

## **Judaism Unbound Podcast, Episode 423: Disability Torah – Julia Watts Belser**

<Lex Rofeberg > Support for this episode comes from the University of San Francisco's Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice, better known as JSSJ. The new JSSJ graduate level certificate program in JEDI, Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, equips professionals with invaluable skills, tools, and resources that organizations need to bridge generational gaps and ensure inclusive growth. Learn from renowned experts like Julia Watts Belser in her upcoming course, Disability and Jewish Social Justice Apply for her class by May 15th. Go to [usfca.edu/jedi](https://usfca.edu/jedi). That's [usfca.edu/jedi](https://usfca.edu/jedi).

<Dan Libenson> This is Judaism Unbound, Episode 423, Disability Torah. Welcome back everyone. I'm Dan Libenson.

<Lex Rofeberg> And I'm Lex Rofeberg.

<Dan Libenson> Today we're launching a series of episodes dedicated to the intersection of Judaism and disability. We've always been really interested in learning about the ways that Judaism intersects with and might be impacted and improved by intersecting more with the distinct identities of various Jews, especially those whose voices have not been historically at the center of the discourse about what Judaism is and what it might become. Our guest today, Julia Watts Belser, has recently published an extremely wonderful new book on the topic. We're sure you'll agree after you listen to this conversation that Julia Watts Belser is the perfect person to help us launch this series.

She's an award-winning disability rights activist and Jewish ethicist. And her new book is entitled, *Loving Our Own Bones, Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*. This book won the 2023 National Jewish Book Award in the area of contemporary Jewish life and practice. Before we jump into the conversation, we just want to wish you a happy Purim. Purim starts the day after this episode is released. And if you want some unbound Purim content this year, be sure to check out last week's episode, episode 422, to listen to Lex, Miriam Terlencham, and me talking about how to make Purim more meaningful. And now, a little bit more introduction for our guest today, Julia Watts Belser.

Julia Watts Belser works at the Intersections of Disability Studies, Queer Feminist Jewish Ethics and Environmental Justice. She is a Professor of Jewish Studies at Georgetown University, Senior Research Fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and Core Faculty in Georgetown's Disability Studies Program. Julia Watts Belser also has rabbinic ordination from the non-denominational Academy for Jewish Religion. We're so thrilled to be starting off this conversation of Judaism and disability. So Julia Watts Belser, welcome to Judaism Unbound. It's so great to have you.

<Julia Watts-Belser > Thank you so much. I'm really, really glad to be here today. It's really exciting.

<Dan Libenson> So I wanted to start with this concept that we actually talked to somebody about not too long ago that Binay Lappe first introduced us to, which is the idea of donkey stories. So for those who haven't heard about it, it's basically the idea that if a donkey knew how to read the Torah, the donkey would look at the Torah and see all these stories where a donkey is at the center of the story. And we read those stories to say, oh, somebody, a human being, rode in on a donkey, but the donkey would read that story and say, hey, that's a story about me. You know, I'm in this. And we just don't notice that. And we've had all these conversations over the years of Judaism Unbound with Binay about queer folk, with Joy Layden about trans folk, with folks about Jews of color. And actually, just a few weeks ago, we had the conversation with somebody about actual donkeys because it's somebody that was teaching a class about animals in the Bible. And I'm just curious if you could get us started with really understanding and maybe giving us some examples of like, what are the disability donkey stories? We could talk about specific stories, but also broadly, how is it that folks with disabilities read the Torah and find things there in ways that others have never found before?

<Julia Watts-Belser> It's such a beautiful question. One of the things I love about it is the way that it orients us to the question of perspective, that yearning to, in some ways, see ourselves, find ourselves reflected back in and through sacred texts. You open up the Torah and disability is everywhere. It is in so many of the most prominent Jewish sacred stories. I'm thinking of Moses, who describes himself when God is about to send him on a great mission to speak first to the Israelites and then to Pharaoh. Moses describes himself as heavy of tongue. He says, I'm not a man of words. Many Jewish commentators have understood that to mean that he has a speech disability. There's Isaac, you know, famous scene in the Torah where Isaac's blindness is really essential to the plot. You can't tell the story of Jacob becoming heir to Isaac's lineage without thinking about Isaac's blindness. Jacob himself has his own disability story. There's the experience of wrestling with the angel where the Torah describes how Jacob's hip was wrenched and the way he limped then thereafter. Those are, I think, some of the most explicit character driven disability stories that sort of pop. But once we begin looking for other elements of disability experience, the field gets even wider and more interesting. We can talk, for example, about the way that Leviticus discusses priestly blemishes, right? The question of bodily, quote unquote, imperfections and what we're meant to do about them, how they in some ways really sharply limit what priests were allowed to do in terms of their sacred duties. We see people aging and aging into disability. I myself am not really a big fan of sort of trying to diagnose biblical characters and say, oh, this particular figure had this kind of a disability. I find myself much more interested in the question of how my own lived disability experience and the lived disability experiences of the broader community today can help inform the way we think about power dynamics, about experiences of invisibility and disclosure, stigma, shame, normativity and ableism. Those are really the questions that most guide me in terms of thinking about what are we looking for when we're thinking about bringing a disability lens to Torah.

<Dan Libenson> So when we look at some of those stories, I'm curious about different examples. One of them, you talked about Isaac, who was blind, and yes, his blindness led to the fact that Jacob became his

successor rather than Esau, and we're descendants of Jacob, and so it all wouldn't have happened if he wasn't blind, but it's not really an achievement on Isaac's part in a sense, right?

<Julia Watts-Belser> In fact, it's a terrible story.

<Dan Libenson> Right. So those are the stories that I think a lot of us who are not disabled read and see. But then there was one, for example, that you talk about in your book that struck both me and Lex in a deep way, which is this scene at the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel where God comes on this chariot with these really strange wheels and all kinds of things. But then you say, God has wheels, essentially God who's like on a wheelchair, right? And so God is being seen. And that's exactly the kind of donkey story that I think Binay is talking about. Only a person with a disability would be likely to see that story and say, God has wheels, right? And I'm curious about other examples of that. Again, specific examples, but also conceptual examples like this is what others aren't seeing in the Bible.

<Julia Watts-Belser> Well, let's talk about that story for a moment. You know, that moment of realizing that God has wheels was for me as a wheelchair user, absolutely extraordinary. It was one of those moments where it felt like my own life just got split open by revelation. I was visiting faculty at Harvard, and so I was going through the really cobblestone streets of Cambridge on my way to Shoal Shoveloot morning, which is the time when the first chapter of Ezekiel is read in synagogue. So I had wheels on my mind and I had, I mean, I as a wheelchair user, right, wheelchairs and wheels. I love wheels. I'm fascinated by them. They make me happy. They light up my life. Wheels really are my, they're a real source of joy for me. But there's something about cobblestones that, you know, cobblestones and wheels really don't mix. And so I was thinking a lot about wheels, both the bliss of them and the like the vexation, the way in which they materially shape my interaction with the world, with the physical lay of the land. When I got to shul and heard the chanting, I mean, Ezekiel, it's often described that first chapter of Ezekiel is often described as a vision of God. But actually, Ezekiel says almost nothing about God, God's self. Ezekiel is, however, all over the wheels, wheels, wheels, wheels. I mean, and also very weird, amazing, brilliant angels who I also think have some very interesting kind of disability kinship. But let's stick with the wheels, because for me, one of the things, one of the lines that really landed for me was the idea that the spirit was in the wheels. I just remember thinking, God knows something about the pleasure, the absolute sweetness of taking that downhill grade and feeling the gentle vibration of land roll up through my body. God knows that feeling, and God knows the frustration of being shut out of a whole lot of places that are inaccessible and inhospitable to wheels and to wheelchair users. And I feel like both of those are really crucial, they're really potent to think about. For me, I think about that image of God on wheels, both as a profound affirmation of disability joy and disabled people's rightness and belonging in the world. I see us as reflected in the image of God. And God experiences, knows something of social, political exclusion of disabled people from so much of our public, cultural, political, religious life. In many ways, that was one of the core, that moment was the moment that kicked off the very beginning of the book. The book was born in that moment, I didn't know it yet. What does it mean to read Torah with those twin

insights, with first the assumption that bedrock, disabled people belong? We matter. We're in the book, in the sacred text, in God's own knowing. And also, the stories that we see and that we find are often stories of violence, of marginalization, of exclusion. And that also needs to be examined and confronted and integrated.

<Lex Rofeberg>So as we keep diving into this, I'd love to just hear from you because, not because I think there's like a correct answer, but because I think it will help our listeners, like, how do you conceptualize even the word disability? Like, what are you thinking of when that term comes up?

<Julia Watts-Belser>Yeah, the category of disability is actually a really big, capacious, expansive category. And so it's, I think, actually very worth mentioning that when I talk and think about disability, I mean it in a very broad way to include things like physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, I'm thinking also about cognitive and intellectual disabilities, neurodivergence and neurodiversity, mental health disabilities, things like depression, anxiety, chronic pain, chronic fatigue, long COVID and a whole lot more. Sometimes people think, oh, by disability, do you mean only disabilities that are visible or apparent? I mean, I myself am a wheelchair user, but most disabilities are not apparent at first glance. So I think one thing that's actually really important when we think about disability is to really recognize the immense diversity of this category and to recognize the way that it unfolds in a lot of different ways in a lot of different people's lives.

<Lex Rofeberg> It's amazing to me the readings that you brought of different texts from the Bible. And what's amazing is not that I found them like, wow, what a deeply interesting, fascinating read that is a stretch or so. It's that like when you said them, I was like, oh, yeah, that's like, it's right there, like God has wheels, of course. There is a place in the world for like the intricate noticings and readings that rest on like a really funky way of seeing a particular word, I'm all about that. But many of yours pretty straightforward and I don't mean to diminish them, I mean to elevate them with that, that they've been looking at us in the face but I have been failing to look back. And so, I'm really grateful for that. And I...

<Julia Watts-Belser> I love that.

<Lex Rofeberg>So, we'll hear more of them. But I also do want to do a little bit of like grand, what is this book? Why this book project? And in particular, I want to get at a little of what it is and a little of what it isn't because my sense and you can add to this or correct, like one key thing that this book is not is sort of like a how to guide for Jewish organizations to like be better to disabled folks, to people with disabilities.

<Julia Watts-Belser> That's important work, but it's not what I'm doing in the book.

<Lex Rofeberg>So that's, look, do I think that somebody could read this and glean from it some good lessons on that front? I do think that. I don't think that's its primary purpose. I'm curious to hear you articulate its primary purpose or its primary purposes, plural, whatever those might be. Part of me is curious if it may relate to a sort of dual framework you brought, and this gets back at Books of the Bible. You brought an example from Isaiah of a text that infuriated you and infuriates present tense, you, and you also brought a text from Jeremiah that spoke to you deeply. And I'm curious to hear out loud because I found it so beautiful in writing how those two different frameworks both present in sacred Jewish texts helped you build sort of the framework of this book.

<Julia Watts-Belser>Thank you so much for that question. Yeah, there are two really strikingly different paradigms for thinking about how to both navigate disability and think about the presence of disabled people in this world. The first example, the one I don't like, comes from Isaiah 35. It's gotten a lot of cultural play, probably most famously outside the Jewish world in Handel's Messiah. Isaiah, as a prophet, is imagining a better world. And he says, then on that great day, the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue will sing with joy.

I mean, what to say here, right? Like this text is so frustrating to me, because it feels like the thing that everyone projects onto me and onto my body. Oh, lame person, oh wheelchair user, wouldn't you like to be leaping like those deer? It imagines that it sort of lays out a trajectory where first, disability requires correction. Disability becomes a symbol of what is wrong with the present world. And then the feeling of erasure or transformation of disabled people's bodies and potentially also minds becomes a kind of symbol of the restored, redeemed world that is finally made good and whole. That just burns, right? I mean, that just irritates the heck out of me. In part, I think because we see the way that kind of symbolic use of people's bodies to accomplish this kind of work gets projected onto actual people. I mean, when I'm out in public, complete strangers will come up to me and want to touch my legs to pray for me. I'm like, "Don't touch me. Who are you?" I mean, and furthermore, like, what are you praying for? I mean, just no, get out of here. Just get out of here.

And it's all particularly difficult because often people mean very well. And so it's hard to be lured in. I mean, I'm...maybe other people aren't, but I'm often kind of lured into sort of this weird dance of politeness of like, "no, no, really, it's fine." It's so abrasive, this assumption that disability is only a negative experience. Isaiah's imagining of disability undone is like, so simple.

Contrast that with a very different image that comes from the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 31, the prophet is describing how God will bring all of the people in, like gather all the people together. And Jeremiah says, the blind and the lame among them, pregnant women and women with children together, they will return here as a great assembly on a level road on which they shall not stumble.

To me, this is such an extraordinary promise. It's a future that imagines disability as part of the story. The work that God does here, the work of this ideal future is not a kind of erasure or rejection of disabled people, but an embrace. It's also a transformation of the physical environment. When I read that line that says they'll return here on a level road, I think God is finally rolling out a good ramp. What a gift of access, finally. Look, there's so much we could say about the way that Jewish tradition thinks about the world to

come and the afterlife and all of that, but so often there's this fantasy that disability will get undone in the afterlife. And I think, you know, look, if there is a heaven, surely it must be a place where all our access needs are actually fully met. That's the future that I'm longing for. And I also want it in the here and now for all of us.

<Dan Libenson>So I wanted to follow up on the example, particularly of the first text that you talked about in Isaiah. I'm thinking about it in contrast to the world of queer folk. There's a couple of really bad lines in the Bible and in other Jewish texts. But for the most part, there's a kind of a quietness about queer folk. Queer folk can come to the Jewish texts and look around and say, we see ourselves there. And usually where they would see themselves is kind of good. Hey, where it's a little quiet, but actually there's a cool story over here. Whereas it feels like with disability, the Bible, but even more so, I don't know about more so, but also the Talmud, it's just full of bad stuff. And some of them are texts that you talk about in the book. I'm not sure if all of them are. One of them that strikes me is a text that I've studied with Benay Lappe, where the moral of the story that we find in it that's really good is that you can have sex anyway you want. But the way that the story is in the Talmud is it's asking this question, is the reason that there are people with disabilities in the world because their parents had sex the wrong way. And the Talmud concludes, no, there is no wrong way to have sex, which is great. But in order to get there, you have to read this awful story about how they see people with disabilities. And so I guess my question is, with queer folk, there's actually a Jay Michaelson short story recently where he imagines that the line in Leviticus just disappears one day. God has removed it and it's gone. Sorry, spoiler alert. And in a way, like that doesn't solve the whole problem, but it solves a lot of the problem. Whereas with disability, it feels like the tradition is just as is the world, you know, just permeated with this approach that disability is something to be sad about and recovered from. And if only it would go away. And so I guess my question is, like, what's the dream? You know, what's the dream of a new Judaism, a new religion? Like, how would it happen? What would its relationship be to all of these old texts?

<Julia Watts-Belser>You know, earlier I said, open the Bible and disability is everywhere. But that's not actually necessarily good news. In fact, often I would be like, oh, don't mention, no, oh, oh, cringe, cringe, stop, stop, right? Erase, erase.

<Lex Rofeberg>It's like the Jefferson Bible.

<Julia Watts-Belser>Exactly. There's just so much that you would have to take out if you wanted to. You can't really snip. And as we were talking about with the with the Isaac story, right? I mean, disability is so often a crucial plot point. Sometimes they're really cringe worthy, frustrating, disappointing plot point. So what to do?

Don't get boxed into apologizing for the text. So often, minoritized people are in a position of like, first, we're often put on the defensive to sort of find material that will buttress our very existence and belonging

and belovedness. I think that's just I mean, it's very understandable to me why we end up doing that. The world is what it is, and so many hostile messages, particularly from religious quarters, are coming at us and coming at us collectively, politically, that, of course, one is drawn often into fighting these kind of fights.

But I also think it's so corrosive to have to prove one's own basic belovedness before God. So I just work from a different premise. I take it as bedrock that God cherishes deaf, disabled, mad, sick, queer, trans folk that like we are intimately and essentially a part of God's love story with the world. That core premise allows me to take a much more critical stance toward passages in the Torah that are telling disability stories in ways that do harm to disabled folks or that give us a really constricted, tragic, pitiful vision of disability. I come to this work from a kind of feminist and queer reading strategy that says critique can be an act of love. In fact, critique may be an essential dimension of what it means to love the tradition and to love the Torah. For me, certainly, it is. The power dynamics or assumptions made by certain texts are intensifying ableism. I think we need to see those poisons and really understand them better so that we're more equipped to spit them out and to alchemize something new.

<Dan Libenson>When you have a fundamental theology where God loves all of us, including disabled folks, and these human beings have screwed it up by writing these texts where that didn't come through, how do you relate to that tradition that those flawed human beings put together? Like, how do you say, I want to build on that as opposed to, hey, let's just start over because these guys did a lot of damage.

<Julia Watts-Belser>It's a great question. I think these stories have tremendous staying power. I do feel committed to, connected to, right? I mean, this is a place where that classic idea of the sort of classic Jewish posture of wrestling, right, with text matters to me religiously. Spiritually, I find it helpful to have a little bit of friction in my life. I actually sometimes think coming up against some stuff that makes me say no can be really fruitful for understanding the contours of my yes. Someone asked me at one point, write more about the Song of Songs. She talked about feeling like Song of Songs was actually a really beautiful potential place to think about, you know, a wide variety of bodies being embraced and recognized as beloved. And I thought this is a great point, but I think truly between you and me, one of the reasons I didn't write more about Song of Songs is it doesn't get under my skin in the same way compared to some of the texts I tangle with in the book. It's definitely got some verses you could lift up if you wanted to pull out a kind of more bliss oriented body talk. I don't go there, though. I often orient toward the places that hurt, but I think it's also rooted in a desire to do the work of de-fanging some of the traditions that do us harm. I do a lot of work as a rabbi in very secular spaces. I do a lot of work with secular disabled and queer community spaces where folks are, for very understandable reasons, allergic to religion or the Bible. One of the things that we often talk about is the way that this material has a cultural impact, regardless of whether or not you engage it religiously. I feel like it's also part of the work of repair that I feel called to work on, to say harm has been done through these stories, which have often migrated into and gotten so deep into our cultural tropes that we don't even necessarily know where those ideas came from. And I want to invite us and give us tools to imagine them differently and to talk back to those voices, those commentators, those stories, those texts and traditions.

<Lex Rofeberg>I love what you said about needing a little friction. That crystallizes something I think is true about my own approach. My favorite Torah portion is Balak. It's the section of numbers that I just find to be really all over the place, and wonderful in its all-over-the-placeness. And for a while people were confused because they say Lex, the end of that Torah portion is the story of Pinchas. I mean, the next portion is named after Pinchas. But the end of that Torah portion is where this guy Pinchas goes and kills an, I'm going to say interfaith, it's kind of an anachronistic term, but like an Israelite, non-Israelite couple. And Lex, you're in an interfaith relationship. Like how is your favorite Torah portion the one that closes in a way that has been used to harm so many people like you?

I actually think that I love how much I hate that part, if that makes sense. Like it's frustrating to a degree that like plants values in me and plants seeds of action in me. Like I'd rather have that reaction sometimes to stories than just like, okay, that's like a text that happened and didn't really do anything to me. I wanted to just really resonate with that. The question I have, I mean, it relates to a framework you brought right at the beginning of distinguishing between disability as, like the common notion that disability is a medical diagnosis. The goal is to overcome, to surmount disability as best as one can on an individual level, as opposed to disability as a cultural movement. I love the way that you spoke about that. Can you talk to us about that difference between sort of disability as medical diagnosis to overcome versus disability as cultural movement?

<Julia Watts-Belser>Yeah, absolutely. So the framework of disability as primarily a medical problem was the pervasive story that I experienced about disability growing up. And I think it's the way that a lot of folks default to thinking about disability in terms of symptoms and impairments and difficulties. And I want to be really careful here because there's a risk when we talk about these sort of two different paradigms as imagining the sort of cultural experience of disability as being all rosy, right? Happy go lucky. And you only sort of become a part of disability culture if you love disability all the time.

Disability is a mixed bag experience like so many other dimensions of human existence. There are aspects of my disability that I find painful and difficult. There are aspects of my disability that I find intricate and interesting. And there are aspects of my disability that I find beautiful and that I cherish. And I actually really want to deeply claim space for folks to hold a whole constellation of feelings in relation to their own disability experience. And part of what I'm interested in doing is actually opening up more space to hold real complexity and nuance rather than these very thin tropes. That's the thing that I really resist, this assumption that other people assume that my life is built around longing for something different.

Disability is sort of inescapably bound up with this idea of like tragedy and, oh, how sad, oh, how horrible. When I think about disability, one of the key orientations that I make is to think about disability first and foremost in terms of normativity. We live in a world that is designed to accommodate certain kinds of bodies and minds and designed to not work well for other bodies and minds. We can see this on the level of built environment and architecture, but it's also really deeply built into so many different systems, thinking about how schools operate, the kind of norms and assumptions about who can excel in what

spaces. What do you have to do? So sensory norms, physical norms, all of these hegemonic, constricting norms that assume really there's one right way to have a body and one right way to have a mind. Manifestly, not the way human beings actually are.

It's a sort of shocking, actually a shocking denial of the diversity that is in our midst. The shift toward a kind of social, political, cultural model of disability says, we want to make a world that wants all people, that wants physical, mental difference in our midst. That's the shift. The shift, the core orientation here is really to say the problem of misfitting in the world. You can say the problem then is with the individual person's body or mind, and they should fix that up. Or you can say the problem is that we have built systems and structures that make it really wretched to not fit. We could change those. We built this world, and we could build it differently.

<Lex Rofeberg> I really, really appreciate that. In the spirit of our podcast Always, we were constantly waffling between the big picture and the nitty-gritty examples from Jewish texts. And so I'm excited to dive back into some Jewish texts. Particularly, I mean, you spoke about Isaac and Jacob earlier. I think if you were to ask most folks that they can think of one person in Jewish tradition who notably has, or at least potentially has, depending on how you read the text, a disability, they would probably say Moses. And, you know, people say five books of Moses, right? Like, he's kind of the protagonist here. Although, I mean, we could argue if God's the protagonist, but I don't know. But like, Moses gets a bunch of airtime in sacred Jewish texts. And again, through like, fairly, like not stretchy, not like, oh, I'm reading beyond the text, like pretty straightforward ways, you can read the text of Exodus as articulating that Moses has difficulty with speech. I'm really curious to dive into that. I mean, on the one hand, like, can you just talk to us about Moses as a character and what his relationship is to ability and disability? I mean, also his relationship to Aaron, who plays a really interesting role. So that's number one. But like, I guess beyond like, what's the story there? Like, why does it matter? Like, to what extent should it be really powerful and important? To what extent should we notice that the most central figure in the Torah has a disability and maybe we should move from a place of like, oh, he's such a big deal, despite the fact that he had to overcome this disability to like, he's such a great deal because of that disability.

<Julia Watts-Belser> Yeah, that's a really interesting shift for me. And I think it's crucial. I actually think the overcoming story, the trope of, oh, disability is a kind of impediment to overcome, is one of the very pernicious, painful stories that frequently gets told, both in contemporary culture at large, but especially in religious communities. That idea that if you just work hard enough or in some communities, pray hard enough, you will be able to overcome disability. It's a terrible, dangerous trope, both because it positions disability only as a negative to be overcome, but also because it assumes that disabled people are responsible for making themselves like everyone else.

I think this is actually a really interesting question that unfolds in the Moses story, which I think we can read in some ways as a story about the question of access and accommodation, but also about kind of radical transformation of expectations and communal norms. So let's take that moment that you mentioned, Exodus chapter 4, where Moses first describes himself explicitly as a person who is not a

man of words. And he uses a particular Hebrew phrase where he describes his mouth and tongue as heavy. This is the phrase that has led many traditional Jewish commentators to identify Moses as having a stutter or some kind of speech disability. The preeminent speaker of Jewish tradition, the guy whose job it is to speak God's words into being. "I'm not a word man."

There's something very significant here about this question of how and why Moses' disability might in fact matter in a positive sense for his prophecy. One of the first things that happens is that God says to Moses, go talk to Pharaoh. And Moses is like, no, I'm the wrong man for the job.

I'm inclined to read it both as a moment of, it feels really familiar to me as a moment of internalized ableism. Maybe my disability is going to prevent me from doing this thing I really need to do. It makes me not as good. I should hold back. I should give it to somebody else. I don't want to mess this thing up. There's another way, though, in which I think Moses here, we might read Moses as being a really astute reader of his own cultural landscape. Then as now, disabled folks are often not listened to. Ableism often means that disabled people's voices are actively marginalized and sidelined and pushed out. Especially true for people who have speech disabilities, communication differences. So Moses may in fact just be kind of reflecting back to God. The sense that like, have you looked down here recently? They're not going to listen to me. Make a better choice.

One of the things that's really striking is that God redesigns the plan. There's a way in which we could say this is the first reasonable accommodation in the Torah. For those of us in disability community, reasonable accommodation is the thing we look to, the thing we need in order to say, at least in the American legal system, ah, we deserve to have a change be made on our behalf in order to make it possible for us to interface with an otherwise inaccessible system. Aaron takes this role of serving as, or Aaron is given this role as serving as Moses' re-voicer. He is going to speak Moses' words to the people. It's actually a practice that's used by a number of disabled folks with speech disabilities today.

But there's something that's a little bit disquieting to me. Or I guess I would say, like, it feels a little bit like not quite enough to me to just imagine Moses here as sort of supported with this reasonable accommodation by the convenient availability of his brother. There's an earlier moment in the fourth chapter of Exodus where God and Moses are speaking. Moses again says, right, what if the Israelites this time? What if they don't listen to my voice?

I mean, it's so painful, right? That actually to me, that moment of kinship where Moses as a speech disabled man says, what if they don't listen to my voice? That is for me, one of the most important moments in the Torah. One of the places where I feel known in that loneliness that has been such a part of my own inner life, it matters to me so much that we get to hear Moses say that. And in response to that question, God says, all right, I'm going to give you the gift of signs. It's extraordinary.

Moses is offered a set of three nonverbal visual communication modes that are meant to convey the truth, the power, the sizzle of revelation to the people. God says effectively, look, Moses, you don't have to use words. Use your own gifts. Don't feel like you always have to force yourself into fitting that dominant culture paradigm. Like so many minoritized communities, we're often feeling like, oh, really, I should just twist myself into knots, right? Make myself smaller, push myself to be bigger or braver or whatever, to be able to do the thing that is particularly hard but valorized by dominant culture. And I love

this moment with the signs because it's actually like, okay, Moses, take it in a totally different direction. Do your thing. Let that be what brings revelation into the world.

<Dan Libenson>So I have a kind of who wrote the Bible question relating to that beautiful interpretation, beautiful way of looking at that story that you shared with us. There are people in the world today and certainly back then who are ableist, and they're also sensitive and wise and thoughtful, and they just didn't understand for whatever reason to apply that sensitivity to disability. And now hopefully more people do. And so we can appreciate what those wise, sensitive people wrote in a world in which they didn't understand that they were violating their own wisdom by not applying it to disability. I would be amazed that people with disabilities today might have the generosity of spirit to do that. I think that's a really hard thing to do. And you said that you really appreciate stories where there's that friction. I do too. But I also encounter every day many people who do not, and many people who read stories and are immediately put off, and that's the end of it. And I'm wondering, how can people approach these texts that don't have that joy of friction like we do?

<Julia Watts-Belser>I mean, that question of what is it that allows this kind of potentially liberative reading to live inside a text sort of waiting to be drawn out, that for me is actually one of the things that I find so magical, juicy about sacred text and Torah. Sometimes, I'll tell you true, sometimes I just think, I just don't want to deal with you today. And just when I feel like I cannot even with you, the text or my experience of it, something will shift and it will turn around and give me something like this.

When I think of a text as, you know, because I think of Torah as sacred text, I don't mean to say I think it is always right, or I think it is always true or always interpreted in true ways. No, I actually think there's a lot of grit in there that I want to release. And I think it's every generation's job to find more grit and to try and release more of it.

For the record with the Moses story, the traditional Jewish commentators do some terrible things with the Moses story. And I can't in good conscience just describe it as a great paradise for disability Torah. There's a lot of sense explicitly by some traditional commentators that there's something unseemly about the fact that Moses, a speech-disabled person, was the one who spoke with God. That doesn't work for some of them.

One of the stories this makes me think of is a really difficult, painful story that's told in Midrash Tanhumah. It's a story that really explicitly raises this question about overcoming disability. It is a Midrash that's built around a kind of apparent contradiction that appears in Torah. There is in Chapter 4, early on in the Exodus story, Moses says, I'm not a man of words. But then by the end of Moses' life, once we get all the way through the Torah to the Book of Deuteronomy, the entire Book of Deuteronomy is Moses delivering an extraordinary speech. So the Midrash asks, what gifts, right? How do we make, what do we make of this difference? And one of the rabbis says, oh, learn Torah and you will be healed.

So painful to me. I mean, first we have that trope again, you know, that notion that Moses' disability is really just waiting to be erased, waiting to be fixed, that we can't imagine Moses as a speaker without that

kind of disability erasure. But the other thing that's really pernicious there is that the Midrash makes that into a kind of advice for anyone, suggesting that if you haven't been healed, all you need to do is just learn more Torah.

Of course, you can see how this is a really devastating message to disabled folks. You know, this for me, this Midrash is just like a non-starter. It's more than friction. It feels like a shaft to the heart. But as I was thinking about this Midrash, I mean, I think here, first of all, we see my real commitment to say, take the hard stuff and talk back to it. Don't snip it out. I teach the story now all the time, because if we if I don't talk about it, it often allows people to carry on with the idea that that overcoming story is still in place. So I actually want us to look at it, confront it and realize why that's not the most life giving story we can tell.

So how might we differently imagine this scene? When I think about what happens in the Book of Deuteronomy, I imagine Moses claiming his own place as a disabled speaker. And not only that, the community at large has learned finally after 40 years to perceive, to recognize the truth, the goodness, and the rightness of his disabled voice. So yeah, when I read the Book of Deuteronomy, I imagine Moses stuttering his way through that entire gorgeous speech. And to me, that's the transformation that I'm looking for. Moses coming in to a kind of sense of wholeness with his own disability experience and Moses' community having learned to recognize that as part and parcel of Moses' story, part of what makes his Torah so fierce.

<Lex Rofeberg> I want to explore something you mentioned earlier and that I think you just touched on in some indirect ways, but you talked about how for groups that are marginalized, many different kinds of groups within Jewish spaces or Jewish tradition, there is this really intense push often from the outside, sometimes from the inside, internalized, towards proving the worth of said marginalized group from Jewish texts. So saying, well, look at this thing in Exodus or in Leviticus or in Genesis. It actually is wonderful on the front of racial justice or queer empowerment or interfaith families or disability justice. And all this stuff where people are being terrible to those groups within Jewish life, that's all a warping of Jewish tradition. That's not what Judaism stands for. What Judaism really stands for, and here's the text to show it, is all the good stuff, all the progressive, all the positive. I also really struggle with that because, and you put this perfectly in your book. I mean, it grants so much power to the text. It re-enshrines the idea that in order for groups of people or individual people to have their rights now, we need to anchor it on a verse from a few thousand years ago. And I don't think that's true. I both think it's just untrue generally, but I also think it's bad strategy. Like when you constantly do that and there are other verses in the same books that people can use to be racist or be queerphobic or be ableist, the other side of the argument gets to say their thing, we get to say our thing, and it's just like, oh, I guess you just got to sort of pick.

<Julia Watts-Belser>Exactly. I will never give the text that kind of power.

<Lex Rofeberg>Right. And so I wanted to close by just like I said to you before we started that I read this book and I had known a little bit about your work, but immediately I feel like I can call you one of my Rebbes. I do mean that in a grand way, but I also have like a big crew of like a few dozen Rebbes, most of whom are not Rabbis and some of whom are not Jews.

<Julia Watts-Belser>You should have a big crew.

<Lex Rofeberg>I do mean that to be a big deal, but the main reason I feel like I want to hold you as a Rabbi is that this entire book is anchored on saying regularly, Exodus, wrong. Leviticus, it's wrong here. Deuteronomy, it's wrong here. We have this deep impulse that what it is to be Jewish and what it is to be a progressive Jew even or a leftist Jew even is to love what Jewish texts say, not to think passionately that they're wrong. I find your, to use an annoying word, your hermeneutic. I can't think of a better way to say it. Your hermeneutic is one in which you are regularly saying this text that is in fact part of sacred Jewish tradition, it's wrong. And the fact of its wrongness doesn't mean that like I'm distancing myself from being Jewish, that's what it is to be part of this tradition. And so I kind of wanted to close just hearing from you like, why might it be pivotal to say when sacred texts are off base on disability or on other topics?

<Julia Watts-Belser>Yes. It's pivotal because it allows us to claim our own authority, to reckon with ethics, to grapple with power, to say, this is wrong. I will never grant Torah some text, the unilateral right to adjudicate questions of right or wrong for me. To me, that feels terrifying. Part of the urgency that we have in this moment is to be in community with others, doing deep discernment about what justice asks of us, what is required of us. The work of asking hard questions, allowing them to stay open for a long time, is crucial moral work. When I was in rabbinical school, I had alongside my books of Torah and books of Talmud, books of feminist commentary and criticism on my sacred text bookshelf, right? >I had like Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich sitting right up there alongside Torah. That's also Torah for me, and I ground my own sense of ethical orientation as much there, more there than I do in Torah. The work that I feel particularly called to do and that I think is so crucial for Jewish communities today to consider taking up is to think about the work of loving Torah in a way that allows us to sometimes say yes and sometimes say no. To say no to a text is to open up a kind of recognition of harm. And that is the ground of repair. And I believe that it is something that is really enfolded into the very rhythms of Jewish time and Jewish sacred practice, right? The idea that we should never be fully satisfied with what we know or how we act or what we do. Like the reaching, the yearning, the striving, the work of Torah, the work of revelation, the work of revelation is always unfolding and the justice traditions, the justice work that is happening in our midst right now, I recognize that as ongoing revelation that deserves to be braided back into conversation, living conversation with Torah.

<Lex Rofeberg>Thank you so much, Julia Watts Belser, for joining us. This has been a fantastic conversation.

<Julia Watts-Belser>Thanks so much for having me. It was a huge pleasure to be in conversation today. I really enjoyed it. Thank you.

<Lex Rofeberg>And thanks so much to all of you out there for listening. We hope you've enjoyed this conversation and we hope that you'll tune in again in the future, especially to our next set of episodes that is going to continue this unit on Disability Torah. There are some amazing, amazing folks joining us in the coming weeks, so we hope that you will continue this journey through learning Disability Torah with us.

As we close, a reminder, not about us yet, we'll get there, but this book, Loving Our Own Bones, you gotta, gotta, gotta order it. You can head to our show notes for this episode to find a link to do so, and this episode gave you a little bit, but you really want to dive into the whole thing. So don't forget to purchase this amazing book.

And also, if you want to be in touch with us about this episode, about other episodes, about anything related to our work, you can always do so in a number of ways. There's our Facebook, Twitter, Instagram handles, all of those are at Judaism Unbound. There's our email addresses, dan at [judaismunbound.com](mailto:dan@judaismunbound.com) and lex at [judaismunbound.com](mailto:lex@judaismunbound.com) and those show notes where you can purchase the amazing book Loving Our Own Bones. It also contains lots of other links related to content that came up in this episode. We really encourage you to check that out.

So thank you so much for listening and the last thing that we'll say is that support for this episode of Judaism Unbound comes from the Oshman Family JCC in Palo Alto, California, whose vision is to be the architects of the Jewish future. The Oshman Family JCC empowers you to experience Jewish paths toward a life of joy, purpose and meaning through innovative Jewish learning and wellness programs, community building and initiatives to develop the next generation of Jewish leaders. Learn more at [www.paloaltojcc.org](http://www.paloaltojcc.org).

And with that, this has been Judaism Unbound.