaism and protect it — because I think closing Judaism and freezing Judaism is a distortion of Judaism — but you do that in order to protect Judaism. So there will be no, you know, assimilation, so we'll have continuity.

So bad option No. 1 is to distort it, but protect it. Bad option No. 2 is not to distort it but keep it open, embrace change, and then threaten your continuity. So you distort it or protect it, or create the best Judaism, which is open and dynamic, but threatens, and you could lose it.

Those are two very bad options. Israel offers a third option. In Israel, because Jewish identity is guaranteed. If you live in Israel, and stay in Israel, more than 90% chance is that your grandchildren will see themselves as Jews and raise their children as Jews. In Israel, Judaism is guaranteed even if you're secular, no matter what you are, what kind of a Jew you are.

And that's why Israel is the only place where we can open Judaism without threatening Judaism. And that is why Herzl and the founding fathers of Zionism thought it's a safe haven from anti-Semitism. Maybe today it's a safe haven for Judaism. And the best of Judaism can flourish in Israel without it being threatened. So that's my

argument. I think it's a powerful argument for Israel. It's a sad argument for American Jews. And I hope you prove me wrong.

Well, I want to prove you wrong. And I have some thoughts on it. And it has to do with the fact that you're using the term continuity and data in a very specific context, which means not all Jews today will have Jewish grandchildren, which is not the same as, are the same dynamic processes of creation and interpretation taking place in American Jewish life, but under different circumstances?

But even before we get to that, though, there's another danger you're not accounting for in the State of Israel. And this one I was really troubled by because if the danger, quote unquote, for American Jews is basically disappearance, lack of continuity by being in an open society, you create the possibility of either American Jews could become obsessed with continuity, and therefore closed off to this society, or discontinuous.

But the other danger in the State of Israel is that religion does something that you don't want it to do, which is that it becomes juxtaposed to the discourse of nationalism and statehood in ways that are also distorting.

And you say, at one point in the same chapter, precisely because Israel's the nation state of the Jewish people, its society can afford to highlight the non national aspects of Judaism.

Well, that's great when it does. But the thing that I think many American Jews look with great fear and suspicion about Israel are the ways in which Judaism is actually being interpreted not as non-national, but precisely as hypernational — expressed in the form of politics, expressed in the form of religion juxtaposed to the state, the very things that the Diaspora frees you from is that don't have to become obsessed with the national and stateist

elements. So it doesn't that temper a little bit the Israel as the great laboratory for the Jewish people in the modern age in ways that the Diaspora isn't? Isn't that its own danger and fear that Israelis have to negotiate around this?

Yes, I think you're right, but Zionism is this whole experiment for Jews as a collective to have power and obtain power. And this is also something — power can change us as individuals, and power can change us as a collective. And power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts completely. And this is all, this is — I read this great book called the “Power Paradox” [by Dacher Keltner]. It describes the dynamics to how powerful people, their minds change. Power is like heroin, it changes you.

Wait, I'm sorry to interrupt, you know who had the best Torah on all of this, of all the people? Ahad Ha'am. This is what he says in 1897 at the Zionist Congress. At the same time that he articulates this beautiful vision for a secular, cultural, deeply Jewish renewal, he warns that the wrong version of a nation state could actually be the opposite of this because it could create a secular calcification.

So here's the thing. So the Torah, this is what — by looking at Deuteronomy — said that. Moshe, right before they entered the land of Israel, he says you're not only changing your geography, you're changing your politics.

It's a massive shift, from being a powerless people to a powerful people in power could change you. And the Torah is how to guide you. This is the Jewish method of how to protect you from the corrupting impact of your own power.

And Zionism resurrects that challenge: We have power, and power can change us and power corrupts us. And the Torah doesn't say, “power corrupts, so avoid power.” It says, no, “we need power because without power, we can't change the world.”

But the paradox is that power might change your own world. And the question is, are you Jewish enough to protect yourself for your own power? So Ben-Gurion said that Israel brings the Tanakh back to life because we're back to the location of the Bible and the language of the Bible.

I think he's mainly right because we're also back to the politics of the Bible, where Jews have a collective, have power, and certainly the prophets, their preachers are alive again. Because the halacha of the Bible, the guidance of how to deal with power is alive again. And it's only alive because we could screw up. The only way we can become an exemplary society is that we can also become a corrupt society.

You can only become ethical if you're in a position that you can also become unethical. And that's the situation today. I think it's too close to call 73 years into this project. But it's possible that power is corrupting the Jewish people. It's also possible that the Jewish people can show it's possible to have power and to use that power in order to make the world a better place and not to make their own tradition a distorted tradition.

Now, as you know, we're not observers of history, we're street fighters. I think you're with me also here in the streets a bit. And we're here not to guess what will happen with Zionism, we're here to promote — not to predict, but to promote — to change what will happen with Zionism. And I think our greatest question is, what will we do with our power?

I think we should have power. But our greatest test is what we can do with our power. And your question is the right question. Is religion about making us excited about power or careful about power? And you're right, that sometimes in Israel, religion is not making us more careful about the usage of our power, it's actually making us sometimes abuse our own power. You're right.

And because we could screw up, because it could go wrong, that's why it's so interesting — because it could also go right.

I guess I did take the charge of that chapter. I took it personally in the sense of, not Micah's wrong about this,

but I took it as Micah could be right about this. And if he's right about it, there are two options basically for Diaspora Jews.

One is, "well, I guess we should pack it in and leave or become haredi, right?"

Or, actually, this is the mandate of what Diaspora Jews have to figure out for ourselves. And I'm fully in on that.

I guess the place where I would love to see greater synergy here is that the Diaspora doesn't become the antithesis that makes the thesis of Zionism work. That they actually might be projects that could communicate.

I think I've told you this story before. But one of the great examples of this phenomenon of the bringing back of religion in Israeli society is the Friday night services on the beach, in the port of Tel Aviv, take place usually during the summer. I suspect that they've been suspended during the pandemic. But in the summer, 1,100 or 1,200 Israelis come for Kabbalat Shabbat services Friday night on the port of Tel Aviv, and they're not, quote unquote, religious Jews. They're Israelis. They're going for Kabbalat Shabbat and then they're going to eat shrimp afterwards somewhere else on the port of Tel Aviv.

And it's beautiful. We go there every summer with our family for this tefillah. Fun fact, where did that come from? Ronnie Yager and a bunch of others went to New York once. And they went looking for American Judaism. And they go to B'nai Jeshurun, a congregation on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which has the most incredible music and Friday night service in the world. And they sit there and they say this is amazing, we should do this in Israel. But you know what we can do in Israel that they can't do at B'nai Jeshurun? We could do this in public.

We could probably get the city of Tel Aviv to allow us to use the port.

So then they go and set it up in the port in Tel Aviv. I was there maybe four or five summers ago with a group of rabbis from Hartman, and I hear them saying to each other “this is really great. You know, we should do this back in America.”

And I was like, “Guys, it’s a Diaspora idea!” But at its best, Israelis are looking to American Jews and saying, “In what ways are your innovations around religion, spirituality, Jewish culture really good? And now I want to find a way to do it in Israel?” And in what ways are American Jews looking at Israelis?

I want American Jews to read this book because I want them to be inspired by the project of religious renewal by secular people. It could be a Diaspora project, too, but I’m gonna have to find a way to make it work in this idiom. How do we make that conversation really possible?

Right, so maybe this is one way to look at it. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l, in one of his books — I think it’s “Radical Then Radical Now,” makes an observation. He says Israeli Jews are the chosen people, and Diaspora Jews are the choosing people.

And I think this is a way to think about it. In Israel, your Jewish identity is guaranteed. You don’t do anything and it’s guaranteed. There’s four things in the air in Israel that are there for free and you don’t think about it. First of all, we speak Hebrew. It’s a big deal. And two, we live in Israel, it’s a big deal. And three, almost guaranteed, that almost all your best friends are going to be Jewish, no matter what college you go to. And fourth, time. Like in Israel, the next holiday is Tu b’Shvat.

So think about it, like your in derech Beit Lechem, like what’s more biblical than being in derech Beit Lechem, and he’s speaking Hebrew, and the people that you’re serving, they’re all Jews, and there’s

Hanukkah songs on the radio. And you're secular and you hate Judaism.

It's like, it doesn't matter. You're reading Judaism, you're inhaling Judaism passively. It's in the air, your space, time, language, people. It's all Jewish, and it's for free. You don't choose it, it chooses you.

In the United States, in the Diaspora, if you don't really work hard to choose it, you lose it. Because the language is not Hebrew. And most of your friends, many times, the people are not Jewish, and the time, the calendar is non-Jewish time, and you're not in Israel.

So now you have to make an effort. It's not in the air, you have to make an effort. And in order to make an effort, you have to make it new and exciting. So you create an attachment, and you create great music. Because if you're the choosing people, if you have to choose your Judaism actively or else, you lose it, you have to be now very innovative, creative and make Judaism exciting.

So I think this is the great advantage of being the chosen people — meaning that our identity is imposed on us and chosen for us — is that our identity is guaranteed. The great advantage of being the choosing people is that your identity is not guaranteed. You have to fight for it, and therefore it's not trivialized, and therefore you have to make it interesting, creative and innovative.

And there's I think where two communities meet, where I think it's not a coincidence that the best, innovative parts of Judaism in Israel are somehow imported from America. Because we need to borrow ideas and practices from a Judaism that is fighting to stay alive, and it's only way to stay alive is to be very creative and innovative.

Because everything that is guaranteed is also trivialized, taken for granted, and you could forget about it. Like imagine everything now we don't take for granted because of coronavirus. So, in Israel, you could forget that you're Jewish. You're so Jewish that you forget that you're Jewish. And in America you don't forget that, you have to choose to be a Jew every day.

So this I think is where we as Israelis have a lot to learn from American Judaism. We need Diaspora Judaism for that Judaism to be alive. You guys need Israeli Judaism for Judaism to *stay* alive.

OK, two more questions for you Micah, and then I'll let you go because I could talk to you all day, but you don't have all day.

You know, one of the things that I also appreciated about the book, and this is not surprising, is that it's kind of like a Zionist Maimonideanism. You're looking for a real deep middle ground between extremes. That's why you've remade secularism and religionism to not be as opposites. There's a complicated secularism, there's a complicated religiosity, and you're looking kind of for a harmonized unified place. Beit Hillel, the house of Hillel, becomes a stand-in for that version of those in the dispute who can really disagree with their opponents, but can understand them, can articulate their views.

It's interesting because when I was reading this, I was thinking about "Catch 67" also, your book about the divides between the right and the left in Israel, and especially the very applied practical suggestions you make in "Catch 67" — which ultimately, you published again in English as eight steps to trick the conflict — where the goal is something of a harmonized middle ground. What was interesting to me about this is President Rivlin in 2015, when he gives his famous Tribes of Israel speech, where he says there's four major tribes, there's not one dominant Israeli identity anymore, there are four different tribes: roughly 20 to 30% of Israeli society is, quote unquote, secular; a little smaller is religious Zionist; about a quarter is haredi; and about 20% are Arabs. But he doesn't do what you do, which is how do we have one unified identity? What he does instead is how do we be tribal, but in a more effective way? So what's driving your push towards a unified identity as opposed to a tolerant identity, as

opposed to a society that's made up of multitudes that figure out a way to communicate with each other?

You know, President Obama's famous speech in 2004 at the DNC, he has a line there where he says, "We are not as divided as our politics suggest." We are not as divided as our politics suggests. Now, I don't know if he was right about America. I know that line is a true line about Israel.

You look at Israel from the lens of politics, you see a very polarized country, where you must assume that Israelis hate each other and they can't agree over anything. When you look into Israeliness, you realize most Israelis agree on most issues. So while I think — I don't want to do like the Israel versus America game again, we just lose one time — I think that in America, American politics is polarized because America is polarized. And in Israel, Israeli politics are polarized, but Israel is not polarized.

So in Israel, politics doesn't reflect the society like it does in America, it actually masks the fact that society is not that polarized. And it's not polarized on these two massive issues: right versus left, secular versus religious.

And that's because most Israelis love Judaism — and they hate the rabbanut. [laughs] They don't like the rabbinate. So Israelis don't like the religious establishment, but across the board, Israelis love Judaism, and across the board they can't stand religious establishments.

So how do you turn those two impulses into a consensus, into action, into inspiration? When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, almost all Jewish Israelis do not want to control the lives of Palestinians. And they do not want to hold a military regime that occupies the civilian population in the West Bank. They also don't want to be threatened by Palestinians, and they're afraid a withdrawal from the West Bank would put Israelis in a position where they're threatened by Palestinians.

So I would say this double catch, that we don't want to control Palestinians and don't want to be threatened by them, we love tradition but don't want to be controlled by Judaism, this is where most Israelis agree. But what we have is the problem is, these are two like tensions or paradoxes.

And I felt like my role is to turn that tension into words, into a worldview, into something that verbalizes the intuition of most Israelis. So they can realize that we actually are not as polarized as our politics suggest.