<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 Belzer in her upcoming course, Disability and Jewish Social Justice. Apply for her class by May 15th. Go to usfca.edu/jedi.That's usfca.edu/jedi.

<Dan Libenson>This is Judaism Unbound episode 424, The Superpowers of Blind Rabbis.

<Dan Libenson>Welcome back everyone, I'm Dan Libenson.

<Lex Rofeberg>And I'm Lex Rofeberg.

<Dan Libenson>And today we're continuing our series of episodes on the intersection of Judaism and disability with today's guest, Lauren Tuchman, who's a speaker, spiritual leader and educator in the area of Disability Torah. And as far as we're aware, the first blind woman in the history of the world to have ever become a rabbi. Now we launched this series with Julia Watts Belser last week and we're excited to build on that interview with our conversation today. So we're gonna get into that quickly.

So just a few more words of introduction of our guest today, Lauren Tuchman. In addition to being a speaker, spiritual leader and educator, Lauren Tuchman provides consulting to individuals and organizations across the Jewish community on matters relating to disability access and inclusion. She's taught in numerous synagogues and organizations across North America and has been named to the New York Jewish Week's 36 to Watch. In 2017, she delivered an Eli talk, that's basically a Jewish Ted talk, entitled, We All Were at Sinai, The Transformative Power of Inclusive Torah.

In addition to her work in the disability inclusion space, Lauren Tuchman teaches Musar with David Jaffe of Kirva, who was our guest back on episode 167. And she's also been a contributor to the Musar Institute's programming. And if that weren't enough, Lauren Tuchman is currently training to become a Jewish Mindfulness Teacher under the auspices of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and Or HaLev, and she also teaches with Svara. Lauren Tuchman has rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary. We're thrilled to continue our exploration of Judaism and disability. So Lauren Tuchman, welcome to Judaism Unbound. It's so great to have you.

<Lauren Tuchman> It’s so wonderful to be here.

<Dan Libenson> Well, we started this unit on disability, Torah, disability and Judaism with Julia Watts-Belser, and we talked a lot of Torah, and I'm excited to talk a lot of Torah with you today. But before we get to Torah, I wanted to, I think our time a little bit ran out with Julia Watts-Belser before we were really talking about inclusion. More than that, you know, Benay Lappe, our great teacher of all of us here, often talks about, you know, we shouldn't be talking about inclusion. We should be talking about other things. We should, maybe we'll include you. And-

<Lex Rofeberg> Sorry, just to clarify that. The “maybe we'll include you,” like “maybe those who are being brought in, quote unquote, as inclusivees, are actually the \*includers\* of the mainstream. That's what you're getting at.

<Dan Libenson> Yeah, maybe we'll end up doing our own thing and maybe we'll include you, you know, which I like that sort of take. But I wanted to talk to you a little bit about imagining a better future. What would the world be if Judaism were inclusive of and integrated with people with disabilities in the way that you would ideally dream that it would be?

<Lauren Tuchman The tradition has a lot of challenge in it, but ultimately it's how we choose as communities to interpret our received tradition that I think has a lot of work to be done. One of the practical things that I would love to see begin is a more democratic access to tradition. We need to have more people learning and more people absorbing tradition.

You know, not everybody needs to go sit in the beit midrash and learn Talmud. I mean, I love learning Talmud in the beit midrash. That's not gonna be for everyone's path, right? But everyone, if we can all take a little bit more ownership, I think that will move us towards a more democratic access point to tradition, which means that we all then become shapers of that tradition. And because we become shapers of tradition, it shifts, I think, how we relate to each other and how we relate to institutions.

I also want to think about disabled Jews and others as integral and that we don't have necessarily an emphasis on inclusion because, right, as you said in the beginning, you know, what does inclusion mean? It can go either way. Maybe we'll include the mainstream or maybe the mainstream will include us. But really thinking about belonging and creating communities where all people can feel a sense of belonging, which in the time I think we're living is extraordinarily challenging with everything going on in our world that's creating these incredibly splintered and separate communities and where people are feeling incredibly alienated socially and otherwise, I think we have a lot of tikkun to do to really build on the good work that has happened until now around disability inclusion. And yet there's a lot more to go.

So I would love to see more people understanding that it's theirs to engage with. I think we have a challenge around people having a model in their mind of like the experts, you know, and I, as a rabbi, I really value the education that I have and the expertise that I have. And I also think that there is this model that is actually natural to the tradition that basically says the rabbi or the head of the institution, whatever that is, whomever that is, they hold the tradition and everybody else just kind of comes in and comes in and leaves. I want a tradition. I want a community where we all are constantly in process of ownership and seeking because the more we do that, the more we have a stake in the future. And I think that we can have a very promising future if we step up to the plate a little bit.

<Dan Libenson> You know, there have been people that have been excluded or marginalized from Jewish community in the past for reasons of kind of moral opprobrium, right? But that's not the situation for people with disabilities. Like, I think that most people, in their minds, if you asked them and you said, do you want your Jewish institution to be open and accessible to people with disabilities, they would say, oh, yes, of course I do. But they don't do it, right? That it's not actually accessible.

So I'm wondering if we could talk about what is it that these good hearted, well-meaning people should be doing that they're not doing? And I know that's a hard question to ask because obviously there are so many different disabilities, but we maybe could just talk about blindness just to kind of use that as an example potentially.

<Lauren Tuchman> Yeah, you know, I think in terms of what the barriers are to accessibility for people with disabilities, I think there are a couple of pieces of it. One of them I think is fear. I don't think we talk about that enough. People are really afraid of disability. People are conditioned to be really afraid of disability. And so if you want to ask somebody, you know, are you excluding people with disabilities because you're afraid of disability? You would probably have people say, of course not, what are you saying?

But I think often that real psychological fear of disability gets in the way on a very subconscious level, and then it translates into not having access. Because people with especially visible disabilities, but really I think all disabilities know in our bones that people have a fear of disability because we live in the world as an embodiment of that fear. And I don't think that that's okay, but I think it's the reality.

And so we have to do a lot of work to shift that reality. Let's be honest that being disabled can be really frustrating because of society, also because the body can be really frustrating. It's lots of different pieces of it, but also like we can choose our responses to that. We can either be afraid of it or we can take it as part and parcel of the human condition.

And I think if we really, really work with people on helping them through that, which I think is actually the purview of able-bodied people to do with other able-bodied people. I think one of the things that the disability community did not do well, we have not really emphasized the need for affinity spaces for able-bodied people to work on their ableism. Just like in the racial justice movement, there's a lot of stuff around white people unlearning white supremacy. I don't think we've done the same thing to the same degree that we should have around disability.

And especially we've learned that really in the last four years since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, and the way in which the pandemic is still ongoing and impacting disabled people in tremendous ways, particularly disabled people who are higher risk for COVID. So I think that that is very much present of like, we don't wanna think about it, we don't wanna deal with it. And so I think one of the things we need to do is really to begin to create more resilient senses of self around being able to grapple with that, which is really hard.

So I would love to have like able-bodied people stepping up and saying like, okay, we really wanna create an inclusive community, but like we need to really work on our ableism. And I think also for disabled people, like we also have ableism within us too against ourselves, that's internalized ableism and against other groups of disabled people. So we all have a lot of work to do, but the analogy that I like to use, it's kind of like if we were in a never-ending rainstorm, where every time you step outside, it's raining, you go inside, you dry off, you maybe have to change your clothes, you get soaking wet, only to then go back outside and it's still raining.

So this kind of stuff is so in our culture and so in our language that we're never going to, I don't think any of us are ever going to get to a place of unlearning ableism and never having to deal with it again. It's a constant observation of the self and it's a constant introspection, but that's really, really tough for people to do. You can't be like, I want you to do the most amazing self introspection all the time. That's going to be really hard for a lot of people, but we do need to make it communally easier to figure out what the emotional and psychological barriers are.

We also of course have major architectural issues. I think about this all the time when I'm in different synagogues, especially synagogue structures that are older, the ways in which some of the accessibility features are very emblematic of the time of the synagogue's construction and how it can be really weird and awkward to work around those things. So a lot of it is around psychological and emotional stuff. I think a lot of it is around, why do I want to spend the money if people aren't in the community, which then gets us back right around to the psychological and emotional stuff?

And I think also on top of that, we have to make a concerted choice to communally move our resources in this direction. Because we live in a world of finite resources, we can't do everything all of the time. But what are the choices that American Jewish institutions, and I'm speaking as an American Jew in the United States, what are choices we are making around our communal resources and how might we redirect some of that so that we're supporting our people in the best way that we can?

<Lex Rofeberg> So I share Dan's excitement about starting with the contemporary and thinking about our Jewish institutions now. And you've already offered some incredible framing and wisdom there. I also do want to do some of that Torah that we began diving into with Julia last episode. And she was talking about how sometimes the issue with Jewish tradition is that we can't find examples of people who have characteristics to marginalized groups today. You have to search really well to find those examples. But with disability, there's actually a lot of those examples.

And the problem is that Jewish texts are sometimes really harmful in the ways that they feature disabled people. There are exceptions to that. And you in an Eli talk that we're gonna put in our show notes, you spoke about some more positive examples, but I'd love to hear a little bit from you on how blindness features in Torah, both in ways that are sort of clear cut and obvious. I'm thinking of like the Isaac story where he's not able to see and that has a direct impact on how the story flows with his children and Jacob receiving his blessing instead of Esau. But also in maybe some more hidden ways. What are the ways in which blindness manifests in our Jewish textual tradition and how might we channel them for good and not just harm?

<Lauren Tuchman>Yeah, absolutely. So one of the things that I'll say is that one of my favorite stories of blindness or visual impairment, maybe more accurately visual impairment in Torah is actually Leah's story and Bereshit's in Genesis, chapter 29, which is only two chapters of the Isaac story, interestingly. But in this text, Leah, one of the four matriarchs of the Jewish tradition, the thing we learn about her when we get introduced to her in the Torah is that in contrast to Rachel, her sister, her younger sister, Leah has eyes that are rakot, is the Hebrew term, which gets often translated as soft or weak.

We don't actually quite know what it means to have weak or soft eyes. And so there's a Midrashic tradition that tries to fill that gap in, basically tries to say, well, Leah's eyes were weak because she was crying so much because she was going to have to marry Esau. And she didn't want to do that because according to this Midrash, which I think also Rashi includes in his commentary, if I'm not mistaken, there's an idea that the oldest sibling marries the oldest and the youngest the youngest. So by that logic, Leah would marry Esau, Esau and Jacob would marry Rachel. And Leah did not want to marry Esau. And I find that to be a very troubling Midrash. So I'm going to just put that aside for now.

Things that I always try to remember with Midrashim. Midrashim were like early Dvrei Torah. They were like early Torah commentaries. Actually, they probably were sermons given in synagogues. In a lot of communities, these sermons, these Midrashim, have become kind of like as though they were Mi-Sinai, as though they were from Sinai. When I remember that many Midrashim were early sermons, it's easier for me to kind of take that in its context.

So thinking about the very famous idea that the reason Leah had soft or weak eyes is because she was crying so much because she'd have to marry Esau. I'm able to kind of contextualize that a little bit, and that's one of the ways that I navigate challenging texts. I'm really intrigued by the idea, which I think is in the straightforward or shot reading of the text, that Leah might have had a visual disability. We will never be able to conclusively claim that Leah had a visual disability. And I think that's not the point. The point is the possibility.

And the reason that that is really important to me personally, we often talk about men in the tradition with disabilities. We rarely talk about women. So I think that's critically important. Also, it helps to kind of reframe Leah's story with how Jacob completely is not interested in her and the way that that gets reframed in really challenging and problematic ways. But that is one example of blindness.

We of course also have the example in Leviticus with the kohanim, which Rabbi Watts Belser addresses beautifully, beautifully in her book, Loving Our Own Bones. That's another way in which blindness comes up is one of those things that if a kohein lives with, that disqualifies them from being able to perform their priestly responsibilities. Interestingly, blindness shows up in the Book of Deuteronomy when there's a series of what are known as brachot uchlalot, blessings and curses, around how we are to behave. And if we don't do those things, there are going to be repercussions. I’m going to put that theological challenge aside and just name that that's fair.

One of those curses has to do with blindness, which is a very, very hard and painful verse to read. But also, there is a section of these curses in Deuteronomy that also says that a person who misleads a blind person along the way, that person should be quote unquote a ruler or a cursing. But I always kind of come upon that verse and I feel like I'm getting mixed messages here on the one hand as somebody who's been misdirected on the way. When you get lost and you're like totally turned around because somebody thought they knew better than you which way you wanted to go, it's extraordinarily frustrating. I don't know any blind person that hasn't experienced that. So there's like a certain bit of recognition.

And also, I think that going back to the issue of the priests, and the kohanim and the ways in which disability challenges their ability to perform their sickness, there are a couple of different ways that's been interpreted over the centuries. One thing that I will lift up from Rabbi Watts Belser is that there's a certain way in which the Torah is recognizing the reality of an ableist world in a very interesting way through that particular treatment.

And also there's one reference that is really well known. Don't place a stumbling block before the blind. It's the 19th chapter of Leviticus. And that gets so quickly metaphorized, right? Rashi says, the preeminent commentator, Rashi from Ma Provence says, this means we don't mislead anybody by giving them bad advice. But actually, I think the Torah is being really literal. The first half of that verse also is don't curse the deaf. Don't humiliate people. Don't make their lives difficult. They were already marginalized.

I think the Torah is saying, be aware of that. To be a holy person in the world is to recognize that everyone has dignity. And so the fact that we are so quick to make something a metaphor, especially when commentators say, well, say nobody would ever place a stumbling block before a blind person. That's a terrible thing to do. And I want to say to them, you clearly haven't lived as a blind person, because if you had, you would know that stumbling blocks are all over the place.

<Lex Rofeberg> That's such a great point. I really appreciate what you're saying about the tendency to metaphorize. And even with the Leia story, it's like that move towards, ah, her eyes were weak. That must mean she was crying as opposed to like, maybe there's a literal kind of visual impairment here that we can learn from. I think that we do that a lot with body related talk in the Torah and other Jewish texts. So I love that you're naming that. I wanted to flash to the Talmud a little bit.

I know that you're deeply connected and involved with Svara. And what that means is that you've spent some deep time committed to Talmud study. Not only is there visual impairment all over the Talmud, there we actually can find some empowering positive kinds of examples that you have spoken about again in that amazing Eli talk. Tell us a little bit about Rav Yosef. He comes up in the Talmud in a way that I actually think helps us a great deal potentially.

<Lauren Tuchman> Yeah, Rav Yosef is a blind rabbi and he comes up in the Talmud a bunch. One of the things that I think is so interesting, I've not done a comprehensive study of Rav Yosef, but I'd actually really love to. But one of the things that's really interesting about him is that he is presented in the Talmud as a very multifaceted personality, as many of the rabbinic sages were. His blindness certainly comes up many, many times, but he's also known to make statements about lots of other things.

The thing about it that I think is really significant is that he makes some problematic statements. And the reason I say that that's really important is because oftentimes people with disabilities are assumed to be angelically perfect human beings. And the truth is, we're just people. But the fact that Rabbi Yosef is just a very dynamic person in the Talmud, it tells us a couple of things. It tells us, first of all, that he was very much there. He was part and parcel of the Beit Midrash. And when I was in rabbinical school, really looking for role models for myself, finding rabbis like Rabbi Yosef and another Rav Sheishet, who is also a blind rabbi, was really important to me because it reminded me that I had a place in the tradition.

I think also something that a lot of my professors talked with me about was how oral the rabbinic culture was. No question that Rabbi Yosef, I'm sure, had plenty of access challenges in his life, but also the fact that the rabbinic culture was incredibly oral meant that he really had full access to the Beit Midrash. And there's something about that that I love. There is something about returning to that that makes me feel really alive and excited. And that's not accessible to many, many people. And so I sit with all of that.

But the fact also that Rav Yosef challenges rabbinic precedence because of blindness. And he says, like, there's a very famous section of Talmud where Rav Yosef, there's a longer conversation about honoring parents. And then the Talmud, as it often does, goes into a tangent. And it says, Rav Yosef was blind and he performed these mitzvot. He performed all the religious obligations that he was supposed to do. It's a question about whether or not he had the same obligation as cited men. Now, of course, bearing in mind, we're only talking about men in this context having obligations to Jewish ritual behavior. And the question goes, you know, did Rav Yosef have that same obligation that his cited colleagues did?

There was a question in this text of Talmud that says, who is greater, a person who performs the obligations that they are required to or a person who performs obligations, even though they are not required? So the rabbi is ultimately saying that a person who performs obligations, who is required, that is a better thing to do or a greater thing to do than doing it voluntarily, which might sound very counterintuitive to us today. And Rav Yosef recognizing this is very perplexed and upset because he knows that his colleagues don't think he is obligated in the same way that they are. And he says, that has to change. This is not aligned with my own experience and my religious obligations.

That is the precedent for why blind people generally are obligated at the same as sighted people. So that is a really beautiful for me model of a complicated, multi-faceted person who we should both really look to as a model of empowerment. But also we should refrain from pedestalling him, which I think we often will do when we try to find people who are in marginal categories, where we assume that everything about them is perfect in every way. And we kind of make them in our own image.

Rav Yosef is his own person, he did something tremendous and he was very involved in his community. But he was also a person. And I think all of those things are so important because he was clearly integrated into the wider rabbinic community. And also to bear in mind, the rabbinic community was a tiny segment of the Jewish world and a very elite one. So all of those things I think make Rav Yosef a really fascinating person.

<Dan Libenson> I'm curious whether you think or know or have an instinct that Judaism has been worse than other religious traditions, other cultural traditions in terms of the place that it's had for people with disabilities or perhaps better or the same, no better, no worse. But sometimes when I look at other traditions, like again, I don't know that much, but it feels like in Islam, there seems to be a place for blind clerics that feels like a more honored, a more common thing.

And with Judaism, it's like there are so few blind rabbis that it feels like every time there is one, whether in the Talmud or in our present time, it's a grand event. And I just don't know if that's true, but it feels to me like there are things in Judaism that are about, I mean in Jewish texts, that are about kind of like we've talked about the priests, that there are these kind of bodily quote unquote imperfections that render somebody not able to join this elite cadre of priests. And I just wonder if there have been trickle down effects of that throughout Jewish history as you read it.

<Lauren Tuchman> Yeah, so I think this is an incredibly important question, and I can't speak to the inner workings of other traditions, so I'm not going to go there. But what I am going to caution us against is thinking about who does disability better and who does disability worse. Religious tradition gets filtered through culture and gets filtered through so many component pieces. I think that different communities are going to have different perspectives on disability that are going to change over time based on so many external factors.

So in terms of the rabbinate, we are seeing a growing number of blind rabbis. And honestly, I don't know in the past, we often assume that there's this gap between Rev Yosef and the modern day. I actually would like us to question that gap. I don't know enough about medieval Jewish history, yet to know if there actually were more blind rabbis or even in the Enlightenment period or even after the destruction. And I think a big component piece also is that we've lost so much of our own knowledge of our history because of the challenges that the Jewish people have encountered. So trying to create a usable past, I think is a little bit more challenging in that way. But I want to encourage us to really ask, like, maybe they did exist, they probably did exist, rather than the assumption that I often get from folks, which is like, you have Rav Sheishet, you have Rav Yosef, and then you have about 2,000 years and then you have modern rabbis.

I wonder if actually there is more there than we are not aware of. It's very, very important because I often get this, right, from people. Other traditions are more welcoming, and there's always a sense of the Jewish community is the worst around disability. One of the things that I want to just name, how much of the assumption of Judaism is worse, right, which is a very common idea. How much of that is based in empirical fact, and how much of that is rooted in internalized anti-Semitism, which rears its ugly head, I think, for a lot of us, and something that we have to navigate.

It doesn't mean that our community doesn't have plenty of challenges, but I think it's really easy for those voices in our head to tell us that others are better than we are, and to also remind ourselves that in terms of physical resources, ours is a tiny community in this country, and we think of ourselves as having a lot of access and resources, which we do, but the reality is if I want disability access, getting it in English and getting it from a Christian publisher is so much easier because there are far more of them.

<Lex Rofeberg> I love that reflection on internalized anti-Semitism. I do think there's another, I don't know if this is a positive read or a neutral read or a negative read. If I, a Jew who spends a lot of time thinking about Jewish stuff, were asked to list problems with Jewish life, I could list a lot of them because it's just where I situate, and I know less about other religious traditions. And so if I had to make a comprehensive list of problems with Christianity and Islam, A, I would feel weird about doing that as an outsider to those traditions, and B, I would be less able to because I don't know the ins and outs of those textual and cultural traditions.

But I agree with you, I think there's also a lot of internalized anti-Semitism that operates there. That's a really great point. I wanted to go to another question tied to Torah a little bit, but it's also a question for our time, which is how we read characters in Torah. So Moses, we talked about Moses with Julia last week. There are commentary traditions that read him as having difficulty with speech. There are many commentaries that go that direction. And what I think happens, though, is there's all sorts of people taking that and saying, like, look at Moses, despite this challenge of his, he was able to be a leader of the Israelite nation. That “despite” word.

What we rarely do is, it is davka, it is specifically the fact that Moses may have been navigating disability. That actually was a superpower of his that made him better able to serve as a leader of many people. I don't see that many approaches that are offering that take. And I think it would be a reasonable take. I think somebody who has that kind of struggle and recognizes what it is to navigate the world with difficulties with speech, when others sort of expect you to communicate a certain way, I think that is a person likely to be able to empathize with people who have other kinds of disabilities or other kinds of challenges.

I wanted to hear a little bit of your thoughts about Moses. And I wanted to bring in that he and you share another thing, which is that both of you, I'm going to use kind of an anachronistic term, but both of you are part of interfaith families. Moses grew up in an Egyptian household. He was then integrated into Israelite life and also through his wife Tzipora integrated into Midianite life for a substantial period of time. I want to get your wisdom not just on disability, but on other questions. You've spoken beautifully about what it meant for you to have a Christian parent playing a key role in your upbringing and helping you even on the Jewish side. And so I'd love to hear a little bit more about that.

<Lauren Tuchman> Yes, I think everything you said there is really right on. And particularly when we think about Moshe's father-in-law, Dretro Yitro, he has this beautiful appearance in Torah right before Revelation where he's basically saying to Moshe, Wow, I can't believe that, you know, God did this miracle. That's really amazing. And like they actually ask after each other's welfare and they apparently have a little shmooze and like connect.

 And he seems like this amazing father-in-law. And he's giving Moshe these bits of wisdom about like how to run a society so that he doesn't drain himself completely. And then he sort of and then he exits the Torah. Jethro is this really incredible figure because he is seen as this deeply wise non-Jewish voice from whom we learn much, particularly in our time right now, when I think it's hard to imagine learning from outside when we are feeling very squeezed perhaps by lots of things. It is really important to remind ourselves of those voices and to remind ourselves that we actually don't hold all of the world's wisdom. In fact, our tradition is incredible, but we have what to learn from others.

But I will say also that being part of an interfaith family is very important in lots of ways and that it forces me to have to explain Jewish traditions much more directly. I would say also that as a community, I think that there is incredible value to distinctiveness and to difference. But I think that there's also an incredible value to finding ways to better build relationships with other groups and other communities, because that I think is critical to our flourishing.

We're not a self-contained, independent island, just as Moshe is not a self-contained person. He is deeply connected to Aaron. He's deeply connected to his brother Aaron. He's deeply connected to Miriam, his sister. And the fact that he has this connection, not only through his adopted family, but also through the family he married into. I think all of that is really important land. I think it's part and parcel of the lived experience of many, many Jews today in America.

<Dan Libenson> I want to pick up on that notion of the internalized anti-Semitism for a second, because I understand that neither of you was accusing me of internalized anti-Semitism. But I do think that it's a difficult balance.

But Lauren, I wanted to talk a little bit about that larger question of kind of introspection, because it also connects to some things that Lex and I have talked about over the years, both on the air and off the air, which is the degree to which activism is aided or not so aided by introspection. Is it the case that activism is better, in this case maybe activism about disability, but is better because we also do that practice of kind of our own growth? Or is it possible that inward turning can come at the expense of activism because you become too inwardly focused?

And I know that Musar, which is maybe you'll say a little bit about it, we've talked about it on the podcast, but it's this Jewish approach to sort of working on yourself that is something that you are very involved with. And I'm curious just your thoughts on Musar more generally, whether it has to do with disability or not, just how you think about Musar practice and its connection to our work outside ourselves.

<Lauren Tuchman> Absolutely. So I'll start with my general thoughts on Musar and then kind of bring it back into disability. And I think what you said about the danger of too much self-reflection, getting down on ourselves, I think that's very real. I think that if we find ourselves in a position of thinking about all of the ways in which we are totally failing at whatever it is, whether it's in Jewish community, whether it's in our personal lives, whether it's whatever it is, like globally, whatever it is, we can become so weighed down that we just shut down and stop acting. And that is not helpful at all.

And I think it gets even dangerous when that then moves from action to completely shutting out any kind of tocha, any kind of rebuke at all. Then we're in a really bad spot. I do think that one of the things that Mussar can do really well is provide a container for that. Mussar was a response to a Yeshiva culture, a Jewish learning culture in which the emphasis was to the exclusion of almost anything. And Rav Israel Salater, who began the Mussar movement, as we understand it, although there have been Mussar texts for a long time, really was concerned about the character development of his students and felt that you could not be a well-rounded Jew and a well-rounded human being if you were not doing that kind of spiritual work.

One of the things that I do in my own practice is really focus on Mussar as a way of spiritual and character development that is done with an incredible amount of accountability and self-compassion. And I think that when we are in that kind of accountable spiritual community, hopefully that translates into then how we are in our wider lives. It prevents us from getting so down on ourselves.

A lot of marginalized people are trained to do that, right, to constantly be beating up on ourselves. This is an antidote to that because we are loved and held in a community and we are in that process to be the best human beings we can be, not because we're aiming for perfection, but because we're just trying to be aligned with our higher soul, with the best version of ourselves so that we can be the best version of ourselves with other people as well.

<Dan Libenson> Okay, so now I have kind of a gear shift, although as we always say, like it may or may not be, there's probably if it's all ties together. But I wanted to talk a little bit about audio and audiobooks because for me, and this is really for the last 20 years or so, audiobooks have been my lifeline, have been the only way that I've been able really to read a book.

Partly that might be because of just having little kids and not having the time to sit down and read a book. It had to do with commuting. It may have to do with certain, I don't know if they rise to the level of disabilities, and maybe they do on my part that I haven't been aware of, but that I now sort of think I might have. But in any event, audiobooks have been really a critical thing for my ability to do my work, to live the life that I'm trying to live.

And I think that there's an interesting situation, because when I started to want to read some Hebrew audiobooks, I signed up for these Israeli audiobook providers, and many of them start out by saying, like when you start listening to the audiobook, they say, this audiobook was recorded at the center for people with blindness and visual impairments or something like that in Hebrew. And it was fascinating to me, because English audiobooks tend to not say something like that. And it feels like maybe what we're seeing is that in Israel, audiobooks right now, I mean in 2024, are kind of seen as something that is meant largely or primarily for access for blind people. And in America, maybe this has to do with what you were saying earlier about the number of Jews versus the number of non-Jews. Like somehow in America because of the vast population, there's a sense that there are actually more people who are not blind that really want to listen to audiobooks. And it's kind of, I would imagine, serving blind people.

And in Israel, it's almost the mirror image. So I guess what I'm curious for you to reflect on a little bit, and we've talked, I've given this analogy before on the podcast that my son has celiac, which means that he can't eat gluten. And if it was only about people who have celiac, there probably wouldn't be a lot of food out in the world that he could eat. But because there are a lot of people in the world who have gluten intolerance that doesn't rise to the level of celiac, that creates a market large enough to provide all this gluten-free food that allows my son to live a great life.

And I'm curious if you could reflect a little bit about that way in which maybe one navigates the world where there are things that if they were only seen as accommodations for people with disabilities, the world maybe should take them more seriously but doesn't. But if folks could understand that those kinds of things help people much more broadly than that, and also vice versa, that maybe again I'm looking for a new lens through which may be to look at disability in ways that don't make it just like, oh, you should only do these things because of people with disabilities, which of course you should, but maybe we would get more mileage if people thought about it more broadly.

<Lauren Tuchman> Part of the things I'll say about audiobooks is that they were actually, they started in this country specifically for blind and visually impaired people back in the 50s. And they were recorded at the National Library Service for the Blind and Visually Impaired, which still exists. And most people who are blind and visually impaired have access to it. It's free for anybody in America who is blind and visually impaired to sign up and you can get all these books. But that's really where it started.

And I remember I have a lot of memories of some of the earlier audio books that were recorded. They were recorded by these very well-intentioned volunteers. And there wasn't a lot of editing. So I'd be trying to listen to a textbook and it was miserable. And I'd often ask for the braille version because I'm a very proud and very, I'm a lifelong and proud braille reader. So that's another piece for me. But in terms of the audio, you know, that's how it started out. And then with things like Audible and other kind of super says, it became much more commercial, which I think in a lot of ways is a really good thing.

I listen to a lot of audio books, but I think also we lose perspective that this began really for the blind community. And when it was just for the blind community, there were a lot of quality control issues. Now that it's become more commercialized, everything is much more polished and much more above board and all of those things. And I think it's really important to just name. When something becomes accessible for more people, particularly people who are not perceived to have disabilities, we tend to experience a quality increase.

So I think in terms of service provision, that's really, really important. I love audio books myself. I think a lot of the narrators are phenomenal. And I always want to just remind folks that when we're listening to a book, that is a way of reading it as well. Lots of people read with their eyes, many of us read with our hands, and some of us read with our ears. And all of those different ways of reading are ways of receiving and being in relationship with the information that we're receiving.

<Dan Libenson> There are so many Jewish books that I want to read that are not available as audio books. And that's because I think there's not a market for it. In other words, the market's not big enough, just like you were describing. And I guess that's just a conundrum that we have. I guess that's an example for me of whether there's a take that you would have that would say, hey, there should be an element of the Jewish community maybe similar to that library for the blind and visual impaired, that would do this as a calling as opposed to as a market.

<Lauren Tuchman> Yeah, and we do have that actually. It's called JBI International. JBI International used to be known as the Jewish Braille Institute. They are the Jewish affiliate of the National Library Service. They do a lot of those Jewish audio recordings. The challenge is the only way to get access to them is if you are eligible for the larger National Library Service. And so to your point, there is not enough of a general market for commercial audio distributors to publish Jewish books, which is extremely frustrating. I share that frustration. There are lots of things I would love to have access to in audio format. The reason that these organizations exist is because despite the proliferation of audio books, we are still living in what we call a book famine, where only 10% of published works are made accessible. And all the more so, there is even greater disparity in the Jewish world. In this country, right, and I'm speaking again as an American Jew, you know, in the United States, as Jews, we actually are better off in terms of access than most other minority religious communities that don't even have the same level of access that we do to alternative formats for their tasks. So much of this is about resources and market share, and we just don't have a lot of market share.

<Lex Rofeberg> So I'm constantly thinking in puns. That's just a thing that my mind does all the time. And I just looked up how braille the word is spelled in Hebrew. I was curious. It doesn't align with what I think is an amazing pun, but you could hear braille as a two-part Hebrew word, bara'el, which would roughly mean like God creates or God creation. I mean, there's a lot of words that end in ale in Jewish text, and it's usually connected to an angel or something like that because it's a God name. But so I think it'd be cool if we thought of this notion of braille as a rendering of like divine creativity. I think that that's absolutely what it is.

But I have maybe a related question, which is sight metaphors, sight languaging. There's a lot of it in Jewish text. There's a lot of stories that hinge on an X character saw whatever they saw. Or on the other hand, Y character was not able to see God's face, only God's back. Moses was able to see the land but not enter it himself. There's a lot of stories that incorporate sight language, sometimes literal language of seeing and of vision, other times metaphoric and other times in between like we talked about before. I really would love to hear how you approach those texts, not as like a challenge. I'm starting from the premise that those texts and all Jewish texts are for everyone. When you reach those texts, does it feel like an ouch or does it actually feel exciting because you have a different way of understanding them that might teach those of us who are sighted?

<Lauren Tuchman>I would say it is both an ouch and an exciting thing, mostly an ouch. But I have come to understand that people or I've come to believe that people write in the way that they sensorally experience the world. I write in a very sensory oriented way around my own experiences. So I recognize that when we have texts that they are reflecting our own human experience. And at the same time, what is very concerning to me is that when we privilege any particular sensory experience, whether it's sight or hearing, particularly it's usually sight or hearing, when we privilege either of those and we say that those are connected to knowing.

So for example, the Moshe being able to see only God's back and not God's stays, like a certain kind of knowing of God, but that knowing is limited, which is an interesting piece. But also I think that there is a certain way in which sight and knowing are very connected. And I think that is dangerous because we assume that sight, and I've heard from sighted people who say that like they are just conditioned to sight is the main sense that they are taught to rely on. And that's what makes blindness so scary. And I would argue that that's a cultural choice as much as it is a physiological choice.

I think we have to be very, very careful about what we assume when we think of knowledge and how we assume ways of knowing. The Isaac story is a great example of that. The way in which Isaac is deeply humiliated when he recognizes that his experiences are not lining up with what Jacob is telling him. Of course, he thinks Jacob is Esau. But sight in that particular text is really weaponized against Isaac. And I think we have to be really, really careful when we make choices about the particular kind of sensory experiences that we associate with absolute knowledge or absolute truth.

<Lex Rofeberg> I have a final closing question, which relates to the fact that Jewish tradition has long cherished the fact that we, and you talked about this before, that we have both oral and written forms of Torah. When I and when most other people speak about why that's cool, we rarely talk about a very practical element of it again, which is that for people who can't see, having oral forms of teaching is critical. And for people who can't hear, having written forms of that which has been oral, even the oral Torah, it started oral and was written down in a bunch of ways.

We've done this beautiful thing historically, which is render texts for what I'm going to call multiple intelligences. It's like a pedagogy term, it's an educator term, where often educators are trained that different learners are best able to process in different ways. Sometimes it's not about their abilities or disabilities, it's just about some people connect better to things that involve touching with their hands. Often young children need things to be sort of kinesthetic in order to learn effectively. Others visual, others auditory.

But there's a way in which rendering our written texts orally, whether it's an ancient text or an audiobook now, rendering our oral texts visually has a long tradition. And I haven't heard many people talk about that as being a gift of Jewish tradition, that we've packaged wisdom in multiplicities of ways to speak to different kinds of learners of people in the world.

I'm kind of curious if there's other things that I might not have thought of or other Jews might not have thought of that are real gifts that folks who are visually impaired, understandings you might have about Jewish tradition or the world that folks who are sighted not through any fault of our own, but through the fact that we're sighted, we haven't thought this way, are there pieces of wisdom that you think visually impaired folks have to offer that sighted people would really benefit from internalizing?

<Lauren Tuchman> Yeah, well, first of all, I think Hebrew braille is a huge gift to the world. There's been a really unfortunate tendency in the wider world, not just in the Jewish world, but in the wider world of thinking of braille as becoming obsolete because of technology, as if you were saying multiple intelligences, right? As if the fact that I use a screen reader, which reads things allowed to me orally on the screen, means that I no longer read braille, like where I no longer need braille. And there are many, many blind people for whom braille is not available, then I honor all of that. But speaking for myself, there's no way that I would want to have one without the other. I wouldn't be who I am with one without the other. When I'm in synagogue, like I am always using a braille prayer book because that is my preference. I want to have the physical book in my physical hands and physically be engaging with it. That is a much richer experience for me than if I had the, you know, C-Door app on my phone, which I'm very happy to have a C-Door app on my phone, but I don't want to have that C-Door app on my phone be my primary conduit. There is something really beautiful about being able to physically connect in a tactile way with text. So I think that's a superpower. Also, a couple of things that I would say are real gifts is like thinking about, I feel like for myself, and again, only speaking for myself as a very auditory person, I have to say, frankly, that I feel really grateful that my brain is wired in such a way, probably through no fault of my own, because it had to be so, so supremely auditory. But I just love things that are detailed, things that are long form, like my favorite medium are podcasts, which is why I'm so excited to be here. I think this is such an intimate, beautiful medium. You are hearing the person's voice, we're connecting in a very particular way. That is really beautiful to me. I think that we are losing a lot of that connection, because we're in a world that is so visually oriented around Instagram, TikTok and all these other apps that I'm not on. But that just is very short, very quick things that cause people to have particular reactions and thinking about things. Whereas with a podcast, you can't skim a podcast. I think that the fact that as a very arbitrary person, I am really committed to just exploring and understanding the world in a really deep way that connects me to detail and connects me to just...I mean, this is also my personality. I just love things that are complicated. I don't really love hot takes. Just the way that I have had to relate to the world, I think really is important in that way. But also say on a slightly different note, I do think that my experience of being a blind person, being the only blind person in my school growing up, being the only blind person at my university, being the only blind person in my rabbinical school, I have had, for good and for bad, have had to build a certain kind of resilience around navigating a lot of ableism and navigating a lot of assumptions and figuring out how to fit into spaces that were not built for me. And I think as Jews, when we think about our own positionality, I think we have a lot to learn from the disability community around what it means to build that internal resilience, particularly around challenges that we're experiencing right now around anti-Semitism and around other things. I think that my lived experience just gives me a very different perspective on how to effectively navigate these things. And I often find myself growing extremely frustrated with how the Jewish community and how our assumed representatives are navigating it. And I think that there is a lot that my personal perspective has given me that really allows me to just have a very different outlook and perspective.

<Lex Rofeberg>Thank you so much, Lauren Tuchman, for joining us. This has been a fantastic conversation.

<Lauren Tuchman>Thank you so much for having me. It's been really a delight to be with 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. We want to close out this episode by reminding you all the ways you can be in touch with us. Send us your questions, your ideas, your visions related to this episode, related to our other episodes in this Disability Torah series, or just related to your visions for the Jewish future. All of that is super welcome.

And here are the different ways you can be in touch. First, there's our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram handles. All of those are @JudaismUnbound. Second, you can head to our website, judaismunbound.com, to check out show notes for this episode or any of our other episodes. You can also check out our upcoming courses in the UnYeshiva, which are not quite posted yet as we release this episode, but will be posted in the next few days, so stay tuned for some amazing learning opportunities. And you can email us at dan at judaismunbound.com or lex at judaismunbound.com.

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