

Making Mel Brooks Proud: Judaism

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SPEAKERS

If You Don't Know, Now You Know, Dr. Shari Rabin, Megan Goodwin, Bonus Ending, Simpsons, A Little Bit Leave It, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:17

This is Keeping It 101, a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast. For 2021-2022, our work is made possible through a Public Humanities Fellowship from the University of Vermont's Humanities Center. We're grateful to live, teach, and record on the current, ancestral, and unceded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and Aucocisco peoples. And as always, you can find material ways to support indigenous communities on our website.



Megan Goodwin 00:39

What's up, nerds?! Hi, hello! I'm Megan Goodwin, a scholar of American religions, race, and gender.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:45

Hi, hello. I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, a historian of religion, Islam, race and racialization, and South Asia. Shalom alechiem, Megan!



Megan Goodwin 00:54

Alechiem wa Shelom? That's not right. *laughs* This is gonna be a long episode, I can tell already.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:59

Already? Already, you're on me? Feh!



Megan Goodwin 01:06

laughs IRMF, do you want to tell the people what's going on today?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:08

Today, nerds, we are talking Judaism, which DEFINITELY means I've got Mel Brooks jokes stored up, and also some killer Yiddish phrases at the ready.



Megan Goodwin 01:21

But, spoilers, Judaism is bigger than funny men from Brooklyn, and your whole network, and also-- I mean, most things are bigger than you, I guess.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:29

laughs It is. It is indeed. Jewish Studies is also a real field of expertise, which famously is NOT mine at ALL, despite Jews being my faith community, to say nothing of my religio-racial-ethnic identity. So, thankfully, to help round us (and by us, I mean me) out, we have a STELLAR guest expert.



Megan Goodwin 01:55

Yeah, we do! Dr. Shari Rabin is Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and Religion at Oberlin College. She works on Judaism in the US, perhaps especially in the American South, and she has lots to teach us, and I can't wait for y'all to hear from her later on!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:09

Me too. All kidding aside, she is fantastic, AND all punny jokes aside, Judaism is weirdly important, not just to me as a Jew, but to the world religions paradigm, which is why we're talking about it today. Its role-- Judaism's role in the world religions paradigm affects Jews in ways we haven't really seen yet into our deep dive into this system. So, why don't we just get into it?



Megan Goodwin 02:40

Yeah, let's do it.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:41

It's pronounced FRONKENSTEEN-- I mean, LESSON PLAN!



Megan Goodwin 02:46

laughs Yay. Today, nerds, we are talking about Judaism in the same way that we've been talking about all these other so-called "world religions." We're stressing plurality, we're talking about divergences, we are interrogating how and why Judaism has a place in the world religions model. And, because Ilyse is Ilyse, we are punctuating it all with not just Mel jokes-- Mel Brooks jokes, but even more Mel Brooks jokes than usual.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:19

He's one of my favorite Jews! And he makes a lot of really smart jokes about religion. So it seems only right!



Megan Goodwin 03:26

It does, it does. So, today's thesis is pretty basic: Judaism is an interesting case study to think about privilege and position in the world religions model. Jews are diverse and interesting, and you likely don't know about the diversity because, despite having such a prominent slot in this silly world religions paradigm model, Judaism isn't there because of its own merits, it's... yeah. It's there because of its relationship to Christianity, or how Christianity imagines its relationship to Judaism and Jews.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:59

White Christian imperialism strikes again! DUN DUN DUN... The 101 on today-- *clicks tongue* -the section where we do professor work. Alright, Megan. Let's just get moving. So, as a-- as a Jew, I have a few things I would, I would like to say, like to get some things off my chest, before we get into the meat of this thing.



Megan Goodwin 04:25

Right. Take the wheel or... fork, and knife? I guess? You don't eat meat. What's happening?!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:32

I mean, if it's pastrami...



Megan Goodwin 04:34

Alright, fair enough. Or the chop liver!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:36

The chop liver. *laughs* Okay. First and foremost, I like to talk about Judaism on its own today. Which means, without talking about anti-Jewish stuff, or antisemitism writ large. But the thing is, is that in reality, I'm going to have to talk about both of those things because quite a lot of Jewish practice, including things like language itself, is rooted in histories of Jewish exclusion, if not outright persecution, and, you know, murder.



Megan Goodwin 05:07

Mm.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:08

I want to name out loud that this is different than what we've seen elsewhere. When we talk about other so-called major religions, we aren't usually immediately talking about hate, or that a community is defined by its outsiders.



Megan Goodwin 05:22

Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:23

Hate isn't the only interesting about Jews! I mean, hello gorgeous, I'm right here!



Megan Goodwin 05:27

cracks up Beautiful.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:30

BUT-- Jews have never been a demographic majority in the world, never ran a major empire, never really even dominated a powerful city. Jews have been minoritized nearly from the jump-- and that's a big ass jump, at least in our popular imagination, since the Jewish calendar assumes some semblance of community for 5,782 years. Which is to say, Megan, I actually have a question: why is Judaism one of the classic five religions listed in the world religions paradigm we are so keen to talk about this year?



Megan Goodwin 06:06

Hmm. Well, in case our nerds don't recall, we said WAY back at the start of HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART 1 that the "traditional" world religions model was Judaism,

Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Sometimes it was Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Heathens, since, like, Hindus could fit into that idolatry category, because this model fucking blows, because it's imperialist trash... Either way, though, Jews were ALWAYS part of the model, despite literally never being a majority. And you're asking me why??



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:36

I AM asking that. Can you tell the nerds?



Megan Goodwin 06:38

I can. The answer will not surprise you. The answer is Christianity. And specifically, white European Christianity.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:47

Gey an! Do go on.



Megan Goodwin 06:51

Christians, who we have argued and have receipts to prove, invented the world religions model, at the same time they invented scientific racism, no less. But as much as they disliked Jews theologically -- or provisionally allowed Jews some rights and freedoms and their kingdoms and empires and budding nation-states-- they couldn't and can't ignore Judaism. And why, I hear you asking? Because texts. Because the Hebrew Bible is the first part of the Christian Bible. Pause. Which meant Christians can't actually throw the baby Jesus out with the bathwater.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:27

I got you good.



Megan Goodwin 07:28

You got us really good! This is what I get for not reading ahead! *laughs* You cannot-- *cracks up*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:39

Oh man, that's like a classic blooper reel right there.



Megan Goodwin 07:42

Woof. Oh-ho. You cannot throw the baby Jesus out with the baptismal water. Judaism is important in the model NOT because Jews are important-- or even because Judaism gets described kindly in this model. Spoilers: it does NOT. Judaism is important in the world religions paradigm because it HAS to be in order for Christianity to be solidly number one in this model.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:09

Yeah. Vi klug! So smart, so smart, dear. Yeah. Nothing makes me want to flex my Yiddish more than a bunch of goyim sitting around deciding that my long religious history is important only in service to its own.



Megan Goodwin 08:23

sighs Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:24

So, see what I mean when I say that I want to talk about Judaism on its own, but also, that's impossible because of the very structures in which we talk about religion academically.



Megan Goodwin 08:33

Meh.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:34

So let me say more. The popular, very legally important idea that Jews are legalistic-- and only legalistic-- is a remnant of this model, of this depiction of Jews in a so-called scientific way. Because early, quote, "science or religion" or "philosophy of religion" scholars wrote things like "Christianity is a natural evolution from Judaism, because the Jewish God is a mean father but a grown up religion's understanding of God is about kindness and love and forgiveness." That's an emotionally mature religion and God. A primitive understanding of God is "here are the rules, follow them assiduously!" An evolved understanding of God is that "there are rules, but being so uptight about them doesn't make any sense. Only unevolved people are 'slaves' to religion." And I want you to hear all the words I'm using on purpose, right? Evolved, slaves, immature, father...



Megan Goodwin 09:35

Yeah. That hurts.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:36

This is what's going on when Christians-- specifically white Protestant Christians-- are making up the world religions model, while they are also doing scientific racism AND enslaving Black Africans. So, that is the soup from which religious studies emerges. Judaism not doin' so good in this model. Which is also related to, like, a sidebar on this exact theme, because, like, when y'all hear people-- because you, dear nerd, would never say this, but you might hear schmucks-- say shit like, "my God isn't wrathful," or "the Jewish God," or "Jews love laws!" or even when you are inclusion, equity, and diversity officer only knows about what Jews cannot eat, but not a thing more so that they don't get in trouble? I want you to hear in those phrases the history of anti-Jewish interpretation, and anti-Jewish classification of religions. Because I, famously a Jew, find love, freedom, liberation, forgiveness, and goodness in my holy traditions, yeah, without the so-called New Testament addenda. Because Judaism is not just rules and regulations and "thou shalt nots," regardless of what this system has taught us. So if that's an image of Judaism in your head-- if the rules, or the "before Christianity," the Old Testament-- if that's an image that you carry with you, it isn't just antisemitism, it's also the world religions model that values Christianity over all else, and that has to differentiate between Christian ideas and Jewish ones.

M

Megan Goodwin 11:19

Ugh. Yeah, totally. I think the other maybe paradoxical part about Judaism inhabiting such a prominent role in the world religions model, but also for the wrongest, grossest, racist, imperialist reasons, is that the general public still has no frickin idea about Jews-- up to and including whether or not it's okay to say Jews, or whether that's a slur. Like, that's an issue that comes up in my world religions class every year. When I teach--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:47

Woof.

M

Megan Goodwin 11:47

Yeah, yeah. And it's that moment of like, "Oh, no, in what context have you been hearing Jews and Judaism talked about? Because it doesn't seem healthy or good..." Yikes. Yeah. And when I teach, students are straight up shocked a lot of times to learn that there are more than one kind of Jew? Particularly when I was teaching in North Carolina? They are straight up shocked to learn that Jews live in a lot of places, and are even FROM those places. I get a lot of like, "What do you mean, there are as many as, if not more, Jews in New York than there are in the state of Israel?" There's a whole thing. And then some of my students are themselves Jewish, which raises some interesting questions about Jewish proximity to white Christians, as also proximity to white privilege and power, and that is another space where I see students, my Jewish students, particularly wrestling in these classes. It's a lot.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:41

Yeah, yeah. This isn't the moment for this, maybe, because I'd like to move into types of Jews-- which you so beautifully teed up for me-- and regionality, and like, "Oh, the places Jews go!"



Megan Goodwin 12:52

laughs They are a traveling people.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:55

laughs Like, Jews with European heritage and pale skin claiming that they don't benefit from white privilege in the USA is fucked and fraught, at best. But! That is not what we are doing right now. Right now, let's talk diversity of practice. Goodwin, Goodwin, do you want to say some stuff?



Megan Goodwin 13:12

I mean, when do I not want to say some stuff? But do I?? You bet. First of all, all rules apply. Judaism cannot be one thing because Judaism is what Jews do. Which, in this case, isn't just a cute thing we say, it is a thing Jews say! And not just Ilyse. Judaism is frankly sort of famous for honoring dissent, disagreement, and multiple interpretations. Jews tell jokes about three Jews, twice as many opinions, and that isn't separate from theology. Yes, there's the Torah-- *Secret Word of the Day!* --the written Hebrew Bible, but that's not all Judaism is. But I do love, love, love, love, love, LOVE Rabbi Danya Ruttenburg's definition of Torah that is living-- you have to live the Torah. Then there's the Talmud-- *Secret Word of the Day!* --which is rabbinic and oral law, essentially. There's a long history of midrash-- interpretation, commentaries, innovative ways to think about the stories... I always think of this as, like, filling in... not plot holes, but, like, it's not non-fanfic. Love it.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:20

Definitely.



Megan Goodwin 14:21

Like, this is where we get the story--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:23

It's religious humor!



Megan Goodwin 14:23

Right! Like, it's where we get the story of Lilith, which is my all time favorite midrash. Even if these things are written down, they're not solidly set in stone because Jews more or less assume that the world is changing, and if their sacred sources are meant to speak to all people

in all ages, then it's up to them, the Jews, to make sense of the sacred source in a contemporary world. In short, then, Jews have seemingly always known that Judaism is what Jews do. There's built in arguments LITERALLY written down in the sacred sources, which, I bet, is why you get so mad that the world religions model makes it so that Judaism is flattened out and stuck in time, like it's this one thing.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:03

Yeah, I mean, it doesn't-- it doesn't help me think "Hey, those white Christian colonizers were just people thinking they were doing the right thing." No, no, no. It doesn't help with that.



Megan Goodwin 15:14

Oh. Huh!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:15

So, what I hear you saying is that Jews have baked plurality into their sacred traditions. And people often miss this because, you know, reasons.



Megan Goodwin 15:25

Racism and imperialism reasons. Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:27

Uh, yeah. And one of the things I think is true is that in the US, we can't-- like, it's not helped in the US because we can't think of diversity in Jewish communities or practices, because we're only imagined to be from eastern or northern Europe-- places that my people are from, places that spoke Yiddish, or look like Fiddler on the Roof, or that got absolutely destroyed during World War II, the Third Reich, Soviet Union, and the Holocaust. Say nothing of the Cossacks. But yes, in the US, that is a majority of the Jewish community. Not the totality, but the majority. That said, historically... historically, places like Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic-- those are those are not remotely the only places that Jews are from.



Megan Goodwin 16:21

Do you want to elaborate?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:22

Well, as Mel Brooks-- and I suppose Monty Python-- teaches us, the Spanish Inquisition did some work to remove the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula.



Megan Goodwin 16:33

Oh. Yeah, work-- work was done.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:37

But before that, before we are ceremoniously kicked out with a song and dance number, there was a huge, vibrant Jewish community there. In fact, that community had its own Yiddish, so to speak, its own ethnically defined language. But instead of Yiddish, which is German and Hebrew (and linguists, don't kill me. I know it's more complicated than that, but it's an easy equation). If Yiddish is German plus Hebrew, there was this other language: Spanish plus Hebrew, a language that we now call Ladino. Ladino, some experts think, was the language of Jews, not just in Spain, like what we would now picture as the nation-state of Spain, but in all the places pre-1492 Iberian traders and empires would have been: which is to say, like, the whole Mediterranean. Places that include northern Africa, and especially Morocco, since it's like, a stone's throw from Spain, as well as Turkey, Greece, and other parts of the Balkans. Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 17:41

Yeah. Sorry, I got stuck on this stone throwing with the, you know, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella get rid of the Jews. Eugh.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:50

And the Muslims. But, you know. Right now, we're focusing on the Jews.



Megan Goodwin 17:52

Yep, yep, yep. Okay, okay. *Secret Word of the Day!* So, Yiddish is/was a language spoken by Jews in eastern and northern Europe, and I know those Jews are often called Ashkenazi, and they are a major population of US Jews. And you're telling me there's also Ladino, a language that I know is spoken by Jews we would call Sephardi, or Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. And there are basically ethnic divisions within a religious and racialized group. That's a lot.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:26

There's also more.



Megan Goodwin 18:28

MORE?!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:30

There's also Mizrahi Jews, which is a little confusing, because it has a lot to do with the nation-state of Israel-- which I am NOT going to get into because I've done it elsewhere, and every time I do, I get fellow Jews sending me hate mail, because I am apparently the wrong sort of Jew. And I don't mean, like, annoying DMs. I mean, like, call the cops threats. So, I'm not into it, fam. Please stop. If you know a cousin who's doing this to me, call them off. That said, in Israel's establishment, the goal was to populate the so-called Jewish state with, uh, you know, Jews. And there are categories of Jews. Mizrahi-- **Secret Word of the Day!** -- is one of those categories that gets established. And there's evidence that before 1948, Jews would never have said "I'm Mizrahi," which is a legal ethnic category for Jews specifically from the Middle East, western Asia (which, if that doesn't make sense to you, think of countries like Iraq, Iran, Turkey), and northern Africa. But, sometimes Jews from northern Africa are called "Magrebi"-- **Secret Word of the Day!** --because "magreb" is the word for North Africa.



Megan Goodwin 19:42

Okay.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:42

All of which is to say that I want our nerds to hear that there are long-standing Jewish communities in all of these places such that we need names for them.



Megan Goodwin 19:52

Okay! So you're saying that even though we think of places like Iraq and Iran and Turkey and Morocco and Egypt as, like, exclusively Muslim today, at some point, these places held significant Jewish populations?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:03

That's exactly what I'm saying. Can I-- can I digress for a second?



Megan Goodwin 20:08

Yeah, like I could stop you. **laughs** But yes, please do.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:11

So, when I was living and studying in Tajikistan, which is a country in central Asia, I was studying there because I couldn't study in Iran because of US laws, and I was learning Persian

because Tajik is a dialect of Persian, which you would think is a good substitute for living in Iran, except that Tajik is written in Cyrillic, like Russian, which broke my brain. Straight up broke my brain.



Megan Goodwin 20:33

laughs Oy.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:33

In this middle-- like, I'm in the middle of a brain break-- two month period, we take this trip to the mountains. Now, being good nerds, sister of the pod Kathy Foody and I had read a bunch of books about Tajikistan before we headed there. And one of the things that we read about was this illustrious history of Jews as musicians in, like, Tajik royal court spaces-- but also how those very musician Jews, during the USSR's brutal reign there, were all forced underground, like every religion in the USSR, and, like, so many people were sent to Siberian work camps. And in the midst of all this, Jews "escaped" to the mountains. So. We're in the mountains, we're like... we're like in the mountains. Like, I mean, like, hairpin turns every five seconds. And we see some-- we see some Jews. They're noticeable by their funny hats, and I, famously a Jew, get so excited that I'm like borderline yelling in my crusty ass Tajik, "Hi! I'm Jewish, too! Hello!" And this poor Jewish man, who had, like, been walking with goats, grabs this tiny goat that he was with and, like, literally throws it over his shoulder, and fucking runs. Like, just runs. Which, I had thought this story was going to be about, "Oh my god, there's Jews in Tajikistan, which is a country most Americans can't even locate, let alone associate with Jewish history," but... now that I said this story, I'm worried that this is actually a story of how I did a hate crime. *laughs*



Megan Goodwin 22:01

laughs shakily Primary sources...



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:07

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Okay. I'm back.



Megan Goodwin 22:11

Jews in the mountains. Check. Glad that YOU said funny hats, because I don't think that's appropriate for ME to say. Anyway.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:22

There's actually, like, a very real history of, like, coded heads, particularly in that part of the world. So that's both inappropriate and actually historically accurate shorthand. I apologize. *laughs* Alright. So, let's move on.



Megan Goodwin 22:38

Okay. Okay. Okay. Gracefully backing away... beyond Jew-on-Jew hate crimes-- Jesus Christ-- in foreign countries. I think the larger point, right, was that Jewish communities exist well beyond eastern Europe! And well beyond the Yiddish speaking imaginary that many of us have. And Jews are not just white people living in the US, eating bacon, if it's your mom, and telling jokes. Jews are richly part of places and doing Judaism in those places accordingly, in their own unique languages, for example.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:17

Yeah. That's exactly right. Would you permit me one more story, even though that one took a turn?



Megan Goodwin 23:22

laughs Is it a hate crime?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:25

I don't think so? Question mark?



Megan Goodwin 23:27

Okay. Then I will allow it



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:30

Alright. So, when I was in India for the first time in 2003, I traveled to Kochi, which used to be a city called Cochin--



Megan Goodwin 23:39


Oh yeah!




Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:39

-- a small port city on the Indian Ocean. So, think the east coast of India.




 Megan Goodwin 23:46

Mhm.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:47


And-- oh no! I'm sorry, the west coast of India. I'm like, literally thinking about it and I can't tell left from right at this point! So, good work Ilyse. So on the west coast of India, we're in this small city called Kochi, and I shit you not, the first time we see in the city, like we get off the train, and it's this giant sign that says "JEW TOWN" with an arrow.

 Megan Goodwin 24:05

Oh no.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 24:05

And I lost my, like, 20 year old shit. Because no one ever told me that there were Jews in India, and I assumed that "Jew Town" was, like, a deeply antisemitic thing. And I'm ranting and raving at this moment about antisemitism, and I'm hyping the one other Jewish girl up on my study abroad program, and we are, at this point, bordering on disorderly. Like, we are... we are underslept, and we are just off this train, and we are loud. And our professor-- this is a study abroad moment, remember, I'm in college, so forgive me-- is like, like, "Listen, girls. This is Jew Town because Cochin has this population of Jews, so like, shut up. You're embarrassing. Like, we are out-- we are in public." And I'm not convinced! So he literally redoes the program of the day and is like "We're all going to this synagogue because Ilyse will not shut the fuck up." And so, lo and behold, we head to this synagogue that traces its roots to-- wait for it-- the inquisition and the expulsion of Jews from Iberia. So this is a Sephardic Jewish community that, in expulsion, sets up shop in India in, like, the early 1500s, the 16th century. Now, I went to Hebrew school. My grandparents literally founded the synagogue and my dad literally helped build-- dig the foundation of the building that would become our shul. Like, I have pictures. I care a lot about religious history and Jewish history, and I had never heard of Indian Jews to the point of ranting and raving on a public street. Which is a shame.

 Megan Goodwin 25:37

That is a shame. Dare I say, a shanda.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 25:40

laughs Anyway, all of this is to say that when Judaism is given such priority in the world religions model, it isn't actually because of all this richness that I'm trying to get at by telling you "all the places Jews will go." It's not that richness in our Passover seders, or our ethnicities, or these many languages that show up. It's just not! That's not why Judaism is given priority in

the world religions model. It is given priority because in Europe, our proximity to whiteness and to Christianity needed to be explained-- and relegated, and mitigated, and quite frankly, eliminated.

M

Megan Goodwin 26:17

sighs Yeah. And we see some of that prioritization in US discourses about Judaism, too-- so, this is not only a historical problem, nor a "we don't know about global history" problem. Which, on that note, let's let Dr. Rabin, an actual expert about Judaism and Judaism in what's now the United States, talk to us about it!

D

Dr. Shari Rabin 26:39

My name is Shari Rabin, and I'm an expert on modern Judaism and religion in the US. I care that folks, my students, fellow scholars, my neighbors, know about what I study because Jews have a long history and a global reach that helps us see the messiness of religion and the dynamics of power in particularly clear and important ways. Judaism is, I think, weirder than most people think it is. It is not just about believing different things about Jesus, or the afterlife, or what have you, but actually offers a very distinct way of understanding the world which is shaped by Jewish legal discourses. Although in practice, most Jews are rarely in lockstep with it. Jewish canonical texts differentiate between the land of Israel and every other place, and yet, Judaism has been practiced all over the world. The result is a distinctive geographic imaginary that coexists with tremendous diversity based on where Judaism is being practiced and who is in charge. In the US south, for instance, where there have been claims that it is a new Jerusalem, or a new promised land, there is a distinctive Jewish food culture. Communities have had to cope with the material and spiritual challenges of things like yellow fever epidemics, and hurricanes, and, in a place shaped by evangelical Christianity and chattel slavery, many Jews embraced forms of religious thought and practice that would comport with and not challenge, or disturb in any way, their status as white Southerners. Circumcision is historically one of the Jewish practices that Christians were most disturbed by, and it has also been one of the most widely practiced. This is even amongst adherence of reformed Judaism, who otherwise claimed that Judaism was a matter of ethical monotheism alone, and even amongst those who in the absence of sonograms, or telephones, or a nearby ritual circumciser could not quite make that eight day deadline mandated in the Hebrew Bible. It offers a really visceral example of how Judaism is not just about belief, and is not just what the rabbi's say it should be. In recent years, things have gotten even more interesting because circumcision has ceased to be a distinctively Jewish practice, at least in the US. New rituals have been established to welcome baby girls into the Jewish covenant, and there's even a movement of Jews who reject circumcision altogether, insisting that they can be Jews while finding less gendered, less bloody ways to mark the birth of a Jewish baby. Jews have been part of American history from the very beginning. They did not just show up at Ellis Island in 1881. There were Jews in what became the United States as early as 1654, and in 1669, the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina explicitly promised freedom of worship to Jews, heathens, and other dissenters from the purity of the Christian religion. This same text, by the way, also entrenched slavery, making it an unchangeable social status. So, I want people to know that Jews have been part and parcel of what became the United States from the very beginning, including the good and the bad, and what's more, their religious lives have really been fundamentally shaped by that fact. Jews are a tiny group, about .2% of the world population, and so they're easy to write off as insignificant,

or unrepresentative. But in the world religions paradigm, suddenly, they're one out of five of what is deemed important. This grants Judaism much more attention than it would otherwise receive, but it can also lead to some serious distortions. They're the same issues as with other religious traditions of Judaism getting reduced to a list of beliefs, but also because its inclusion is premised on its relationship with Christianity, Judaism can sometimes get cast only as a Western or a Judeo-Christian religion that is basically like Christianity, or only important insofar as it relates to Christianity, which I think can miss how distinctive and interesting Judaism is on its own, despite-- or maybe even because of-- its very small numbers. In 2018, 11 people were murdered at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh by a white nationalist who saw Jews as the masterminds of non-white immigration to the US. In some ways, this felt like a horrifying surprise, and yet, there is a history of attacks on synagogues dating at least to the 1950s in the US, when white supremacists bombed several, mostly in the south, claiming that Jews were orchestrating the Civil Rights Movement. It's also worth noting that Tree of Life Congregation has its own long history dating to the 1860s, when it was founded as the second Jewish congregation in Pittsburgh, and was trying to adapt to the American context, kind of from that early date. National surveys show that most American Jews today don't belong to synagogues, or regularly attend services, and yet these histories show how central synagogues like Tree of Life have been from very early in American history as sites of empowerment that can also tragically, and perhaps for that very reason, also become sites of vulnerability and violence. One of my biggest pet peeves is hearing "Judaism says X" or "Judaism says Y," to which I always want to say "Judaism does not have a mouth." Jews do have mouths, however, and they speak drawing on diverse Jewish ideas and on the cultures, ideas from the cultures in which they live, and more often than not, when they speak, they are disagreeing with one another. So, there is not a singular Judaism that speaks and says one particular thing. There are many, many Jews saying many, many things about what Judaism is, or has been, or should be.



Megan Goodwin 32:32

One of the things I want to pick up on here is that Jews have been in what's now the United States from when it was still unclear how it would or could become the US! I also, just in terms of American Judaism, want to say that we have not talked about food, and I feel like, therefore, we have not talked about Judaism. I...



Ilyse Morgenstern Fuerst 32:54

Troll me, man. Just troll me.



Megan Goodwin 32:55

I'm just saying! This was-- so... without going totally primary sources my own self, I spent a brief period in between college and grad school nannying for a series of Jewish families, the first of whom were the Sheinfelds, and they fed me a lot because I was broke, and they are nice, but also because Judaism and food are BFF. So, I will stash actual academic sources in the show notes, but for right now, I just want to shoutout to my friend and NEWLY tenure track Judaism scholar, Dr. Shayna Scheinfeld, who fed me every shabbat (and a bunch of other times_ while she was at Harvard.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 33:33

That is lovely. And we have had some requests for, like, an episode on religion and food. So, maybe that is a place we could explore that in an upcoming season. But not this one! This one's HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART 1.



Megan Goodwin 33:47

For now, though, it is time to move on to... A Little Bit Leave It!



A Little Bit Leave It 33:55

Little Bit Leave It



Megan Goodwin 33:58

Where we're letting you know what we think the most important, most interesting, or most challenging part of this topic is. It is a little bit to leave you with! I think my A Little Bit Leave It for today is just how recent so much of this history and diversity is, right? Like, you talked about the Mizrahi designation. I just-- I know we're not talking about antisemitism, but I feel like... in a space and a time where the history of genocide against Jewish people is-- and not ONLY Jewish people-- is so recent, that it is mind scrambling to be in a time and place where folks are trying to say that genocide did not happen, or that, for some reason, Nazis aren't bad to everybody anymore. And that is fucking gross, and wrong, and you should punch Nazis, and that's the last thing I'm gonna talk about that. The end.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:04

Well, I think my Little Bit Leave It tees up nicely with that, which is to say, I want to make sure that everyone heard what I did not say. I did NOT make this episode about the Holocaust, and while I let my hero, Mel Brooks, sing his song about the Inquisition, I did not make it about that, either, or the various other moments in history that Jews have been expulsed, like, from somewhere.



Megan Goodwin 35:23

Ugh.




Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:24

In fact, while antisemitism is the background of this episode, this was not about the long, terrifying history of it. Nor was this episode about Israel. On purpose! Because far too often when we say Jews, we think antisemitism or Israel. And while there are a lot of deeply


important things to say about both of those gigantic issues-- and believe me, I know, I'm writing a book on the racialization of religion and how Islamophobia and antisemitism come from the same pot, really-- reducing Judaism to trauma porn is a trope that I did not want this podcast to engage in. And frankly, it's a trope... that is big. And it is also antisemitic to reduce Jews to their experiences of hate, just like it is antisemitic to reduce Jews to the modern nation-state of Israel. And that's a hate crime I'm unwilling to commit on my own podcast, even though I did scare a man in the hills of Tajikistan.

 Megan Goodwin 36:15


You made him run away with his goat. *sighs* Well, if you don't know, now you know!

 If You Don't Know, Now You Know 36:22


If You Don't Know, Now You Know!

 Megan Goodwin 36:25

A segment in which we get one factoid each. My factoid for today is about the Constitution. Ilyse, did you know that the very first constitutional protection for religious difference in what is now the United States followed a conversation between Moses Seixas, who was an 18th century Rhode Island Jew and community leader, who wrote to George Washington and asked our first president (who was a slaveholder and gross, but this part of the Constitution is useful) asked our first president to hold to the promise of America, a country that (should, anyway) "give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." This correspondence helped shape Article 6, paragraph 3 of the constitution, meaning it predates even the First Amendment. It is the very first guarantee that folks should not have to be Christian in order to receive the full protections of-- and the full privileges of-- American citizenship.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:25

That's really interesting! And that goes really well with what Dr. Rabin said.

 Megan Goodwin 37:29

Yeah!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:31

My factoid is that I love Jewish comedy and Yiddish because, when we roast you, we motherfucking roast you, and when we curse you, we like, LITERALLY curse you. One of my favorite curses is like "May you grow like an onion, with your head in the ground and your feet in the air," which doesn't mean anything but when my grandmother would say it, it was like, "Oh my God, she-- like, watch out. You might actually turn into some sort of root vegetable."



Megan Goodwin 37:56

laughs Yikes.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:57

Anyway... eh, fun.



Megan Goodwin 38:01

I mean, I love curses. So, yeah! That's great! On that note, don't fucking pack up yourself yet, nerds. It is time for homework!



Simpsons 38:12

Homework?!



Megan Goodwin 38:14

As always, we've got citations, references, and other goodies-- plus transcripts-- stashed at keepingit101.com for every single episode. Check it out. Alright, so! Our guest for today, Dr. Shari Rabin, is, uh... pretty prolific! She's got a great book called "Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-century America." We have a couple of podcast interviews that she's done as well, if you can't get to her book in the library! She has an article called "Mohalim, not Missionaries: Outsider and Insider Bodies in Southern Religious History." Great entry in one of my favorite online resources for teaching religion. So, "The Imminent Frame" has this Universe of Terms cluster that she contributed a piece about "Space and Place" for. Highly recommended! A primary source for Congregation Tree of Life in the 1860s: it is "In the Strictest Jewish Orthodox Stile: A Contract Between Isaac Wolf and Congregation Etz Hayim (Pittsburgh, PA)" in "New Perspectives in American Jewish History: A Documentary Tribute to Jonathan D. Sarna." Let's see, what else... "Simon Gerstmann's War: Religion, Loyalty, and Memory in the Post-Civil War Claims Court"-- man, you... I never get to have this many American sources! This is exciting!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:33

I know!



Megan Goodwin 39:34

That is in the Journal of Southern History, and then finally, from Dr. Rabin, "Jews and Sexuality in the Americas, 1519 -1880," with Laura Liebman, in "Religion Compass" that just came out

last June. Um... so that's-- that's a lot already. I have a couple other pieces that I feel like may be helpful, particularly if you, nerds, like me, teach a global religion class and are not an expert in Judaism. So, pieces I find myself referring back to over and over again: Eva Mroczek-- I'm sure that I am slaughtering her name, sorry Eva!-- has a great, kind of quick, reference about comparing the-- the title of this is "Mean, Angry Old Testament God vs. Nice, Loving New Testament God?"



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:21

laughs That's fantastic.



Megan Goodwin 40:24

It's great! Talking about why A) that is a wrong way to think about Judaism, and B) it's also a wrong way to read both the Hebrew and Christian bible, because Jesus... is NOT always nice and loving either. People forget about that. So, that piece I find really useful. I really like Meredith Warren's piece for The Conversation UK about "Why 'Judeo-Christian values' are a dog-whistle myth peddled by the far right," and the way that Judeo-Christian as a framework, whatever work it has done historically, now gets used both in antisemitic and Islamophobic ways. I really like Sarah Imhoff's work. She has published a bunch of stuff, but I particularly appreciate the work that she's done about Judaism and law, specifically around the Supreme Court and the way that it occludes Judaism in the way that it thinks about religion. I have some relatively recent news items about the abayudaya community, which is a community of Ugandan converts to Judaism who were brought into Judaism by a conservative Jewish movement, who were then denied right of return to the state of Israel, which raises, again, questions about the racialization of global Judaism. I really like Rebecca Epstein-Levi's work. She's got a great series for Bitch that I enjoy, particularly a piece about fandom. High recommend. I use-- because I'm a dork-- I use a number of spoken word pieces in my global religions class, but one that I use every single time is Vanessa Hidary's spoken word piece called "The Hebrew Mamita," where she talks about growing up in Brooklyn, I think, and not feeling connected to her Jewish heritage until much later in her life, and the way that she's kind of rethought a bunch of stereotypes. We already mentioned Dr.-- or, sorry. We already mentioned Rabbi Ruttenberg. You should definitely 100% follow her on Twitter. She is @theRADR, t-h-e-R-A-D-R. And then, I just taught a film called "This is Where I Leave You," where a number of high-profile actors play a family that is all sitting shiva together after the dad has died. And it teaches beautifully, my students really liked it, and it really helps disrupt a lot of non-Jewish students' assumptions about what's involved in religion, because it shows you the sitting together, and the arguing, and the food, and the fact that "no, you can't just do the prayers at home" and "no, you can't just do them alone." It is about doing things together. So, I like it. The end.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:02

Awesome! Okay. So, I'm going to keep my suggestions to non-US contexts, mostly. So, Nathan Katz has a classic book on Jews in India, called "Who Are the Jews of India?" It's old at this point, but it's good, and... and solid. Esther David just came out with a really great book this year, or

2021, I should say, called "Bene Appetit: The Cuisine of Indian Jews." It's a cookbook, and it is GOOD.



Megan Goodwin 43:34

That's an amazing title. I am... yeah. Bravo.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:37

It's really good.



Megan Goodwin 43:38

That's great.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:39

And then, um, Lihong Song is a fantastic-- I don't want to say up and coming scholar, but he has a lot of things in the pipeline. But I had read this article a couple of years ago, and I'm excited to see what else he's got. But this article is highly recommended, and it's called "From 'Jews in China' to 'Jews and China'" in the Journal of Modern Jewish Studies. And then there's Olga Borovaya's book called "Modern Ladino culture: press, belles lettres, and theatre in the late Ottoman Empire," where she's tracing the, like, flourishing of this-- yeah, Ottoman Jewish community that uses Ladino in all these ways, and it's, like, this amazing, like, literary theatre play. It's a really great book.



Megan Goodwin 44:29

Cool!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:30

If you are more interested in young adult fiction, I'm really into Veera Hiranandani's newest book called "How to Find What You're Not Looking For," which is about a Jewish and Hindu or Indian couple just after "Loving" made interracial marriage legal in the United States, and it really is about all of the prejudices they face, both within their families AND from the outside world. And it has been a hit with my eight year old and my mom, who's age I will not disclose on a podcast.



Megan Goodwin 45:02

Don't worry about it! This is after Loving v. Virginia, which is a Supreme Court case that makes interracial marriage legal in 1967.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:08

Yes. Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 45:09

Okay.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:10

And I loved a nonfiction/memoir/treatise? almost? It's called "People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present" by Dara Horn. It's not light, but it is exploring that thing that we talked about before where there's, like... when we talk about Jews, we are often talking about what I'm calling trauma porn, and that's the way we like to describe Jews, or to picture them in media, even when Jews should be the protagonists, like, in stories of the Holocaust.



Megan Goodwin 45:42

Woof.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:43

So, a heavy book, but honestly beautiful.



Megan Goodwin 45:45

Oh, hey. Sorry. Again, we didn't focus on Holocaust/Shoah stuff, but given the bullshit of this year, we also recommend "Maus." You should read it. You should send it to libraries. The end.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 46:04

Yeah, I mean... yes. I'm gonna save my Mel Brooks recs for our final episode of the season, no spoilers. But obviously, all his stuff is assigned, because it's good, and it's funny, and it really is the sound-- not just of my childhood, but of my grandparents. Like, that is how they sound. Anyway!



Megan Goodwin 46:24

Alright, big thanks to those of you writing reviews on iTunes, Amazon, and Google. It really does help! I promise. It's... it's worth your time. And we appreciate you! Plus, if you want to be a Nerd of the Week, if you write us a review, we can see your silly handle, you sillies! Our Nerds

of the Week this time are: @David_Iac-- that's David_I-A-C. This is either an I or an A-- @lalcsi, let's say, and-- oh hey! @MeredithWarren, whose work we recommended for today. I didn't even realize she was a Nerd of the Week. Hi, Meredith!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:01

Join us next time for more HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART ONE, when we chat about Buddhism, and are helped out by guest expert Dr. Di-Shuan Yu-Jin Chen.



Megan Goodwin 47:10

Rad. Shoutout to our research assistant, Alex Castellano, whose transcription work makes this pod accessible and therefore awesome. Need more religion nerderie? You know you do, and you know where to find us. It is Twitter. The answer's Twitter.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:24

You can find Megan on Twitter @mpgPhD, and me @ProfIRMF, or the show @KeepingIt_101. Find the website at keepingit101.com. Check out our Instagram! Become nerd royalty! And with that... peace out, nerds!



Megan Goodwin 47:42

Do your homework-- it's on the syllabus.



Bonus Ending 48:05

Jews in Space (Mel Brooks)