

Humboldt in the time of COVID Project: Interview with Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen of Chabad of  
Humboldt  
Arcata, CA

Interviewers: Zayne Nordberg (HSU History Student)

Recorded: Tuesday, Nov 3, 2020

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Technical problems at the start of the recording, interview begins at 1:50

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

So Zayne, you, um, you had reached out to the Jewish community a while ago, are you Jewish yourself?

Zayne Nordberg (Interviewer):

Um, no. To be honest I was very interested in approaching faith based communities because I've taken an interest recently in studying religious texts in general, and I wanted to reach out to the community that maybe I wasn't a part of, but that I could maybe understand better.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Nice. And who's your professor for this class?

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Suzanne Pastore from the history department is the leader of my branch of Humboldt in the time of COVID. And I think there are also students from religious studies and maybe some other places also conducted interviews.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Nice. Very cool.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

So I guess to begin, I just want to ask, before the pandemic, how active what's your community? And where were you having your meetings?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

So our community is very focused around the students. And so each year, it's kind of like a, you know, a different game. And so before the pandemic hit, we had a nice core group of Jewish students from HSU, who would join us for services regularly. And then even before the,even

before Humboldt shut down, I saw what was going on in New York City and other places, and we just stopped all in person services. And, and then, was it a few weeks or maybe a month later that Humboldt officially shut down?

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

So before the actual state shut down, you kind of saw the writing on the wall, and you decided that it was best not to have any in person meetings.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Yeah.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Do you remember? Were there any changes that you thought that you could make while before the actual shutdown came into effect where you thought maybe it would have been possible to have meetings? Or have you transitioned to online meetings exclusively?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

So when it first hit because it was so unknown, and nobody knew what it was, and we thought it was way more deadly and way more contagious? I mean, I still think it's very contagious. But the, we didn't know what to do. So we completely shut down. And it was only after the opening started opening back up that we started thinking of creative ways to be able to do it in person, but outdoors and spatially distanced and figure out creative ways to make it work. But at that time, we just, we went all virtual.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

So are you still doing virtual or have you started having socially distanced in person meetings?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

So we do both. We have different options. A lot of HSU students are remote, you're not even in Humboldt this year. And so it's definitely been a challenge. Just getting through a lot of the way that we meet the freshmen coming in. It's just by being on campus and, and having that presence physically.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

So most of your, I'm sorry, most services are for students?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Yeah, so the Chabad of Humboldt serves both the broader Jewish community as well as the Jewish student base. And so there's the Chabad at HSU, Jewish student group that has student leadership and the Chabad of humbled myself, the rabbi and my wife, the Rebbetzin, work in

close connection with that Jewish student club, give it the fire that boosts to, to really have a Jewish life on a campus that would otherwise not see much of a active Jewish body without that, you know, that that help inspiration and, and knowledge for, for Jewish practices and culture from from the outside.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

In general, do you think that the local area or even the state has handled the pandemic in a way that you think was adequate? Or do you think that there could have been more to be done to help your community?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Um, so I don't really get into politics so much for, you know, what the governor should do, or what the special should do. But we do have, you know, I have a religious advisory board, made up of Jewish doctors and, and Jewish legal experts about, you know, both the United States and also primarily, Jewish law, that very much dictates what it is that we do. And so I'm in close connection with, with my advisors and, and that's how we got that foresight to close down even before it was mandated.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Have there been any teachings or lessons that you think have been more pertinent during this time, or have helped a lot of people maybe process what's going on?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Oh, absolutely. I mean, it's, there's so many silver linings, to the point that even though it's sort of like a bullet, you know, when it's, you know, want to undermine the, the catastrophe, and then the hardship that many people feel, it's a, it's a silver bullet in the sense that there's a lot of positive things that have gone on and have happened, I've seen many people who were kind of just going through day to day life without much of a thought about what it is, you know, who am I? What am I really doing here, that it was a shock, and it made them take a step back and start addressing these questions. And people started getting very anxious and very depressed and very scared. And, and so it's sort of forced our hand to put our faith and trust in the only one that can really make a difference, which is God. And, and so one of my favorite teachings that have come to during this time about really putting your trust in God, it's not just enough to, to believe that God exists. But to put your full trust, there's a parable of a guy who's traveling back in the old country, from from one village to the next with all of his, bags on the stick and a lot of packages, he's running, making some sales from going to the marketplace and then coming back to the small town, and along comes a horse and buggy and says, you know, you're an old man, you your legs seemed decrepit, you want to come up on the wagon? and he's so grateful, he gets up on the back of the wagon, and along comes. And so it says the wagon driver is going down the road, he looks back and he sees the man is struggling with all of his packages. And he says, you

know, why don't you relax? You could put the bags down and and he says, Well, you know, it's kind enough of you, sir, to offer to take me up on the wagon, you don't have to carry my bags too. But we get that way with God sometimes, you know, God's running this ship, you know, the world is under a constant divine intervention, a divine watch. And we sometimes feel like we got to hold on to all of these worries and anxieties that somehow that's going to make the the wagon lighter or easier when really all that's doing is just tying up your hands from being able to do the the mission that you were sent here in this world to do we're sending your do accomplish stuff and, and so it's not like we're just meant to sit back in the wagon and do nothing. But as soon as you let go of all of that, that pressure, the anxiety, all of the things that are outside of your control, then all the sudden have the ability to make a real impact in this world. And, and that's that matters way more than, you know hanging on to all of those anxieties, which will ultimately are just crippling.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

How did you handle the high holy days?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

So high holy days, we did a combination of certain, certain events in person, spatially distanced, and limited attendance and, and other pre holiday or in the middle of a holiday. Like between the holidays, virtual offerings, because, according to Jewish law, you're not allowed to use technology, electronics on the actual festivals. So, before, Rosh Hashanah, the new year came in, we did a pre Rosh Hashanah sermon. And so the sermon I would generally give where we have, you know, 50-60 people packed into the the small synagogue room, we did on on zoom, and then we had a shorter, smaller in person prayer service where it was limited to smaller groups. So we have a few at a time or so.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Excuse my ignorance, but I've talked to the rabbi from the temple Beth-El, is there a general difference in the way that you guys teach?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

So the Jewish tradition has been passed down for 1000s of years from the moment that the Jewish people were standing around Mount Sinai and receive the Torah where that was after the exodus from Egypt, all the Jewish people were there and heard God speak. And, and Moshe spent 40 years in the desert, explaining word for word, what every word that God dictated to Moses on Mount Sinai meant, and that became those teachings, are what we call the Torah. So we have the written text, which is the scroll of the Torah scroll, you'll see in any synagogue, and then the, the interpretation, or even the, the methodology behind how to decrypt the Torah, were all delivered by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. And for 1000s of years, the Jewish people have learned and analyzed and add work to Oh, using those, those core principles to decrypt new

meanings and, and, and apply it to different situations that that never existed 1000s of years ago, and yet, even with that whole process, the, the Torah itself, never changes. It's, and so, growing up with a formal yeshiva background, where we really got into that method and, and learned Talmud and how to decrypt the Torah, there's a, there's a unique way of understanding the Torah, that, that many Jewish people who, you know, grew up on traditional Judaism, bagels and lox, you know, or whatever, don't necessarily understand the depth of the method and, and how systematic and creative it can be. Both, you know, they kind of go hand in hand and so and, in America, and in the early generations, sort of left the Eastern European jewry, as you know, the old country and started just assimilating, but the truth is that, the Torah, and its, its core traditions, and methods for how to decrypt it, are very much alive and relevant to our particular situations. And, and so, we, we focus on, on really getting to the, to the core of, you know, what the text is actually saying, and then applying it to, to the different situations that we live in. But, but not, not, God forbid, to, to change or remove different aspects of the Torah, or we're focused on, on changing or adapting ourselves to live to that higher morals and values, rather than saying, Oh, that must be ancient, let's just, you know, take out certain things or remove whatever doesn't feel right.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Do you have anybody in your community that's kind of been personally affected by COVID-19? You don't have to talk about any details, but did your community help them or...

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

There was at least one person that I know that got it here.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Okay.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

So, um, to be honest, I don't have like too many more questions, but I guess, honestly, um, how, how's your own personal spiritual life affected without having as much meeting in person? I know, a lot of people say that, actually conducting, you know, like in person meetings, influence your own spiritual life with your community. And with, you know, some of those meetings being lessened, do you think that it's kind of changed your own spiritual way?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Yeah, it's definitely been a, it's definitely been a journey. And like, every, every descent is ultimately for the sake of a of a higher ascent that follows it. And it's interesting, there are a lot of Chabad rabbis all over California. And they had certain gatherings or meetings to strengthen each other as, as rabbis. But I would never go because you know, what am I going to do jump on a plane to LA or something? But now that everything's gone virtual actually feel

more connected to that sort of community of rabbis. And so that's really been an amazing thing. And as well as focusing on the one on one interaction, so to, to connect with people who are who maybe before the pandemic would never come to a large Jewish event, because they either don't identify so much with with their Jewishness, but then when it came, when, when the situation came up, they wanted to know, well, what's the Jewish perspective? Or how do we, how do we manage or thrive under these circumstances? And so and that way, it's, it's actually been a boost both for the community as well as for me personally, because my, my own personal spiritual life is very much intertwined with the the well being of the community, and being able to teach and mentor and inspire.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Yeah, talk to other people in this and that you people that even moved away or kind of moved on from this local community have engaged online. Have you had the same experience where people that, you know, are in Humboldt, I guess, you said that most students aren't even in Humboldt. And so attending service even though they're, they're not even in the local area?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Yeah, definitely. We did. We did a course called the positivity bias. And there we had, in addition to the core group, from Humboldt, we also had people from a number of different places who would sign on and join that which is, you know, getting into it. Everybody has their, their own biases. And we generally think of it as a kind of like a dirty word, you know, check your bias or whatever. But the truth is that you can't escape you are nurtured nature and a combination of what you've seen and where you've been that form and shape, but also obscure your view of reality. But sometimes that can end up working against you. And so if a lot of what you're experiencing is based on your own biases, or maybe it's, there's a more helpful bias to adapt, that will actually excel and, and help you grow through, through the different experiences of life. And so we did this course called the positivity bias, where we shared stories and real life examples of how the Torah philosophy of looking at life can really help us to see the positive in different situations, and how when we recognize that goodness within ourselves, and then see that goodness with it another, that it's not just a change in feeling, but it really has, you know, empirical and actual effects on that person's success, and your own well being and in what you're, you're able to do.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

All right, I'm just going down this list of questions for you.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

No worries.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

So there have been kind of reports in other parts of the country that some faith based communities have endangered local areas by refusing to have any type of social distancing, you know, citing that is against our tradition and against our, our rights. Right. And well, I can agree that there's definitely an argument to be made there. There's also people that would say that it's reckless endangerment for a lot larger community. How do you feel about those communities that have kind of been an axis of which they don't want to compromise their faith? They also don't want to endanger the community?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Yeah, I think it's very important when you're looking at what the community's philosophy is to look at its leadership. And if you look at the the Orthodox rabbinical leadership, it's very clear that, that you should follow the spatial distancing and the, the health guidelines, etc. And what, what happens when there are outliers, or individuals that are that are not following. There's, you know, different ways of viewing it and to try to sort of answer for your brother or explain, you know, why they're doing something doesn't ever help for the people who are upset about it, or have have complaints, but there is that personal responsibility on each individual to act in an irresponsible way. And what we're seeing, unfortunately, is a lot of demonization and, and selective enforcement, which is an which is an infringement on rights. Because if you if you make certain laws, but then you choose to ignore them or, or even endorse behavior that's putting people in danger one side, but then pick and choose, you know, very small or very minute examples, and then blow it up and say, you know, this is a, you know, a specific race or a specific religion or a specific group of people that are violating it. All that does is end up seating, division and hatred and bigotry. And we we've seen where that's gone in history, and it's it's not a good place.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Was there anything else that you want to touch on or that we haven't really spoke about that you think it's important for people in the future to know about your community, or COVID-19 in general?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

So it's definitely been a wild ride. And I think that it's, it's going to ultimately save a lot more lives than it takes. And it is going to change our way of thinking we're not meant to go back to you know, the old normal but to bring about a new normal...

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Hello?

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

What sorry? Can you hear me?

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Yeah, I can hear you.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Sorry, I was using something else as a webcam and it died.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Oh, yeah, it's, it's ultimately, like everything in this world, it's coming from God and it and it's ultimately a good thing, it's our job to, to figure out what is that goodness, and to capitalize on it and to magnify it and ultimately to be divine agents of positivity and goodness. And it, it should be a positive thing and, and, and blessings that bring us together more and and create the next level of soul searching and searching.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

Yeah, I've just found in general even just a transitioning from in person class to having all these online, you do lose a little bit of like attention, but also it's a little bit more of an intimate experience mature looking people face to face and you can have conversations that or maybe you wouldn't have in which everybody's looking to one person. And I found that actually refreshing. To be honest, I think that in the future, when we do come back to a new normal, I hope that some of those changes are put into place where we can kind of interface more with individuals.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Yeah. And it really makes the relationships I mean person connection, so much more valuable, something that we just took for granted, we'll always have and you can go to, you know, mega events and 1000s and 1000s of people were now you have to think twice like is this a gathering that I'm really want that I really want to associate with that I really want to be a part of, is it worth the risk, so to speak? Or who do I really want to connect with? And then what is that important relationship and invest in those and then and really cherish those? Those personal connections and relationships because you can't just take them for granted.

Zayne Nordberg(Interviewer):

All right, well, um, that's pretty much everything I have. Thank you for participating in this project.

Rabbi Eliyahu Cowen:

Sure, much success.

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