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This is Judaism Unbound, episode 431, Disability Justice Torah Circle.

Welcome back everyone, I'm Dan Libenson.

And I'm Lex Rofeberg.

And today we're returning to a series of episodes on the intersection of Judaism and disability with our guest today, Jess Belasco, who's a leading scholar of disability informed readings of Jewish texts.

Before we get started, just a quick reminder that our newest bunch of three week on Yeshiva classes starts next week.

The classes are really great, so visit judaismunbound.com/classes to learn more and to register.

And also be sure to mark your calendars for our annual 24 hour Shavuot full day of Jewish learning on Zoom, which we call Shavuot Live.

And that's taking place this year on Saturday, June 8th, starting at 5pm Eastern time.

And running a full 24 hours through most of Sunday, June 9th.

As many listeners know, Shavuot is Lex's favorite holiday, and Shavuot Live is Lex's baby.

So Lex, could you tell us a little bit more about Shavuot Live this year?

Yes, I absolutely can.

Shavuot Live is kind of my favorite thing ever.

Like all year, anytime, it's my favorite moment.

You just said it, it's my favorite holiday.

This event is my favorite version of celebrating this holiday.

Shavuot is a festival of Jewish learning.

That's not the Unbound interesting part.

That's kind of generally accepted that Shavuot is associated with the receiving of Torah on Mount Sinai.

It's a very cool festival dating all the way back to the Torah, though its form has changed over and over again.

It's meant different things at different times.

We're gonna talk about that in a few weeks on this very podcast.

But for us, Shavuot Live is a 24 hours consecutive extravaganza of Jewish learning.

It is unbelievable.

It's hard to distill without being there, but suffice to say we have incredible presenters from all around the country, all around the world.

And we bring everyone together in a global celebration of unbound Jewish learning.

So we start at 5 p.m.

on Saturday, June 8th, and 24 hours later, 5 p.m., June 9th.

And for every single minute of that time period in between, we will be diving into funky forms of Jewish learning.

So that's gonna include diving into Bible and Talmud and classic kinds of Jewish texts.

It will also mean diving into Jewish topics of our current moment and Jewish pop culture and Jewish art and all sorts of different directions that we don't always call Torah, but probably should always call Torah.

So come to Shavuot Live.

The way to do so is to register at judaismunbound.com/shavuot.

That's S-H-A-V-U-O-T, 2024.

That's judaismunbound.com/shavuot, 2024, S-H-A-V-U-O-T.

That is coming up June 8th to June 9th.

We hope to see you there.

Wow, I can't wait for all of this.

Now, this is the fifth episode in an ongoing series we've been doing, Exploring Disability and Torah, or Disability and Judaism.

We took a break from this series the last couple of weeks, and we're excited to pick things back up where we left them.

So just a few more words of introduction for our guest today, Jess Belasco.

Jess Belasco is the founder of the Disability Justice Torah Circle, a space hosted by Svara, a traditionally radical yeshiva, in which Jews with disabilities can build community around Torah and engage Jewish text through a disability justice lens, while nurturing and amplifying their voices to impact the broader Jewish community.

Jess Belasco is about to be ordained as a rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary, where her studies have been focusing on midrash and pastoral care.

So without further ado, Jess Belasco, welcome to Judaism Unbound.

It's so great to have you.

Thank you so much for having me.

It's great to be here.

Well, when I first heard about Disability Justice Torah Circle, I'm like, yeah, that's something that needs to exist.

And then I heard that it was part of Svara, and I was like, that's interesting.

So I would love to hear a little bit of the story of what the Disability Justice Torah Circle does, what it was meant to do at the beginning, like how it came about, and specifically, how did it come about in relationship with Svara, which is an organization that we've featured a lot on this podcast, but I think our listeners think of as a queer organization, and here we're talking about Disability Program.

Yeah, absolutely.

All of that is a great question.

Disability Justice Torah Circle really is kind of, comes out of the depths of my experience as a human

and as a rabbi, just to give our listeners who may not be familiar with DJTC a sense of what that space is.

Basically, we are a space that hosts sometimes holiday events, learning events.

Really, we try to like do that project of bringing disability justice into conversation with Torah and mining the disability experience for the Torah that it holds in a way that is collective and communal and isn't just coming from me, but is coming from many people in the space and enabling them to connect with each other and bounce off each other and build radical Jewish disability justice community together and like really create together what can Judaism look like if it comes from a deep well of disability justice that is part of our Torah.

So two of our current flagship programs are we have a monthly COVID spiritual practice group and also we have a group called Disability Justice as Spiritual Text, which also meets monthly.

We've also experimented with Shabbat gatherings.

We ran a program in the fall called Textual Ancestry Collective where we explored the Book of Jeremiah and kind of a slow in-depth way of learning similar to how at Shfarad learning is traditionally done in this very slow and depth way.

We've also done some holiday programs in particular large gatherings for Tisha Bav and for Purim.

Really, the ninth of Av Fashti in the summer that originally commemorates the destruction of the temple sort of in the Jewish mythology, but that over time comes to hold a lot of other, like the rabbis kind of tie in lots of other experiences of Jewish suffering to that day.

So in this moment for disabled people struggling with many aspects of our current reality, including sort of abandonment of COVID justice by the larger Jewish community, that's been a really potent moment for holding a lot of that grief.

So I'll just say personally, I've had a disability my entire life.

I have a congenital disability, which I say just by way of saying that disability experience has been deeply interwoven with my life from day one.

And I didn't always have a social justice model for thinking about disability, but I kind of found one when I was 18, 19 years old.

And also Judaism was interwoven with my life from day one.

And so a lot of the project of my 20s was kind of figuring out how those things spoke to each other.

You know, a lot of work has been done on this topic since then.

And I know that you've hosted, for example, my friends and colleagues Julia Watts-Belzer and Lauren Tuckman on this podcast.

And Julia and Lauren and I, along with a few other people have sort of been in this ongoing conversation for over a decade now.

But, you know, in 2012, when I first started to come up with the idea for how these conversations about Judaism and Torah might intersect, I struggled a lot at first because I felt very uninterested in questions like, what does Torah say about disability?

Those just felt like so disheartening and alienating and full of ableism.

What I found that has turned into a wellspring that's powered my work is in starting to ask the question, what does disability say about Judaism?

Asking that question was what kind of brought me to rabbinical school.

And I, when this podcast airs, will have just finally finished rabbinical school, which is very exciting.

Maazel Tov.

Thank you.

I would say that for a long time, I would sort of teach and facilitate Torah based conversations in which I'm sure that I wasn't the only disabled person in the room because there's a lot of disabled people out there and disability isn't always visible, et cetera.

But in the way the conversation was set up, I was kind of the person at the front of the room holding this disability experience.

That was something that in retrospect I realized was very hard and very draining.

And not that I won't continue to do that, but really when I had the realization, this was kind of around 2018, I realized in part based on having seen what B'nai Lapi had done with Svara and sort of B'nai having taken her experience of queerness and figured out how for her queerness talks to Torah, and then sort of brought together a community of people where it wasn't just her holding that.

I realized that I could and wanted to do that with Disability Torah also.

I called it a Disability Justice, Bait Me Drash, Bait Me Drash meaning like House of Study, which is kind of a more traditionalist term.

Then the COVID pandemic happened, which a lot of shifts happened around that, including an even

greater need for a disability-centered Torah experience in the way that the pandemic was particularly intense for disabled people and in the way that it affected people's spiritual lives.

And there was just a real need for space around that.

And so in 2020, I got a grant from a funder called Rise Up, which I'm very grateful for, to officially launch this project.

I remember having a conversation with Julia Wetz-Belser in which I was like, I guess every Jewish project needs a two-syllable Hebrew name.

So what's the two-syllable Hebrew name going to be for this?

And she was like, you know, maybe you don't need a two-syllable Hebrew name.

Maybe you can just call it Disability Justice Torah Circle.

Thank you, Julia.

I'm also very grateful to Julia.

And we didn't want to call it Baby Drash because that seemed like maybe it would be intimidating to people who didn't have a lot of experience with tech study.

And so the idea of Torah Circle came from wanting it to really be collaborative and accessible and not seem to have a high bar to entry.

So can we interrogate that name a little bit?

Because first of all, like we said, we love a name that actually describes what the organization does in English in a way that people can understand, so it's very exciting.

But some of the words I want to sort of understand more deeply.

One is disability justice as opposed to, for example, it could be Disability Torah Circle.

So I'm curious when we say Disability Justice Torah Circle, what is really happening there?

What is that really about?

And then also the Torah Circle, which is very interesting to understand that that's sort of an alternative to Bait Midrash, which we could say is like yeshiva or study center or any of those words, Torah Circle is sort of in that family and that's really helpful.

But can you describe kind of who is there?

Is it just people with disabilities?

Is it also allies?

Is it also other people?

What kinds of texts are they studying?

How do they study them?

That whole kind of story.

Absolutely.

So to start with the piece about disability justice, I would say that disability justice is a lens on disability experience.

I think it's really important for disability justice to include all of disability experience, not to leave any of it out.

Meaning when we think in terms of disability justice, it sort of implies a lens of analysis, pushing back on a lot of ableist assumptions that are built into how people tend to think about disability in general.

Disability justice critiques the idea that disability is automatically a lesser experience.

There's something that folks may or may not have heard of called the social model of disability that talks about how disability is socially constructed in a lot of ways.

Now, I'll also say, and I think this is very important to say as a spiritual leader, that the fact that ableism is socially constructed does not mean that disability doesn't often carry inherent suffering.

Being in a space where disability is not seen as tragic, and in Disability Justice Torah Circle, we don't see disability as inherently tragic, being in a space where people can feel the safety that disability is not seen as tragic actually opens up the possibility of really holding the inherent suffering that does come for some people with disability, because there isn't this fear that, oh, if I acknowledge the suffering, that means that I'm sort of this one-dimensional tragic figure that happens a lot and flattens people's experiences.

So Disability Justice sort of carries with it all of that, and it also carries with it sort of this idea that disability justice is linked to all these other forms of justice.

Like, none of them can really be separated from each other.

Queer justice, feminism, racial justice, climate justice, these are all linked.

And in terms of Torah Circle, Torah, like the word Torah really just means teaching.

It doesn't always have to be about text.

It can be about the Torah of our lives that we share with each other in a lot of different ways.

And that's one thing we do in, for example, COVID Spiritual Practice Group is not a text-based group, but I would say it's a very Torah-based group.

But one thing I want to say about Torah is that Disability Justice Torah Circle does two things.

One thing that we do is we read Jewish texts with a disability justice lens.

And another thing that we do, and this was kind of actually came out of some of my spiritual struggles early in the pandemic, feeling very alienated from Jewish text, is that we read disability justice text with a Jewish spiritual lens.

And that's where COVID Spiritual Practice Group came out of.

Early in the pandemic, I remember personally feeling like I was in deep trauma and deeply adrift spiritually, and I had spent a decade studying Jewish text, and I looked at the Jewish text that I had studied, and I was like, for me, these texts are not helping me right now.

I have been extensively trained in how to like pull meaning out of text that feel alienating, and how do we do that?

And I'm like so good at that.

And in that moment of the early pandemic, I was like, I need something that is just speaking to my experience that is like actually for me.

And what would it mean to expand our canon so that we can pull in those disability justice texts and say we can read these as Jewish texts and put them in conversation with our Jewish canon?

Another thing about DJTC is that we hold, we do have events that are specifically for disabled people, and we publicize which events those are, but not all of our events are specifically for disabled people.

Every human has a relationship to disability or will have a relationship to disability in their lives.

Disabled people sometimes refer to non-disabled people as temporarily able-bodied people.

The line between disabled and non-disabled is much, much blurrier than people tend to think of it as.

And also, Disability Justice Torah is just important Torah for the world.

It can be nourishing Torah for everybody.

So we kind of try to hold the balance of having some spaces that are for disabled people, but also really welcoming people who don't necessarily identify as disabled, or who might be questioning whether they identify as disabled, which is a very valid experience, into a number of events that we have.

I want to sit with the Torah piece you were talking about, and how Torah is not necessarily like a title for a certain set of Jewish texts that are Jewish teachings, but rather something that can serve as a more overarching term that includes even like people's experience.

First off, I want to shout that out, because it's very much how B'nai and Svara talk about Torah, that we can channel our own Svara, our own like instincts, intuition, and the real life experiences of actual human people are a form of Torah.

But I also I want to sit with it because I think what you were saying, and correct me if this is not what you were communicating, but texts that are not usually seen as Torah, but seeing them as Torah.

And what makes something Torah, it's not like, oh, this is part of a certain set of books, or it's not that it's in the Torah, it's not that it's in the Bible, it's not that it's in the Talmud, it's not that it's written by a rabbi.

The thing that makes something Torah is not in the text, it's in the people engaging with the text.

It's a choice we make to engage with something as Torah.

It's a form of reading.

It's something we attribute to a text and which allows us to treat it as sacred in a certain way.

And so it makes perfect sense to me that you would treat disability justice texts that are not necessarily quote unquote Jewish texts or not intended to be as a form of Torah.

That's not quite a question as much as a thought, but it links to my question, which is about Svara.

You could have started DJTC just as you, you could have started it as an adjunct to many other organizations, but it is connected to Svara, an organization that does queer Torah learning, queer Talmud learning.

And that makes a lot of sense to me.

For listeners who hear that, I mean, you've hinted at part of why that synergy made sense, but why did it feel important to link this to Svara's work?

And I'm asking that both sort of from the disability side, but also like the other side too, like how are these intersecting?

It seems that a lot of disability spaces are pretty conscious of LGBTQ plus topics and people.

And a lot of the LGBTQ plus spaces are very conscious of disability Torah.

I don't want to speak that there's never spaces that fall short, but like what's happening there?

Yeah, I think that's a great question.

And one thing I dream of is having much larger and deeper conversations about exactly this topic.

I identify as queer and non-binary now.

I didn't identify as queer and non-binary.

Well, it's been a process, but 10 years ago I didn't.

But it's something I did think about all the time 10 years ago is even though I didn't realize that I was queer, I was like, my experience of being disabled is really queer.

And then sort of various things came together.

And this probably is part of the phenomenon that you're talking about, Lex, but also I think is probably also linked to the fact that Spara is conscious of accessibility and especially in this pandemic era is still almost entirely online.

An enormous and growing percentage of Spara's learners are disabled.

I think it was something like 35% a few years ago, and now it's actually 45% identify as disabled.

So there's, it's actually just numerically a huge overlap.

Not everybody who comes to DJTC programming identifies as queer, but a large percentage do.

I mean, there's much more intersectionality than just a literal overlap, but the literal overlap of those two identities is very large.

I wanna talk a little bit actually about why I think the disability is inherently queer.

And so I'm sharing from my experience directly and there's a much larger conversation to be had.

I am a very visibly disabled person.

You cannot tell that if you're listening to this podcast, but I first of all grew up with a speech impediment, which you also can't tell because I don't have it anymore, but it was a big impact on my entire growing up.

And I also have a tracheostomy and a ventilator.

And a motorized wheelchair.

I'm not trying to create a hierarchy of stigma here, but those are some pretty stigmatized forms of visible disability.

When I worked as a nursing home chaplain as part of my rabbinic training, I would be in the nursing home, like with the chaplain's badge on, like with a staff badge.

And I would repeatedly get asked by other staff what room I lived in.

Like there was an assumption that I was a resident, which nothing wrong with being a resident, but I wasn't and that was, there's a lot of ableism in that assumption.

And I think this is something that's very common among disabled people, and especially visibly disabled people is just a pervasive desexualization.

I was like very pervasively desexualized from basically my whole life until my thirties.

And there's more to say about that that's not for this format.

But I'm saying that because I really wanna argue that that type of experience, which again is just one type of disability and sexuality experience, but I think that's a really inherently queer experience.

I have spent enormous amounts of time because of that experience, reflecting on relationship hierarchies in our culture, romantic supremacy, who receives care, how we structure our relationships, what relationships get validated and what relationships don't get validated.

I would love to see more, and maybe saying this here can spark more, I would love to see more conversation about how there's actually really an overlap between disability experience and queer experience.

Not just in sort of the larger sense of like having an experience that's outside the margins of society, which there is, and there's more to say about that, but really in terms of experience of gender and sexuality.

I mean, another thing I'll say is like, I realized that I was non-binary in my 30s.

And I think part of the reason I didn't realize that earlier was that I always felt like my body didn't fit because I was disabled.

I didn't have any reason to attribute ways that I felt like things didn't fit to gender stuff because I just assumed it was all about disability.

And so in that way, disability and gender were really interlinked for me.

And also actually being disabled was a reason that I didn't realize I was queer until later.

And I've given some examples from my life because that's what I can speak from.

But I think these things are really intertwined in ways that get very concrete.

And I would actually, I think that we could gain a much deeper understanding of queerness by thinking through a disability lens and a much deeper understanding of disability by thinking through a queer lens.

And that the synergy there is really powerful.

And then in a larger sense, something that if folks who are listening are familiar with how Binay Laphi frames Svara, Binay has this idea of crash, this idea of a master narrative.

And for those who aren't familiar, episode three, our first ever episode with a guest features Binay Laphi and explores crash theory a little bit.

Yeah, thank you, Lex.

So this idea of like a master, that we all live with master narratives and our master narratives are constantly crashing.

They're constantly sort of ceasing to effectively describe the world that we perceive ourselves as living in.

And then what do we do when they crash?

Do we hold onto them even tighter?

Do we reject them?

Do we build something new?

And so that's the way that Benet thinks of queer experience and also rabbinic experience and the Talmud and how they come together.

And I think that for me, and I think for a lot of disabled people, disability experience also involves constant crashes.

And those can happen in different, I mean, the pandemic is a crash for sure.

The pandemic is a crash for everybody, not just disabled people, but it's had a particular crash impact on disabled people.

Disabled people in particular often have to develop skills around both like grieving crashes and adapting to new realities.

And that's very deeply interwoven with the way that Svara thinks about queerness and Torah.

So I'd love to follow up a little bit on the COVID Spiritual Practice Group.

I think this is so vital.

And I also wanna name in many ways, the timing you described, the 2022 year of when you came to be.

And I recognize you mentioned you got a grant earlier than that.

But in many ways, it sounds like the Disability Justice Torah Circle really flowered in 2022 through now.

That feels like a really crystal clear kind of timeline, because I feel like in 2022, and increasing in 23 and 24, this notion that COVID is over, really was and is being preached in our society.

And that's done unbelievable damage to people for whom COVID continues to be a huge risk.

And I would argue to everyone, but I want to bring that up in a few respects.

One is we're an organization that we've been a digital Jewish organization since our founding.

Dan and I exist in offline places, and occasionally we visit places, and same with other members of our team, but we by and large operate digitally through our podcasts, through our courses in the Onyashiva, through our digital gatherings, all sorts of stuff.

And that's stayed the same.

We haven't had a period where we're like offline, and then online, and then off again.

But there are all these organizations, whether they're synagogues or Jewish community centers or other

forms of offline Jewish experience, that they saw COVID as this temporary moment to offer digital things.

Maybe some of them still offer some of their programming as hybrid, maybe.

But even those that do, it feels like the extent to which digital experience is accessible is much smaller for most people in most geographic locations now.

And that's a huge problem.

It's a huge problem for many groups, not only people who are disabled.

And so I'd love to hear a little bit more about the COVID side of things, and not just like what your programming is.

I am interested in the kinds of discussions you have in that group, but I'm also curious like if you could speak to why it is such a shonda that we have collectively, as a Jewish community and a human community, it's not just Jews that have done this, but like how we have left disabled folks in the dust.

It's absolutely correct that I'm like at a loss for words because the whole thing is too large for words.

And I remember that, so the specific moment that I decided I had to start a COVID spiritual practice group specifically, this was not a program that I like planned for months and had a lot of focus groups about.

Literally the way it happened was it was the middle of, it was like the third week of April, sorry, third week of April, 2022.

And that spring sort of after that Omicron wave was when the mask mandates were dropping in a lot of places that had maintained them until then.

I think that the federal mask mandate on airlines on airplanes dropped that week.

And I remember there being a particular YouTube video that was going around that was like, there was a plane on which during the flight, there was an announcement that the federal mask mandate for airlines had dropped.

And on the plane, this person took this video, on the plane, everybody ripped their masks off and cheered in the middle of the flight, which like people had gotten on that flight thinking that there was still a mask mandate.

I was like, I have to start a COVID spiritual practice group and I have to start it like next week.

The sense of like, how are we going to survive this, not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally.

Just the depth of the abandonment.

You know, the story that I just told is a story about a secular space and airline, but I was seeing the same things happen in the Jewish communities around me.

Like I was arguing for COVID precautions at events that I wanted to go to that summer and I was losing those battles.

And I knew that friends were losing them.

And I was losing communities that I wanted to be part of.

I want to say, like what I'm about to say, I don't mean that there's no possibility for repair.

That's not what I mean.

But the experience for disabled people of having communities turn away from their physical safety and just ability to be part of the space.

I think for a lot of disabled people and people who are in COVID crashes, even if the pandemic were to magically actually end tomorrow and COVID was no longer a risk, I don't think people would know how to go back to those spaces.

And I don't mean that to say that there's no hope and there's no repair.

That's not what I mean at all.

I mean that for people to come back, there's going to have to be a process of repair.

Yes, it is true that there is such a thing as high-risk people, and a lot of disabled people are higher risk.

And it's actually, and I know this is probably hard for some listeners to hear, but there's not really any such thing as someone who isn't high-risk for COVID.

What we've been learning about COVID, following the research and following the science, is that actually the long-term impacts of COVID, and especially of repeated COVID infections on people, are very serious and can cause disability, like long COVID that comes in many forms.

I have been following the research very closely this whole time, and I keep hoping that it will show that I don't need to be as worried as I am, and it keeps showing that the health impacts of COVID are very serious in terms of various types of organ function, immune system function, et cetera.

And so that really applies to everybody, but I think it's also important to name that it does disproportionately affect certain groups.

And that includes disabled people.

It doesn't only include disabled people.

It also includes, there's lots of other disparities, including racial disparities, where people don't have the same kind of access to health care and have a higher level chronic illness because of that, and I want to name that too.

But a lot of disabled people, A, don't have the kind of sense of invincibility health-wise that I think a lot of non-disabled people do.

And B, I'll say for myself as a disabled person, I know I'm not the only one.

I know that I don't have a lot of margin, and I know that being affected by another chronic illness, which could easily happen to me if I got COVID, would not have a small impact on my life.

It would have a huge impact on my life.

At this point, acute death from COVID is still a real thing to be concerned about, but long COVID and the health impacts of COVID are unfortunately where the real concerns lie.

Like in the ideal world, I mean, I'm not saying in the real.

You know, like, we understand that a lot of these things aren't going to happen, but let's say that we could really envision what should be the case, because the truth is, I think, right, I mean, you're following the science better than me, but the thing that you're talking about is how people are saying that the pandemic's over and it's not over, but I think it will never be over, right?

I mean, I think that this is now an endemic part of human life.

And so the question is, what does that mean?

And does that mean that really this is a time when the majority of Jewish life, for example, should move into the digital sphere?

Or is it something else?

Because I think that that's the question that I don't really know the answer to.

I often think about COVID and climate crisis as being very similar to each other, which is to say that there are technologies that can help us with both of them.

And I actually do think there's like not in like a moonshot miracle, but there is hope on the horizon for

intranasal vaccines that might stop COVID transmission, et cetera.

Like it's not that there isn't technological hope.

I think it's important to remember that there is technological hope.

But the parallel I would draw between COVID and climate crisis is that in both cases, yes, technology is useful, but we're not going to solve the climate crisis just through green energy.

We also have to solve it by changing how we live our lives and using less energy and just consuming less.

And that's the thing that's very hard to confront.

And I think it's a real spiritual problem to confront that.

I don't need to minimize it.

But I think it's a spiritual problem that we need to be actually engaging with.

And this is one of the things that I think is like, if Judaism is going to meet this moment, what is Judaism doing if it isn't going to meet this moment, both in terms of COVID and in terms of climate and many other things like creeping fascism and genocide?

But COVID and climate, to bring us to the forefront in this conversation, religious and spiritual practice has to be helping us to meet this moment around those things.

And what I would say with COVID is that, first of all, I do think that having things be digitally accessible is important, in part for COVID safety and in part because that's actually improved access for a lot of people, a lot of ways they don't have to deal with COVID.

I will also say, and I'm very in favor of digital accessibility, I will also say that like, I'll share that I personally struggle with Zoom.

I do struggle to like, get my nervous system needs met with Zoom, and I say this as someone who's like very COVID cautious.

I actually think it is deeply possible to make in-person events happen that are deeply COVID safe.

It's always a bit of harm reduction.

There's never perfect safety, but we really do have the tools.

One of the messages that I started a different organization that isn't really the topic of this podcast, but

it's called Jewish COVID Resilience Network, and I put out a Yom Kippur protest video a few years ago.

The final slide of that video is a graphic that I made that says we have the tools.

COVID is an airborne disease, so what we need to do is clean the air and enact airborne protections.

There's a lot of ways to do that.

Upgrading, like really upgrading air filtration to like a really, really solid high level is a hugely important way to do that.

There's also emerging technologies like ultraviolet, safe ultraviolet light that can enhance that.

Also, masking.

I know that masking has sort of become this like, thing that's been very politicized, but masking is the number one way we keep each other safe.

I will say that I find it uncomfortable to wear a mask.

I do not enjoy wearing a mask, but we got to mask.

Are there access conflicts around masking where like sometimes it gets like some people can't mask, like young children can't mask, there are disabled people who can't mask, like people who are hard of hearing, et cetera.

Those are all real.

They are things that we can work around.

And in fact, for the most part, the fact that not everybody can mask is all the more so of a reason that people who can mask should mask.

Providing captioning to support hearing access for people who struggle with masking, rapid testing, staying home when sick.

Like these are things that can dramatically make things safer and make it possible to gather indoors.

I did not have a tracheostomy and a ventilator until I was 24 years old.

I got them proactively because I realized it was better for my health.

That was a big transition.

It made some things harder for me.

It's also the reason that I'm here and I'm healthy.

And I just say that as one example, because that was like it was a hard transition for me.

There was grief, there was struggle.

I had to learn to do things differently.

But in part because of having been through that transition, I'm like, okay, I know how to do a transition.

I know how to like figure out, okay, we're going to have to like figure out how to clean the air and mask and do things differently.

That is actually something that disabled people can support communities in figuring out and holding their feelings around because disabled people have been through those types of things in their lives often.

You know, it's a shame that disabled people have been pushed out of communities so often because actually disabled people are the people who are holding the Torah that the community has large needs right now.

So I like to remind people about the relationship that American Jews have to our broader population.

American Jews are approximately 2% of the American population.

And one of the primary concerns of the American Jewish population historically has been advocating for the rest of society not to ignore us because we are a small minority group.

I mean, that's like A, not to ignore us and B, not to oppress us.

That's been a core, probably the core advocacy concern of the American Jewish population for the last few hundred years.

The American Jewish population is a much smaller percentage of the American population than is the disabled Jewish population among the American Jewish community.

Many more than 2% of American Jews are disabled.

And so the idea that we don't need to or shouldn't consider how terrible it is to create Jewish spaces that are uninhabitable for not a small minority.

We would dismiss that argument if we were talking about Jews in the broader American public.

We would say, no, it doesn't matter that only 2% of the American population writ large celebrates Yom Kippur.

It should be an understood day by the broader public and communities shouldn't have big secular things on those days and box out all the Jews from going, et cetera.

We recognize that that would be something that we would voice, and yet we don't apply it within Jewish life to groups that are much more than 2% of our American Jewish community.

So to me, that's a cognitive dissonance that I can't stomach to those who are listening who have the ability to influence whether forms of programming happen in ways that are COVID safe or at least more COVID safe than they might otherwise be.

I really would call on us to recognize the importance of that.

The second thing I have is a gear shift, but I've been asking it at a number of points in this broader unit.

We don't want to just focus on the challenges and the hardships of disability.

We want to also be holding just the gifts, the joys, the awesomenesses that disabled folks bring to the world and to Jewish life.

What are ways in which your own experience with navigating disability has actually enhanced and deepened your ability to be a Jewish teacher of Torah, your ability to be a rabbi, your ability to facilitate for others?

How is that often the case?

How is that not just like a bug in the system where you happen to be able to overcome, quote unquote, your disability and teach Torah, but rather actually something that can and does frequently give people greater ability to teach Torah that non-disabled folks might not be able to bring to the world as well?

Yeah, it's a great question.

For me, disability justice, and I'm a white person who comes from an upper middle class background, for me, disability justice and my disability experience has been a very powerful means of getting underneath the...

understanding lots of different kinds of marginalized experience and really getting underneath societal narratives that I was raised with around how certain types of power domination are natural, et cetera, et cetera.

My life experience has shown me the harm of that and therefore it's opened up for me the freedom that

comes from rejecting that and the solidarity with other people and other experiences that comes from rejecting that.

The fact that I am disabled doesn't mean that I automatically understand every other experience.

It doesn't mean that at all, and it requires a lot of humility.

But I do find that because I have struggled with marginalization in my life, I can often find analogies in my experience to things that other marginalized people describe struggling with even when they're marginalized in different ways.

The ability to kind of not just learn intellectually what those experiences are like, but draw those analogies into my kind of embodied experience and like really feel it semantically.

I don't want to have hubris about it.

Experiences are different.

But I do think that is like a powerful part of what makes me able to do both pastoral and social justice work in the ways that I do.

And I wouldn't, I actually wouldn't want to give it up.

I wouldn't want to live without that experience.

Seeing beyond the narratives, I mean, this is related, but seeing beyond the narratives and structures that were handed by society, because we have to, because we're forced to, seeing through those structures that are prevented as inevitable for me and for other disabled people can both be painful but could also be very generative.

And I often think about disabled creativity.

People call me a MacGyver a lot because I'm constantly like inventing my own equipment hacks and so on.

And that comes out of necessity, but it's also very powerful.

You know, like I was once trying to argue that I was arguing for a mask mandate at a school that I used to belong to.

And there were some people saying that there was an issue because the straps on the masks that we were using were painful for them.

And I was like, well, we can fix that.

We just need like some scissors and a hot glue gun, and I can fix that for you.

And I was talking to someone and this person was like, Jess, you don't understand that like, you're used to DIY-ing things, but are they going to take it seriously if it's DIY-ed?

And like, it just made me reflect on how my disabled experience is that I DIY everything.

There's like a deep sort of DIY creativity to disabled experience that I find very hopeful because it means that we don't have to rely on what we've been given.

We can actually create things ourselves.

And in terms of the conversation about adaptation and how to adapt, I think that disabled people can really be on the forefront of that sort of creative adaptation and then finding joy.

I really missed being able to eat food safely indoors with people.

Masks and food don't mix very well.

I had done outdoor gatherings, but I wanted to eat food safely indoors with people because I'm Jewish, so that's what we do.

And I don't know if you've heard of these, but there's these valves that are called sip valves, and you can insert them in any mask, and they basically enable you to put a straw in the mask without breaking the seal of the mask.

Last Thanksgiving weekend, I hosted a sip valve soup party, where we all put sip valves in our masks, and everybody brought a different kind of soup.

And we sipped it.

And I was like, you know, it's just like a concrete example of how we can adapt and there can still be joy.

And the joy of that soup party was both in itself and symbolic of something larger.

That's awesome.

And I'm thinking about the universal design element of it because I'm kind of a picky eater and a lot of times I don't want to eat what's given, but I would be happy to have soup.

So it just feels like a great party, even for those of us who aren't disabled.

I wanted to pick up on something you said much earlier in this conversation about at a certain point that

you felt like reading the Jewish text was hard and not valuable because there was so much ableism and you found a way to read COVID texts in a Jewish way.

I think you said something like that.

And I'm curious about reflecting on that from now being a newly minted rabbi and wondering about what you think about Judaism and its capacity to be a help in this world, whether it's in terms of disability or climate crisis or any of the other crises that we face.

There's so much ableism in the Bible, in Jewish text, for example.

We talked about this in some of our earlier conversations in this series, and one of the things that occurred to me was that there's also some bad stuff in Jewish text about sexual orientation, but it's not talked about that much.

So there's a few places that you kind of could erase and then the rest would be more or less kind of okay, whereas the ableism feels like it's pervasive.

And it makes me wonder how you look at Judaism and say, well, one option feels to me like you say, look, there's a real great set of values here.

Unfortunately, human beings at a time thousands of years ago didn't understand the ableism that was inherent in their thinking.

So we can kind of pull out their good thinking and it's almost like separating the wheat from the chaff.

There's still something there that's really worth pulling out.

Or one could just say this is just so inherently pervasive that that just can't be done, but there's something else in Judaism that has happened over the course of the two thousand years and that we have a culture that we don't only find in texts.

For example, I'm interested in that lens that we say we can bring a Jewish lens to other texts.

So I'm just wondering as we get towards the close of this conversation, from your perspective as a new rabbi, can you tell us what the enduring value of Judaism is?

Small potatoes.

You know, I am trained in ways that give me the skills to read Jewish texts that are about disability and like, carefully mine them for the one thing that maybe is not totally ableist and we can learn from that.

And I've done that.

I know how to do that.

In this moment, I'm not finding that derisive.

I think that Judaism is like an enduring set of like, joy and survival and rich living strategies that we can draw on.

And I'm going to say more about that in a sec.

What I want to say first is that I think that we have a choice to make.

In order for Judaism to be life-giving, we have to continually choose to make it that way in ways that might be hard and scary for us.

But in terms of like, what's life-giving about it, probably more than I could even list.

And that's actually one of the beautiful things that we get to do in Disability Justice Torah Circle is just move through the cycle of the year with a disability lens and like, discover how it speaks, how those things speak to each other.

I've been really finding a lot to vibe with from the prophet Jeremiah because Jeremiah is a prophet and he is so unhappy about it.

He's miserable.

He's like, why me, guy?

Couldn't you have chosen somebody else?

I mean, that's what all the prophets say apparently in Judaism, but couldn't you have chosen somebody else?

He like has this fire in his soul and he describes it as fire where he's like, world, why are you like this?

Why is the world like this?

Why can you stop being like this?

And then he's like, but God, why me?

Why do I have to be the one to tell them?

I think a lot of disabled people like resonate with that these days.

Being in this position where whether or not you wanted to, you kind of have to be prophetic in the sense of like telling the world that it needs to change.

Is that a text about disability?

No, it's a text about what it means to be on the margin and have something that you have to say to the world, even when the world reacts violently to you for saying it.

It certainly speaks to my disability experience in this moment.

Another example is Purim.

We've had DJTC gatherings for Purim twice now.

And there's a lot of complications of Purim in this moment that I won't go into.

But Purim as a holiday that kind of holds being kind of besieged with also like humor as a strategy for dealing with that, that also has incredible richness to offer to disabled lives right now.

And there's much more like I could go on, but I think what the Jewish tradition has to say about disability, I mostly find very upsetting.

What the Jewish tradition has to offer in terms of how we can engage with parts of the human experience and how those parts of the human experience, and specifically, how can disabled people bring their particular experiences of the human experience together with the ways that Torah offers us to hold aspects of our human experience and how can we bring that together?

That I find incredibly powerful.

I'll give one last example, which is that I hosted a Shemini Etzeret Torah gathering COVID Safely this year.

One of the main kind of under recognized themes of Sukkot and Shemini Etzeret is that it's all about praying for rain.

And in the context of ancient Israel, ancient Israel is not a society that's based around a river, not like Egypt or Babylon.

So they depended on rain.

They like very literally depended on rain.

And if it didn't, and it would start raining in October, which is right when Sukkot is, and if it didn't rain, your crops would fail and people wouldn't survive.

And so like Sukkot is sort of this like festival of praying for rain and it kind of peeps at Shemini Etzeret.

And I think that for disabled people today, and this is kind of how I felt it and presented it when I did this gathering, that sense of being close to the edge, that sense of like really being in vulnerable need of this gift of abundance and the gratitude that brings when it comes and also the vulnerability it brings to like be sort of asking the universe for this gift of rain or this gift of whatever we need to survive.

There's a rawness in that that ties in with disability experience very deeply.

I think there's a huge amount of spiritual richness that can be brought to bear when we bring disability experience into conversation with Jewish tradition.

And what makes me excited is bringing that together.

What makes me sad is when Jewish tradition kind of gets, it feels to me like the word is fossilized.

If the tradition is excluding people and not supporting our society and turning towards this moment in all the ways that we need to, then it's not doing its job.

So how can we support it in doing its job?

Thank you so much, Jess Belasco, for joining us.

This has been a fantastic conversation.

Thank you, I really, really appreciate it.

And thanks so much to all of you out there for listening.

We hope you've enjoyed this conversation and we hope that you'll tune in again in the future.

As a reminder, registration just opened for Shavuot Live, our fifth annual extravaganza of Jewish learning that lasts 24 consecutive hours.

Amazing presenters from all around the world giving their Torah for free.

There's already over 250 signups as I record this outro, and we've still got a month to go.

So we're going to have a lot of people gathered in this space to share some Jewish learning together on June 8th and 9th.

Just head to www.judiasmunbound.com/shavuot2024.

That's judiasmunbound.com/shavuot2024.

Also, we want to encourage you to be in touch with us, as always, with any questions, thoughts, ideas you have off of this amazing episode with Jess Belasco or with any of our other recent conversations on the podcast.

Here are all the ways that you can be in touch.

First, there's our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram handles.

All of those are at Judaism Unbound.

Second, there's our website, judiasmunbound.com, where you can check out show notes for this episode, learn more about our organization, lots of other goodies.

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Any amount goes a long way.

So thanks so much for listening, and with that, this has been Judaism Unbound.