

Blessed Are the Binary Breakers

Episode 6:

Eli and the Prophet Elijah

Transcribed by Annie

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[Acoustic guitar intro music]

Avery:

Hey there, listeners. Before we jump into the conversation I had with my friend Eli, I want to invite you - yes, you! - to share a little bit of your story with me. I plan on putting together a special episode of Blessed Are the Binary Breakers in which we hear not from one trans person but from a whole bunch of people at once. The topic will be on faith and violence, in other words, on the harm that religion has inflicted on trans and/or nonbinary people. Religious trauma, which is often called “church hurt” in Christian circles, can come in so many forms, being invisibilised, excluded, or otherwise pushed out, being told that you are sinful or sick or that your god or gods don’t accept your transness, being subjected to conversion therapy or other forms of manipulation or abuse. If you have been hurt in any way by a faith community or by individuals in a faith community or by theology you’ve been taught in ways that relate to being trans and/or nonbinary, I invite you to share your story. Please only do this if you are truly ready to tell your story and have a support network of some sort in case retelling it is painful for you, and if you’re out enough that it’s safe for you to do so. If you are a minor in particular, I will definitely ask if it’s fully safe for you to be sharing your story.

I also think I’m going to open this up to cisgender people too. If you are cisgender but you’re part of a faith community or a family or some other group where there has been transphobic violence and you want to retell it and how you’ve helped to stop it from happening or are working on unlearning violent ideology that you learned, you can feel free to send in your story too.

To get on the episode, please record yourself telling your story, or send in a written-out version of the story for me to read out loud if you don’t want your voice to appear in the podcast, by April 15th 2019. Your story can be as short as you want, but it should be somewhere within eight minutes. Don’t go super long. It can also be in the form of poetry if you prefer that to narrative.

If you have any questions or want some suggestions for what to include in your recording or written-out story, email me at queerlychristian36@gmail.com. Email your recordings to queerlychristian36@gmail.com as well.

So now that I've advertised that call for stories, we can finally get to my conversation with Eli Rosenberg. They have some really cool views on what it means to be both transgender and a person of faith, to be a person of faith and a lover of math and science, and to be disabled and also be made in God's image. Let's get to it.

[audio change as it shifts from just Avery speaking to their conversation with Eli]

Introducing Eli -- nonbinary, disabled, autistic, Jewish (3:24 - 4:13)

Avery:

I've got Eli with me today.

Eli:

Hello!

Avery:

The way I usually start these episodes is just to ask you what you want the listeners to know right off the bat, whether that's about gender or faith or about your hobbies, whatever.

Eli:

Um, I ended up writing down a bunch of stuff.

Avery:

Nice.

Eli:

And forgive me if I go on tangents.

Avery:

All good.

Eli:

I have a bad habit. But yeah, I'm Eli Rosenberg, them/them preferred, but I also go by he/him. I'm nonbinary, disabled, autistic, and I was born and raised Jewish, so a little introduction for myself, I guess.

Avery:

Cool. Yeah. How old are you?

Eli:

Sure. 23. I'm 23.

Avery:

I always have to think too.

Eli:

Yeah, 23 years old. I hopefully one day will be a psychologist, but I'm still working on that.

Psychology and therapist problems (4:14 - 6:05)

Avery:

Sweet. Do you have ideas about what kind of psychology you're most interested in?

Eli:

Honestly what has kind of gotten me interested in psychology the most is that, like, you know, I was diagnosed with mental illness, and it's kind of a big part of my life, and some of the experiences that I've had trying to, you know, get treatment for that has been a little subpar. There was one time where something actually pretty serious - it was one of the reasons why I ended up leaving school - went completely unnoticed for two years.

Avery:

Oh, wow.

Eli:

And the reason it went unnoticed is because the person I was talking to in therapy was a lot more interested in the fact that I was trans and –

Avery:

Of course. Yeah.

Eli:

– making some sort of, like, case study out of me than actually trying to treat any problem that I actually had.

Avery:

[dryly] Cool. Yeah. That sucks.

Eli:

So if I can be a better experience or even somebody in that field who is trying to say, “hey, there's other people who have these problems, we can't just ignore them or, y'know, foist off their problems on some aspect of their identity” - like, these people still need help.

Avery:

Yeah. That's awesome. Because that - like, every time I see a new therapist I feel like the first half hour is me trying to explain nonbinary to them, and I'm just like, “I'm paying you, I'm not here to give you a lesson.”

Eli:

Yeah. Yeah. Honestly what I'd really love to do one day is open a consulting firm for psychology and stuff.

Avery:

Sweet. Yeah.

Eli:

Give training workshops and stuff like that.

Avery:

That's so cool, and so needed, and my cat is getting tangled up in the microphone cords, so that's fun.

Interpretation and conflict -- Judaism allows for wrestling with God (6:06 - 7:55)

So how do you kind of want to go about talking today? Do you want to go chronological through your life, or what?

Eli:

So I did a lot of thinking about this, and the topic that I kind of chose - honestly I feel like I'm giving a Dvar Torah here [laughing] um, the topic that I chose was kind of interpretation and conflict, actually.

Avery:

Okay.

Eli:

because one of the - one of my favorite things about Judaism is that not everybody has to agree.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

You don't even have to agree with God themselves.

Avery:

Yeah! That is pretty awesome.

Eli:

Yeah! Yeah, that's - like I said, it's my favorite bit of Judaism. And like, the name Israel, which is, like, the Jewish people, name of the Jewish people, etcetera, means "wrestles with god", and I really, really like that for a number of reasons. One of the I guess conflict things that I wanted to note was, when I first realized that I was trans, I assumed - and it wasn't even like I sat down and thought about it really hard; it was just something that just - it was like a tenet in my mind or something, that me being trans was going to be automatically incompatible with any form of religion.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

And that doesn't seem to be an uncommon thing among trans or nonbinary people. I struggled with that for a really long time, and I kind of went through - you know, being part of the Jewish people is also you know, very cultural, so I was like, ok, maybe I'm just culturally Jewish, not really spiritual or religious or anything. And I went with that for a while as well, but that still didn't really fit, and I wasn't really sure why. When I moved back to Louisville a couple years ago, I started to slowly get a little bit more into, y'know being Jewish and what that means and everything

A new rabbi and transtorah.org (7:56 - 10:25)

Eli:

And then we got a new rabbi at synagogue. And not that the old rabbi was bad or anything. He was very good and is still one of my favorite people. But the new rabbi - she specifically - I don't remember exactly what she said, but she essentially came up to me and said, "you know now, I see you, and if you ever want to talk with me about these things, I'm going to be here for you." And I had a really good conversation with her where I told her about some of the even transgender-specific religious things that I had found. One of them is something that I wanted to note, transtorah. I don't know if you've -

Avery:

Oh, the website?

Eli:

Yeah. It's transtorah.org, and it was started by a transgender man who became a rabbi.

Avery:

Sweet.

Eli:

And it's got everything from essays to, y'know, text, from - texts, translations, different interpretations. There's even Hebrew blessings on there for transition.

Avery:

Oh my gosh! I love that!

Eli:

And when I found that I was just like, I was like, oh my gosh, I have to tell somebody about this!

Avery:

Yeah!

Eli:

And I had a really good conversation with the new rabbi about it, and It was just kind of like - oh. Maybe - maybe this isn't as incompatible as I thought

Avery:

Yeah. So do you want to explain a little what those blessings for transition - what that's about.

Eli:

Yeah. With - in Judaism, I swear there's a prayer blessing something for just about everything from, like, eating bread, specifically, to eating fruit, specifically to going to the bathroom.

Avery:

Hell yeah.

Eli:

There's something for everything.

Avery:

That's great.

Eli:

And one of the most common ones, or I think it's one of the most common ones, is the Sheheheyenu, and it's something that you say whenever you're doing something for the first time. Well, I've been on T for two or three years, somewhere around there, and I remember I said the Sheheheyenu before I gave myself my first shot.

Avery:

That's awesome.

Eli:

And that felt kind of appropriate.

Avery:

That's really cool.

Eli:

Yeah. So I started to maybe realise that the big issue that I had had wasn't necessarily that the religion was incompatible with it, but I was looking at the wrong interpretation .

How Eli got their name: dysphoria and Elijah the prophet (10:26 - 16:30)

Eli:

And one - ok, I've never told this story before, but I really want to tell it now. How I chose the name Elijah - I was up at college, and, um, I'm guessing everybody listening probably already knows what dysphoria is, but –

Avery:

Probably, yeah.

Eli:

I mean, for me, it's this - it's almost claustrophobic. Like, you're just trapped - it's like there's irreconcilable conflict going on within you, and it's like you don't fit in your skin right. It's like you just want to pull it all off.

Avery:

That's a mood. That's a mood.

Eli:

Yeah. And when I was at - when I was in college, it was really, really bad. I didn't have a very good support system. I wasn't really in a good place mentally, etcetera, etcetera, and I remember there was one night that it was really, really bad, and I mean, it was almost atmospheric as well. There was, like, this huge storm outside, and it was, like, 4 in the morning, and I could not get to sleep, and I was just curled up under the covers and borderline in tears.

And I - at the time I thought it was just because this song had gotten stuck in my head - Jewish songs will get stuck in your head so easily, you'll be singing them for days. And I started singing a song that we sang at haftarah, which is at the end of shabbat, and I don't think I can sing it right now, but if anybody's curious, it's called *Eliyahu Hanavi*, Elijah the Prophet.

And yeah, I started singing this song, and like I said, it was, like, 4 in the morning, I was almost deliriously exhausted, and next thing I know, I'm waking up, and the sun is shining outside, and I'm - must have fallen asleep. And it was kind of curious to me, because I had never fallen asleep that quickly before, and kind of almost as an experiment, whenever I started to get back into that really bad mindspace, and started, you know, to feel claustrophobic and everything again, I would start singing this song, and it wouldn't exactly - I mean, it wouldn't make the dysphoria go away, but it was kind of like putting a jacket on against the cold, I guess. And I have no idea why, but to this day that song still has that effect.

Now that I'm on T, thankfully the dysphoria doesn't rear its head quite as often. But yeah. And I've researched Elijah the prophet. I've researched that song. And I still can't come up with a cohesive answer as to why it works. One kind of theory that I think is interesting that I want to note is apparently Elijah in the old Talmudic scripts and literature and everything - Elijah would visit rabbis to help them solve particularly difficult legal problems.

Avery:

Interesting.

Eli:

[laughing] Now, back then, "legal" was kind of all-encompassing. It wasn't quite as secular of a definition as now.

Avery:

Sure.

Eli:

So that is also kind of up to interpretation, because "legal" would still fit with religious, spiritual, cultural, you know, rituals.

Avery:

How you live your life, to an extent.

Eli:

Yeah. Exactly. Which I thought was really interesting, because I had this situation in which I felt like the problem that I had was too conflicting, I couldn't handle it, I couldn't figure out how to, you know, deal with it, and then I'd start singing this song, and the song is basically asking Elijah to come - basically asking for him to come next week and the week after that and continuing.

Avery:

Wow.

Eli:

And I was just kind of like, okay, I don't know if I - I don't know if I was talking to Elijah or if I was praying to God. Does God exist? I don't know. That's not really - see, the good thing about Judaism is that's not a question I have to answer.

Avery:

You don't have to - yeah. That's really cool, though, that something happened there.

Eli:

Yeah.

Avery:

Is that - Elijah comes - am I getting this right - like, Elijah - you ask Elijah to come at Passover? Is that right?

Eli:

Yeah. You set out a cup on the seder plate for Elijah.

Avery:

Yeah! Yeah.

Eli:

And I think - don't quote me on this, but I think that was also an instance of Elijah presiding over some sort of legal issue, because the rabbis couldn't decide –

Avery:

Oh, for sure?

Eli:

The rabbis couldn't decide whether or not you should have four cups or five, so I think the fifth cup is for Elijah.

Avery:

He's like, "Um, leave a cup out for me, c'mon. Five is the answer."

Eli:

Something like that. So yeah, what I kind of took away from that - like I said, I don't know if - is there a god? I don't know. I don't have to answer that.

Avery:

Sure. Yeah.

Eli:

But what I kind of took away from that is that it's okay to not have answers. It's okay to keep wrestling with this. I mean, these are really, really big topics. You don't need to feel a bunch of pressure to get it solved right away. It's okay.

Avery:

I'm glad you had that experience, because dysphoria sucks.

Eli:

It really does.

Avery:

So any night that it can be sort of just eased in some way is a good thing.

Eli:

I also curl up with tea. Tea is wonderful.

Avery:

Yes.

Eli:

Okay. I think that's most of the notes that I had.

Avery:

Okay. Do you want to talk a little more about what Judaism means to you and stuff?

Eli:

I mean, I'm still kind of trying to - ha - "wrestle" with that question myself. One thing that's, surprisingly, on my bucket list is to have a sort of renaming ceremony, which I've

heard of people doing, which I think would be really cool. And I think the rabbi at my synagogue would totally be onboard with it.

Avery:

Ooh, cool. Yeah. I've heard of a lot of people doing that in Christian churches, so it's –

Eli:

Really?

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

Okay. Cool.

"You can't be trans, you're autistic" (16:31 - 18:47)

Avery:

Do you want to talk about how disability or how autism ties into either your gender or your faith or anything like that?

Eli:

I don't know. That's an area that I've tried to explore, but - one thing that I think it was another therapist I had once told me was something like, "oh, you can't be trans, you're autistic."

Avery:

Oh, that's always a fun one. That's fun.

Eli:

I was like, what?

Avery:

You can't be, like, two different marginalized groups at once. No.

Eli:

[laughter] I think she had some sort of wild idea that, you know, if you have autism, you can't understand any sort of social concept whatsoever –

Avery:

Yes.

Eli:

And, like –

Avery:

"Romance is beyond you."

Eli:

– there's a lot of social things I don't get, but trust me, my gender is one that I do, so –

Avery:

Yeah. Yeah. That is - yeah, that's an obnoxious stereotype.

Eli:

Mm-hmm.

Avery:

A lot of us are trans.

Eli:

Yeah.

Avery:

Hence, like, where I met you, at KASA, which is, for the listeners, a - an off-branch of ASAN, which is the autistic self-advocacy network. There's a little group in Louisville that is trying to sort of get our own branch of it off the ground here. That's where I met Eli. And a lot of us in that group happen to be trans or otherwise LGBT as well as being autistic, so we definitely exist.

Eli:

I've also met a lot of nonbinary autistics.

Avery:

Me too. We're out there.

Eli:

Interestingly enough, I've also met a lot of people with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome who are autistic.

Avery:

Mm-hmm.

Eli:

And I'm not really sure why. I mean, I know they're both genetic, largely, but –

Avery:

Yeah. It is - like, yeah, what is the connection there?

Eli:

Yeah. I don't really know if autism plays a big part in my gender or not. I mean, I'm nonbinary, although I'm more agender. Like, gender as a whole - it's kind of like I understand it when it's applied to other people, but I just don't really get it myself.

Avery:

Yeah. Why bother? What's the point of it? It's so hard to pin it down. That's why I like what you said before that, like, you don't have to have the answers to everything. It's okay to be wrestling with all this stuff.

Eli:

Yeah.

Testosterone and gender presentation (18:48 - 23:40)

Eli:

Something kind of gender specific - well, no, more like gender - yes, gender presentation specific.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

It's like the longer I'm on T, the more comfortable I am with, you know, displaying gender nonconformity or kind of indulging my feminine side a little bit more.

Avery:

Yes. Yes! Same.

Eli:

Because I mean, back when I had just started on T - I've never been super hyper masculine or anything, but it's like I was allergic to the color pink –

Avery:

[bursts out laughing]

Eli:

[laughing] and I didn't want to have anything to do with anything feminine, because I guess I had felt like I have to distance myself from it so far, thinking that was somehow the answer to everything. It wasn't.

Avery:

Oh, I feel that.

Eli:

Yeah. So yeah, like, I've recently actually started, you know - I don't want to say women's clothes, but wearing feminine clothes.

Avery:

I usually say, like, clothes from the women's section.

Eli:

Yeah. Just - it reminds me of - god, who was it - I don't know, Eddie Izzard or something? He was in an interview and somebody asked him, "you dress up in women's clothes sometimes", and he goes, "it's not women's clothes, they're *my* clothes, I buy them."

Avery:

Yeah. That is - yeah. Whatever the gender of the person wearing the clothes, that's the clothes –

Eli:

Yeah. Yeah, like –

Avery:

It's like, they're pieces of fabric. It's going to be okay, guys.

Eli:

That, and when I say "women's clothes", it just gives me this idea in my head that I've stolen them off some poor woman.

Avery:

[laughing]

Eli:

Like, they're my clothes. I bought them. I own them.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

[laughing]

Avery:

But yeah, I'm with you. When I was a really little kid I was okay with dresses, but it was around the time when I started getting some - I don't know, like, kind of like awareness of self somewhere like 10 or so, I was like, okay, pink is ille- like, illegal now, I cannot wear pink, ever, no more dresses, no more skirts, no jewelry or makeup of any kind. But now that I'm on T - like, I own a dress now, and I like having a dress, and I got my ears pierced so I could wear pretty dangly earrings which I never would have done before being on T.

Eli:

Yeah.

Avery:

It's almost like there's got to be this balance. I don't know what it is. Do you know what it is? I always try to puzzle this out in my brain. Sometimes it feels kind of arbitrary.

Eli:

I think the way I kind of rationalized it was that, you know, the longer I'm on T, the less of a physical conflict I seem to have with myself, so drawing in something that used to have a conflict isn't as stressful and kind of takes on a new meaning for me. So, like, wearing a dress - it doesn't feel like I'm misgendering myself as far as presentation anymore. It just feels like, oh, I'm just me wearing a dress.

Avery:

Yes. Yeah.

Eli:

Yeah. Oh, but there is one other thing that I wanted to bring up. There is a - and actually the whole dress topic reminded me of it, because I am going to wear a - but one of my friends is letting me borrow this enormous floor-length poofy black skirt, and I'm going to wear it with - I haven't really decided if it's going to be a tux jacket or what exactly it's going to be.

Avery:

Oh, for your wedding! Is it for your wedding, or am I making that up?

Eli:

That too, but -

Avery:

Sorry. Spoilers, everyone!

Eli:

Also - yes -

Avery:

I got overexcited! Because I'm also trying to figure out what to wear at my wedding right now.

Eli:

Yeah. There's going to be a trans march on DC in September, and I am currently trying to put together a little group to go, because I really, really, really want to go, and one of the things that they've kind of got on the itinerary or whatever is going to be a - literally a ball the night before -

Avery:

Oh! Oh, that's so cool.

Eli:

– and I have been trying to decide what I was going to wear –

Avery:

Oh, man. I want to go to that so bad.

Eli:

– and it's going to be this giant floofy skirt with - honestly what I really want to wear is - it's this suit, and it's got, like, this metallic almost paisley type pattern over the entire thing, and it is, like, so over the top and ostentatious. I'm in love with it.

Avery:

Okay. Yes! Which is perfect for a trans ball.

Eli:

But then also for my wedding, I think if I wear a skirt to my own wedding, a lot of my family is going to be really confused.

Avery:

Yeah. They're going to be like, "Wow, I thought they said they were trans. What is this?"

Eli:

Yeah. Which I - like, it's my wedding. I don't want to have to deal with that.

Avery:

Because people don't know - yeah, you don't want to have to debate them about your own gender at your wedding.

Eli:

Yeah! Really! Ugh. So, whatever. Yeah.

Avery:

Yeah. That makes sense. That's cool, though.

Eli's fiancée, sister, family (23:41 - 30:29)

Avery:

Is there anything else that you can think of that you - for instance, how about your fiancée, Rachel?

Eli:

Rachel. Yeah.

Avery:

Yeah. She comes to family dinners, so I should know her name by now.

Eli:

She and I have been together for 10 years.

Avery:

Oh, wow!

Eli:

Yeah.

Avery:

That's a long - so, like, you grew up together? Sort - like, was that in high school?

Eli:

We have known each other since the sixth grade, and we got together freshman year of high school, or the summer before freshman year of high school.

Avery:

Awesome. Yeah. Cool. So she's known you a long time.

Eli:

Yes. Yeah.

Avery:

Has she been cool about you coming out and stuff?

Eli:

Yeah. It's like - there was absolutely no resistance.

Avery:

Awesome.

Eli:

I was just like, "You know, I don't think I'm a girl", and she's like, "aight, cool."

Avery:

"That's chill. You're still cool. I'll still hang out with ya." That's awesome. Yeah.

Eli:

Yeah. She has kind of been the longest supporter for me on that front. My family was a little bit unexpected.

Avery:

Yeah?

Eli:

My mom - it took a little bit of explaining the concepts and everything, but once I had actually explained what all of this stuff is, she was wonderful. She even helped me do a bunch of research on endocrinologists so I could get started on T and everything.

Avery:

Aw, that's awesome. How many years ago was that?

Eli:

Um.

Avery:

That's always a really hard question. "When did it start?" Who knows!

Eli:

Oh my god, one of my first endocrinologists asked me that, literally with that exact phrasing, "When did all this start?"

Avery:

Whenever they ask that, too, I'm just like, if I don't say "since I, like, could talk", are you going to not - like, are you going to gatekeep me if I don't say "Yes, as a little child I hated dolls."

Eli:

Yeah [laughing] That - little bit of a tangent here, but --

Avery:

And I had lots of dolls.

Eli:

I did too. Me and my sister, we had a collection - do you know what Polly Pockets are?

Avery:

Do I?

Eli:

[laughing] Okay.

Avery:

Oh, you *know* I know what Polly Pockets are, and you *know* that they're my fave.

Eli:

My sister and I had a collection of them so big that we literally had, like, two tubs the size of laundry baskets just filled with this Polly Pocket stuff.

Avery:

I loved them. My little sister chewed on the rubber clothes.

Eli:

I would too! It was like a stim.

Avery:

I didn't. No, I was like, "No, these are sacred. You cannot chew on her nice little dress. Look at this, Allie, look at what you did." But yeah, it's - I feel weird and awkward asking you "when did all this begin", because I know that when I get asked that, I'm just like, if I give the wrong answer, are you going to tell me I'm not a "real trans"?

Eli:

Well, I've got a little bit of a funny story to explain it. So my sister and I were about two and a half years apart, and I mean, when you're particularly young, we did everything together. We even dressed together. People would mistake us for twins even though we didn't look anything alike. But you know, whatever.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

As far as the gender stuff, I feel like I started to realize something's not right seventh grade ish, somewhere middle school ish, somewhere around there, and I would just keep shoving it to the back of my mind like I don't need to deal with this right now.

Avery:

Middle school is hard enough without all of this confusion.

Eli:

Plus I didn't have the words to describe it at that point, and even when I did finally learn terms to describe it, I was so deep into denial, I was like, this is *not* it, I'm just a tomboy, I'm not trans. I was like, so adamant about it. And my sister put it together just like that, and she honestly got it before I did.

Avery:

Okay.

Eli:

And I remember she even went out of her way to go to the library and find books about trans kids.

Avery:

Oh wow.

Eli:

And specifically, like, came home, and was like, hey, hey - I'm not going to use my deadname, but, "Hey, Eli, I think you might like this book."

Avery:

Just casually leaves it on your bed or something [laughing]

Eli:

I think she actually did!

Avery:

Was she older than you or younger?

Eli:

Younger. Yeah. And I was still so in denial.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

I was probably rude to her about it, to be honest.

Avery:

"Why are you getting these books? What are you saying?"

Eli:

Yeah. And then I finally officially came out publicly, even made a little facebook post about it and everything, I believe freshman year of college. I was like, new start, I'm 10 hours away from home, might as well. [laughing] I just went back to my sister and I was like, "Emily, you were right."

Avery:

You were right all along.

Eli:

A lot of my family - they're not necessarily conservative, but they kind of give off that vibe anyway.

Avery:

Sure. Okay.

Eli:

But it was the weirdest thing. Once I had actually officially come out to everybody and I thought it was going to be this, you know, I thought going home for the first time was going to be this awful experience and everything, and everybody was just calling me Eli, and my grandmother even was sitting there correcting my great-aunts on it, like, "it's 'him' now".

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

Like - oh my god! This is so cool!

Avery:

That's so great.

Eli:

And they're not necessarily perfect about it, but even something as small as - to somebody else, it might be small. To a trans person, trust me, it's a big deal. Correcting people on pronouns is *such* a big deal, and when my family members who I assumed were not going to be receptive to it at all started to actually correct people on pronouns - it was just like, okay, they're still here for me. They're my family. Okay.

Avery:

That's so wonderful. So you said your family was 10 hours away from your college.

Eli:

Yes.

Avery:

Is that here in Louisville, your college your undergrad was?

Eli:

No, my - I went to college at Lehigh University, which is in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Avery:

Okay.

Eli:

Yeah. 10 hours away. My family - my dad's family is here. My mom's family, there's not really much to say. They are hyperconservative nuts in Arkansas. Like, they're not all bad, but I wore a suit once when I went down there, and I got enough bad comments about it that, like - all right. All right. I'm not ... so.

Avery:

Okay. So you were raised in Louisville.

Eli:

Yeah. Lehigh was a godawful mess.

Avery:

I mean, it sounds like it was in the middle of - like, I've not ever heard of it in my life.

Eli:

No. It's—

Avery:

How many people were there, students?

Eli:

Including both undergrad and graduate, about 5000.

Avery:

Okay.

Eli:

So, like, it's a decent size.

Love for math and science: "Numbers are the closest we get to the handwriting of God" (30:30 - 33:07)

Avery:

Yeah. What made you go there?

Eli:

It was a really - it's a really good mechanical engineering school.

Avery:

Oh, okay.

Eli:

So I did mechanical engineering for two years. I absolutely love science, particularly physics, even the really ugly physics like quantum physics and --

Avery:

Oh, I know [wryly]

Eli:

[laughing] I mean, you and I have talked about it a bit before. Yeah. That - so --

Avery:

The stuff that goes over everyone else's head, you're like, yes, this seems interesting.

Eli:

Quantum physics, theoretical physics, theoretical calculus, those are my favorite topics [laughing] which probably sounds really masochistic, but you know, it's not engineering, which is good enough for me. But yeah, I actually do kind of have a lot of spiritual beliefs about science and physics and math, if you don't mind me kind of just going on a tangent about this now.

Avery:

Yes, no, I want you to, please.

Eli:

Okay. [laughing] Are you familiar with the movie *Pacific Rim*?

Avery:

Yes.

Eli:

Okay.

Avery:

Yes, I am.

Eli:

Herman Gottlieb in there has one line where he says that numbers are the closest we get to the handwriting of God. And when I first saw that movie, at first I thought that it was kind of a, you know, funny line, like I had never really heard somebody describe it that way. And then as I got more and more into math and calculus, calculus specifically, and the way you can use these really, really abstract concepts to represent actual real things - I don't know, it started to make a lot more sense to me, actually. And particularly I've been doing a lot of research on particle accelerators and kind of, you know, quantum discoveries for the last decade or so, and the more I find out about it, the more I'm like, this can't be accidental.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

One example is, you know, if you take table salt and throw it in water, it doesn't explode.

Avery:

Sure. Yeah. Thankfully. That would be pretty bad if it did.

Eli:

But - I know! [laughing] but one of the chemicals which is there in table salt - like, you can touch it, you're touching the chemical - but if you had that chemical separated and you threw it in water, it would, like, catch fire and explode in this giant, you know --

Avery:

What the heck.

Eli:

Yeah. Seriously.

Avery:

Yeah. Oh, man. Salt! More dangerous than you think!

Eli:

And like - [laughing] I mean, there's - you would have to be in a lab and, you know, under very very specific circumstances to be able to separate those chemicals, but the fact that those two can coexist in one instance and then be something completely different in another, and there's still a complete framework for how that works and how it happens --

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

-- completely underlining that it just - it doesn't look accidental to me.

"This can't be accidental" -- intelligent design and human advancements (33:08 - 36:34)

When I'm looking at all of this stuff, and then even down to, you know, quantum things, it does not look accidental. It all makes sense. And it makes sense in a way that it's possible for me to be sitting here talking with you and all of the the little, you know, chemicals in our bodies and everything - kind of like with the whole salt thing, if you took it by itself or combined it with something in the wrong way, you could get really catastrophic results, but you don't.

Avery:

Yeah. Yeah. It is pretty amazing. Life is pretty cool.

Eli:

Yeah, it really is.

Avery:

That's what I should title this episode, Life is Cool with Eli.

Eli:

[laughing]

Avery:

That is really neat, though. And that's something that kind of confuses me about so many Christians think that you can't believe in evolution or believe in like, an earth that's more than 6000 years old and be Christian, like, because it goes against the Bible.

Eli:

Yeah.

Avery:

It goes against God. And it's just - to me it's so much cooler to look at things like evolution and think about how God's at work in it than to just say that God [click] poofed everything into existence in seven days or whatever.

Eli:

Yeah. The id- I mean, the world is complicated, and the idea of god or gods or, you know, a creator in my opinion is equally complicated. I mean, for example, with quantum physics, it's not like we're just pulling hadrons out of nothing. No, these are things that have always existed, and it's part of how this universe is possible.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

Us discovering them does not suddenly make them not part of, you know, God's hypothetical realm as well.

Avery:

Yeah. And it also doesn't mean they didn't exist yesterday and now they do because we know they're there.

Eli:

Yeah! Yeah. They have always been there.

Avery:

Yeah. Which is - like, I love outer space and stuff, and just learning - it's so cool that we have the ability to learn about this stuff, like, stuff that is so much bigger than us, like, in space, or things that are so freaking tiny like in salt. Like, we can learn about it, and that's just wild.

Eli:

Yeah. It's like what's his name, Yuri Gagarin - I'm probably mangling the pronunciation of that, but he is the first guy to ever go into space.

Avery:

Oh, okay. Okay.

Eli:

[laughing] So he literally just got shot up into space in, like, the nineteen fifties, nineteen sixties.

Avery:

Sounds about right.

Eli:

1950s? Something like that. And managed to come back in one piece.

Avery:

Mm-hmm. That's a scary job. [laughing]

Eli:

See, that's also, you know - incredible feats of, you know, science and engineering like that, in my opinion, is almost a little bit more proof that, you know, a creator or god, what- however you want to conceptualize this being, exists, and that this is an intentional space, and that this, you know, is an intentional space, because you know, this idea of "made in God's image" comes up a lot in Judaism as well, and as somebody who has a disability, I really kind of try to take that to heart, because a lot of people kind of go, like,

you're the problem. It's like, no, the fact that I can't get my wheelchair upstairs is the problem.

Avery:

Amen.

We are made in God's image -- made to be creative -- tattoos and piercings (36:35 - 42:20)

Eli:

Anyway. This idea that we're made in God's image - when I hear about - for example, NASA - no, it wasn't NASA. It was SpaceX, which is Elon Musk, who I don't like, but who cares.

Avery:

The space part is cool, the guy, not so cool.

Eli:

Yeah. But they successfully launched a rocket.

Avery:

Right.

Eli:

And it successfully docked with the ISS a week ago - couple of days ago, something like - I put it on twitter. You saw it on twitter, did you?

Avery:

Yes.

Eli:

[laughing] Yeah. And when I actually watched the launch of that online and the entire time I'm just thinking, this is a human version of intentional space. Like, we are able to create incredible things like this because we do have creativity. We've been given creativity and we've been given the tools to discover so many cool things about this world and use them.

Avery:

Yes.

Eli:

Like, why on earth does everybody seem to think that God has to sit up on high going, "You can't build rockets."

Avery:

[laughing]

Eli:

Like, what?

Avery:

And, like, you can't change your body just because you say you're --

Eli:

That's another --

Avery:

Like, God made you a girl, so you can't say you're not, and you can't change your body.

Eli:

No, no, no.

Avery:

And you're so right, we're made in God's image, which means we're made to be creators, and that can mean over our bodies too. We can be part of that creation.

Eli:

And another - see, in Judaism, you're not supposed to get piercings, tattoos, you're not supposed to - you know, whatever.

Avery:

Right. With your pierced ears.

Eli:

Yeah, and multiple plans for tattoos in the future. That's one of the things - that's one of the things I really don't like about Judaism, because the, you know, plans for tattoos that I've got and the self-expression with, you know, jewelry and things like that -

Avery:

Yeah. Like, I love your earring that has, like, the spoon -

Eli:

Spoon theory.

Avery:

Yes. That self-expression is so great.

Eli:

It is. And it's creative, and I feel like, you know, one of the things that for me has played a lot in my religion, spirituality and all of that, is name.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

And I wanted to - one of my first - my first tattoo that I want to get is my birthname, and I want to get it alongside of my foot, kind of like symbolize steps forward, and I feel like -

Avery:

So cool.

Eli:

I feel like me getting that as a tattoo is almost kind of giving a little bit of thanks, because as I told with that, you know, story about the song and everything, the whole idea of that name is really important to me, and the way I got that name and the importance that it has with, you know, me being able to manage my own dysphoria and come to terms with, you know, being trans and being able to take that on - it feels like I'm, you know, honoring the way I'm made.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

By - I don't know if it sounds silly to kind of -

Avery:

No, that makes so much sense.

Eli:

So yeah, like –

Avery:

Name - like, the concept of naming and names is so important in scripture. Like with, Israel gets that name. He wasn't, like, born with that name.

Eli:

Yeah.

Avery:

God gave it to him. How we name God is even so important in scripture.

Eli:

It is.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

I - I'm not really particularly familiar with any Christian traditions on this, but with all of my little notes that I have here [paper fluttering noise] wherever I've written God, I don't write the O.

Avery:

Yeah, you do the hyphen thing.

Eli:

Yeah. And anything that has - anything that names God is supposed to be treated with a lot of respect. So if you drop a prayer book, if you drop one of the Hebrew prayer books or something, you're supposed to pick it up and kiss it before you put it away. And Torahs - there's a lot more - a lot more traditions that go along with that, but when you're done using a Torah, you aren't supposed to just, you know, recycle it, throw it away or anything. You're supposed to, like, bury it.

Avery:

Yeah. We learned about that in my Hebrew class. I'm like, that's why we have fragments of things is because they were buried instead of disposed of other - like, they were buried, and then later people found them, and that's how we have certain manuscripts is because of that special way of disposing of them.

Eli:

That's cool.

Avery:

Sorry. That's a tangent.

Eli:

No, that's really cool.

Avery:

So, like, that reference for the name - yeah.

Eli:

So yeah, I don't know - like, to go back to the whole tattoo thing, I don't know if that sounds a little bit silly, but to me, you know, using that as a self-expression, using that as a meaningful way of handling and relating to your own body - it - that feels spiritual. I don't get why it should be some - like, the original idea in Judaism was that you're not

supposed to - I don't want to use the word desecrate, but you're not really supposed to, like, damage, maybe, the vessel that God has given you or something.

Avery:

Like that it's - I don't know if this is right because I'm not Jewish. I'm reading this book on disability in Judaism that's by a Jewish woman named Judith Abrams. She talks a lot about, like, the idea of the body being perfect if it's a certain way, and - like, yeah. So, like, a tattoo or something makes it less perfect.

The medical model vs. the social model of disability (42:21 - 45:36)

Eli:

And as it relates to disability –

Avery:

Disability! Yes! Disability makes it less perfect.

Eli:

That really, really starts to, you know - the whole medical model of disability versus the social model of disability, and as someone with EDS, I actually kind of struggle with that a little bit, because on the one hand, EDS can be really bad.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

EDS can cause really serious heart problems. Some of the complications from EDS can be deadly. Thankfully the type of EDS that I have is a little bit lighter on that, but it's still a possibility.

Avery:

Yeah. Yeah. So, like, all the accessibility in the world isn't going to help with that kind of thing.

Eli:

Yeah. And a lot of people in the disability community are extremely vocal, and they have a right to be vocal, that they don't want to be cured. But at the same time, that has the potential to kind of alienate some of the people with chronic illness who, you know, could potentially be dying from their diseases.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

So it's a little - one of those conflict struggle moments where I don't really need to have the answer right now, thank God.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

[laughing]

Avery:

Well, and we have - it's such a binary thing to say it's either the medical model or the social model when really it might be a bit of both.

Eli:

Yeah. My personal theory is that, you know, self-determination should be the absolute rule in any case.

Avery:

Yes.

Eli:

But yeah, sometimes I'll kind of, you know, sit there, think about EDS and you know, what exactly "made in God's image" means with respect to that. And I still haven't really come up with an answer, but I hope I will someday.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

You know, it has impacted my life in a lot of ways, trying to adjust to the fact that I do now need to use mobility aids a lot of the time, and especially trying to balance - because, like, I use a wheelchair sometimes, but am I, like, physically capable of standing up and walking? Yeah. Is it safe for me to do so all the time? Not really. But a lot of people don't really get that there can be that duality to it.

Avery:

Yeah. It's not binary.

Eli:

And, you know, if somebody sees me stand up from a wheelchair, I literally have little cards explaining EDS -

Avery:

That's nice.

Eli:

- that I carry around in my back pocket -

Avery:

In case someone's like, faker, faking it!

Eli:

In case anybody gives me a weird look, or asks me - because I've had people where I go from using my crutches to not using them to using them again - because I work in food service. It's not like I can cons- I have tripped people with them. I have whacked people with them. One time I even reached a little too far and hit somebody in the nose.

Avery:

[wheezes] So sometimes you can't.

Eli:

Sometimes it's more of a hazard for me to use them than just suck it up and deal with, you know, the dislocated whatever.

Avery:

Yeah.

Eli:

And I've had people make really, really kind of nasty, sarcastic comments about it, and every time I'm just, like, I have a genetic disease, it screws up my joints sometimes - just, you know, the whole thing. [huff]

Avery:

And it sucks that you have to do that work and educate them, but it is smart of you to just be, like –

Eli:

That's why I just started carrying around little cards.

Avery:

“Take a card. I don't have time to explain it to you, so just read this.”

Wrapping up (45:37 - 48:16)

Eli:

Was there any other topics you wanted to touch on?

Avery:

We've gone through a lot of things.

Eli:

We have.

Avery:

A lot of math tangent. I might cut that down a little bit because you're like, “And look at this graph,” and the listener will be, like, “There's no graph!”

Eli:

Yeah.

Avery:

“This podcast does not come with a graph.” Yeah. So my last question for people is usually if you could offer one last piece of advice for trans people, and it can be specifically Jewish trans people, trans people of faith, or just trans people in general. What kind of last bit of advice –

Eli:

I guess it's something that I did kind of touch on earlier, that it's okay to wrestle with these things.

Avery:

Yes.

Eli:

And I think that the idea of you know, being able to interpret things differently - it's a Jewish concept, but it's also a concept in general that I think you can apply to a lot of things, particularly religion, because, like, there's going to be religious sects or areas and spaces that are not welcoming, but there's going to be some that are. And one thing that I wish I had kind of known and understood earlier is that being trans and being religious - they don't have to be mutually exclusive. For a long time I assumed that I couldn't be both, you know, actively Jewish and trans, but I've found areas where people are going

to welcome me as both, and they're not going to consider me lesser for being either one.
So yeah.

Avery:

Yeah. It's been really awesome to get to talk to you about so many different topics.

Eli:

Yeah. This has been fun.

[Shift in audio to only Avery speaking]

Avery:

So many thanks to Eli for sharing some of their thoughts with us. I want to remind listeners once more about the call for stories on faith and violence that I described at the start of this episode. Also, if you are interested in hearing Eli talk more about intelligent design and some really cool calculus stuff, I saved the clip that I cut out of this episode and I plan on sharing it on patreon. That's right, I don't have a patreon yet, but I plan on setting one up sometime in the near future where anyone who's able to support me financially will have access to some bonus clips and stuff like that. I will definitely make sure to let y'all know when I finally set that up and explain a little more why I need financial support to keep this podcast going. So keep an eye out for all of that. And in the meantime, go break some binaries and be a blessing to the world with your life.

[acoustic music]