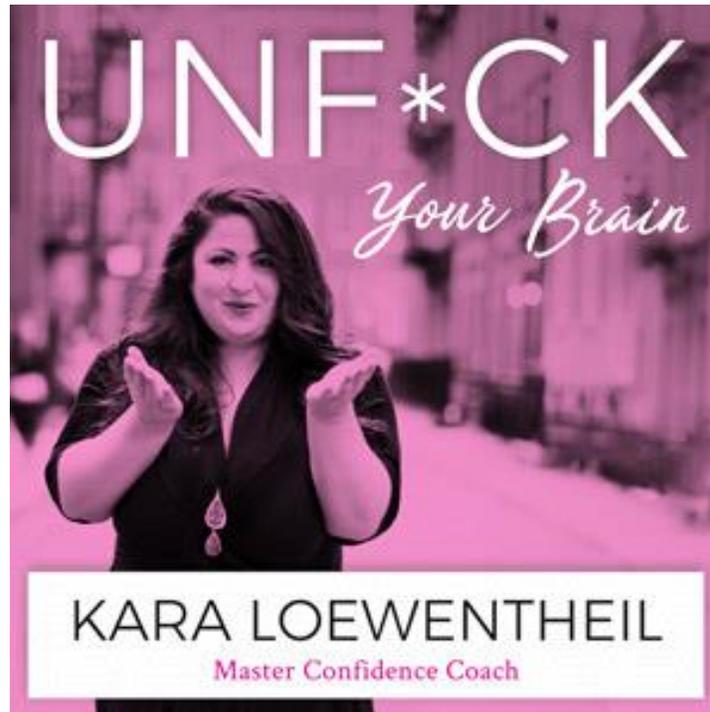


UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello, my chickens. How are you? I am very cold. We had our first little bit of snow last night which felt very winter magic for 23 seconds. So I'm open for a little more snow as long as just conveniently it doesn't interfere with any of my plans. That's the kind of snow I want.

So this past weekend I had a little bit of a blast from the past, a trip to the past. I went down to DC, well, really technically, Bowie, Maryland to attend the bar mitzvah of the son, the first son of my childhood best friend. So that's just blown my mind right there. But it was a really, actually quite a beautiful experience.

I think as with any kind of religious observance or ritual sometimes, regardless of where you are on the kind of faith spectrum, or spirituality spectrum sometimes you participate in a ritual and it feels like just going through the motions. And then sometimes it feels really powerful and really meaningful. And I am not somebody who really identifies as being particularly, certainly not religious or particularly spiritual.

But I do identify strongly with being Jewish. And part of that kind of that seems like a disconnect to some people but that's partly because people are using a very kind of western Christian notion of religion. Judaism is not just a religion, it's more like an ethno or tribal religion. It is from before these western concepts of religion.

I think the way that the western concepts of religion work and especially these days are that it's sort of religion is this thing that is separate from your nationality and separate from your political structure and separate

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

from your demographic background. Or separate from your identity group or community potentially. And that's true for some people for sure. And obviously, believe in the separation of church and state. So there are good reasons to sometimes think of religion as a sort of discrete category that we could swap in or out or compare across groups of people.

But there are also those of us who are parts of communities where that framework doesn't really make sense or doesn't really apply. And this is such a beautiful example to me of why coaching is all about opening your mind to thinking about things in a different way. It makes not that much sense for some of you to say, "Yes, I actively identify with the Christian community and I don't believe in God or Jesus." Now, some people say that, again, I'm not making any statement about what's possible but just kind of what is a norm.

But it's very common for people to say, "Yes, I actively identify as Jewish and within the Jewish community and I don't believe in God or I don't believe in organized religion." And that is actually coherent because Judaism is more than religion. It doesn't fit neatly into these kinds of western categories.

So I was thinking about that this weekend and about how my own understanding of my identity, my community, my place in the world has been impacted since birth by this way of understanding a major life component, or several life components in a way that is at odds with how the dominant culture understands it. The dominant culture's sort of like, well, you have your, whatever your ethnic or racial identity is. You have whatever your religious identity is. You have whatever your spiritual identity is.

But Judaism started out as a tribe, a literal tribe of people who had a shared religious practice, yes, religious beliefs but also a shared

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

government, a shared society and a shared ethnicity. So it isn't just one thing or the other. So as I was thinking about that I was thinking about the ways in which I think my traditions and the values of the kinds of Judaism that I grew up in have really impacted the way that I think about coaching.

And I was thinking about this because I was with my partner who is, well, I wouldn't say that he's Christian because he's not actively Christian but he is not actively any religion or spirituality but grew up in a kind of home with parents who went to church. And I'm always talking to him about how yes, you can absolutely be Jewish and not believe in God. And that's not even contradictory and whatever.

And so we're at this bar mitzvah and my friend's son during the bar mitzvah or the way that they did it at this temple and they do it at many is that the person who is the bar mitzvah, that's actually a noun, that's the person. That's not actually the event. The person who is having this coming-of-age experience and celebration. They give a little talk. I probably should have backed up and explained what a bar mitzvah is. When you are 13 you have the opportunity to participate in this event in which you are called up to read from the Torah which is the holy book for Jews in front of the congregation.

And so people do this in a million different ways. There are a lot of different theories about it. As with anything Jewish, there are 600 opinions about it. But in a lot of places, I had a bar mitzvah when I was younger and then this [5:59], the kid who's going through this gives a talk. So they give a little talk about what they have learned during the process and often it relates to the piece of the Torah that they read at the service. And so my friend's son got up and he gave his whole talk about really struggling with the idea of God and struggling with what that meant and not being sure he believed in it.

And my partner was kind of like, "Okay, I see what you're saying." This is different if, in an actual religious ritual, it's totally acceptable to get up and

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

talk about this as the person who's undergoing this big ritual, to get up and talk about struggling with this. Now, that's partly because of the kind of Jewish community he was in. There are certainly Jewish communities where that would not be acceptable. But he is in the kind of Jewish community that is more similar to the one that I grew up in as well where that's totally allowed.

So I was really thinking about how as I listened to him talk about this I was seeing how so much of what was evident in this weekend shows up in the way that I think about coaching and think about thought work. And so I decided I wanted to do a little podcast episode about this and talk about the three different ways that I think Judaism has really impacted how I do my work in the world and how I have created this coaching business and all of it, all of this podcast, everything that I put out into the world, my body of work.

And again I say that as somebody who is agnostic at best and I don't subscribe to that phrase that goes around the coaching world that's like you're a spiritual being having a human experience or whatever it is. I really don't identify with that side of things. That's not how I experience my life but the values and priorities of the community and of these traditions I was raised in have really impacted me. So I want to talk about three big ones that I think underly my approach.

And I think if you are Jewish some of this may resonate with you, but most of you will not be statistically, most of you listening will not be. There are obviously different ways of counting but the Jewish population is about 0.19% of the worldwide population. And I think that it's 2 to 3% in the US maybe.

So whether you identify that way or not this is going to be, I think a helpful framework for you to start thinking from your own perspective. What are the

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

things that you learned implicitly or explicitly as part of being in a religious community or any other kind of community that may have impacted how you think about the world?

Okay, so here is the first one. The first one is really the value of questioning. So this came up in that story I was just telling where my friend's son got up and gave his talk about his Torah portion, all about, his Torah portion was the one in which, let's see if I get this right, but basically in the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. So he used that as his analogy to talk about how he has wrestled with the process of preparing for this event and of whether he wanted to do it at all and of his thoughts about whether there is a God and how he relates to God, all of it.

And when he was done the rabbi said, "Yeah, I struggle with those things too." So I think that one of the strongest principles in the kind of Judaism that I was raised with is the value of questioning. It is the importance that's placed on understanding and asking questions. So there's a very strong kind of tradition in Judaism and in Jewish scholarship of challenging and questioning everything, of kind of learned scholarly debate. The people who were the religious leaders, or community leaders historically and traditionally in Judaism were scholars.

That was the highest vocation was to study, not just the Bible but the million assorted scholarly works that were created over the years. And in very religious Jewish communities today that's still the highest calling. And so this value of questioning and this space that's made for struggling with what you're taught, whether it's true, asking questions, challenging and leads, I think to for me the kind of value and importance I place on questioning everything. This idea that nothing is sacrosanct, nothing has to be just accepted and swallowed because that's what you've been told.

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

There are certainly values of kind of respect for the learned and for the thinking that's come before you but it really is a culture of engagement with ideas and questioning of ideas. And sort of a really big tolerance for each generation pushing back on what it's been taught, questioning, again I'm speaking from my experience. There are obviously, fundamentalist Jewish communities where none of this is welcome, just like there are fundamentalist religious communities in almost every religion.

So I am speaking for sort of the community and the history and the tradition that I was raised with, is that asking questions is a really important part of how you engage with the tradition. And in fact, there are kinds of places that, that is preserved and ritualized in the holiday observance when you celebrate the holiday of Passover which is sort of the Jewish, I think a lot of cultures have a spring planting kind of spring festival. And Passover is the Jewish version.

There is actually a thing you do every year where you ask certain questions. It's called the four questions and you sort of go through what different types of children ask different types of questions. So there is just this sort of emphasis on questioning what your taught, engaging with it, that sort of even the kind of belief system is constantly evolving and ongoing and being interpreted.

And that kind of brings me to the second thing I think has really influenced how I think about the world which is the kind of multiplicity of Jewish thoughts. So if you are Catholic then the pope is the head of the church. That's the one guy, he's infallible. He is the direct relationship from God to the people. And until the Protestant Reformation that basically was all Christians. And the Protestant Reformation was only in the last 500 to 600 years really. So for the majority of the existence of Christianity, there was the one dude who was infallible and in charge and he was the ultimate arbiter of everything.

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

Judaism has been around for many thousands of years more. The Hebrew calendar is currently in the year 5785. And there's this decentralization in Jewish history partly because of being forced out of various countries, fleeing different empires, fleeing different kinds of persecution. And there's a whole history version of this. There's a biblical version of this. We don't have to get into either of those. The point is just that there isn't one dude who's in charge. There isn't one person. There isn't one institution.

And so what you have instead are all these different communities with all these different traditions of learning and scholarship and interpretation. And I think that growing up in that context gives you this understanding kind of early on that there isn't just one thing that's true. There isn't one objective correct source for everything. And I think you get that in two ways. One is just if you are a minority of any kind, you by virtue of being a minority already know that there are different ways of living and different kinds of cultures.

If you're in the dominant culture you don't have to know that. You don't really have to pay attention. You may intellectually understand that there are other ways of doing things but you don't really need to know. But if you are in a minority in any way whether you are a person of color, whether you are in a minority religion, a minority nationality, a minority sexual orientation or gender identity, whatever it is. You are very keenly aware of the fact that there are different ways of doing things and that there are different communities.

And that the way that the dominant culture thinks and talks about things is not true for everyone. And so I think from the beginning you grow up with a more nuanced worldview about what might be true and with a more just understanding that there is a kind of multiplicity of ways to be a human and to live in the world. And so I think I experience that just from being a religious minority but then also from the particular kind of history and

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

culture of Judaism and the sort of different branches of Judaism, all with their own different traditions.

And the ways in which kind of the rabbis of antiquity arguing about how to interpret various religious text. It's part of many religious celebrations, you go over this rabbi said that and that rabbi said that. And then this rabbi disagreed and it can seem kind of nonsensical. Why are we sitting here year after year reading about how what these rabbis in the year 1200 were arguing with each other about? But it's part of the intellectual development of the religion and it is kind of evidence that's always at the front of your mind that there is more than one way to interpret something.

And that life is created in the interpretation of what we experience or what authority we rely on or what came before us. That we are actively interpreting and that there are always different ways of interpreting things. And I think that is something that had meshed so beautifully with thought work when I found it, that there's more than one way of interpreting everything that's happening around me or to me or in my relationships with other people. And seeing those multiple points of view has been part of what is so freeing for me about thought work.

So this decentralization of authority and scholarship is really a decentralization of meaning-making, and that's what thought work is all about to me is, it's inevitable as a human that we make meaning, we create meaning. And part of thought work is learning how to do that intentionally rather than unintentionally.

And then the third thing that I really have absorbed from my cultural upbringing and that is so still very important to me is this concept of Tikkun Olam which I swear to God I've talked about on the podcast. And I swear to God ironically. I swear I've talked about on the podcast before. I could not find the episode. I think maybe I talked about it once in a Q&A. So we don't

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

have a name of a podcast for it. But it's this concept that we come into the world and the world is broken. That doesn't mean the world's irredeemable or the world is terrible. It just means that the world is not yet perfect.

There is suffering in the world, there's unfairness in the world, there are people going hungry, there are people who are sick, there is meanness and strife as well as all the wonderful things that are in the world. So we come into the world and it is not yet perfect. So this is kind of a very different perspective than the idea that the world is perfect just because that's how it is which is something that you hear in some other religions and certainly in some versions of Christianity that the world is perfect because whatever's happening is God's will.

And so if that's what's happening then that's what's perfect. And this comes up in coaching. And I've definitely talked before about the idea that the coaching concept of seeing everything as perfect because it is the way really does not resonate with me and hasn't from the beginning. If you listened to a very early episode of my teacher's podcast where she was answering questions that were sent in by email. I sent in a question about this in the first year of her podcast about my discomfort with the idea that things are perfect.

So Tikkun Olam is the kind of responsibility that Judaism teaches that we all have to repair the world. That the world, we come into the world and it is not yet perfect. It is broken. I mean that sounds sort of negative, again it is in a way but the way that this concept works, it's not a depressing concept. It's not like the world is terrible. The world is in different pieces and it's our job to put those pieces back together. And we all have a responsibility to put those pieces back together.

And so for me in my work, I take that very seriously. Why have I been doing a podcast that is free every week for, oh God, five years, six years? Yes, of

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

course, people find me that way and come to my coaching business. But a lot of people run multimillion-dollar coaching businesses and don't have a podcast and don't have free whatever. And part of the reason that I do the podcast and that I put so much value out there for free is because I take that responsibility seriously.

And part of the reason that I have chosen this as a line of work is that I take that responsibility seriously, that to whom much has been given much is required. Or how does it go? To whom much has been given much is required from whom, whatever it is. You get the point. So that kind of belief has fueled every iteration of my career, as a reproductive rights attorney. I did non-profit law and then academia and now this. And I really believe that that's my life's purpose is to help put the world back together.

And the way that this concept is taught, it's not going to happen in our lifetime. It's not going to be done in our lifetime. The work is never done but the fact that the work is never done and this is a specific teaching in the tradition, the fact that the work will never be done or that you can't do it all yourself is not an acceptable reason to not do it at all. So you're not supposed to solve the whole world yourself and it probably won't be solved in your lifetime. But you still have a responsibility to try to help make it better.

And that can look very different ways obviously. I don't think that everyone in the world should be a life coach or have a podcast. And I don't think that it has to be, obviously, it doesn't have to be directly for instance non-profit. I've done a non-profit and I've worked in non-profits. And some non-profits are great and some do harm and the same is true for for-profit entities. Anything humans do is like that. So it can take so many different forms. I don't think that everyone has to have a sort of world-changing mission.

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

For some people that means, you know, I was having this conversation with a friend of mine the other day. He was like, “I really just think the meaning of my life that I want is to be there and have helped and supported my friends and family. If my friends and family feel like their life is better because I was in it and I have supported and loved them through what they want to do. That’s what I want. That’s the meaning of my life.” And I think that’s a beautiful version of Tikkun Olam.

I don’t think that it has to be particularly political. It doesn’t have to be particularly large scale. It can be anything but it’s just contribution and service and making sure that the way that we show up in the world is doing our part to kind of put it back together. And for me, that’s part of why coaching is so important because I think women are socialized to spend so much of their energy taking themselves apart and breaking themselves down and picking themselves apart.

And when we can change the way that we think, so that we are creating more energy and more resources in ourselves and we are spending less time breaking ourselves. When we put ourselves back together then we can turn to putting the world back together and it’s so much more powerful. So that’s a little view inside my brain and inside how my traditions and my community has shaped the way that I think. And I encourage you to think about how yours has as well because whether you decide to keep those thoughts or not, it is always good to be aware of them. Alright my chickens, I’ll talk to you next week.

Okay my chickens, I have a favor to ask you. Now it might seem funny for me to ask you to do this given that I always teach that we need to be putting ourselves out there and living our lives regardless of what other people think of us. That is true. And also, the algorithms have their ways, and so I would love to invite you if you have gotten value from this podcast,

UFYB 277: Three Ways Judaism Has Shaped My Work in the World

if this podcast has helped you, if it changed your life, to pay that forward and make sure that other people see it.

You don't have to text it to your friends even. You can just go to unfuckyourbrain.com/podcastreview, all one word. It's unfuckyourbrain.com/podcastreview. And we have all of the instructions there for how you can leave a review of the podcast. Leaving reviews is super helpful, even when a podcast is really big and popular already, when there are new reviews, it helps with the algorithm, it helps bump the podcast up.

It helps other people see the podcast. And obviously my mission with this podcast is for as many people in the world as possible to hear it. So I would love for you to do that if you are willing, if you are so inclined, it would be enormously helpful to me. And so if I have been a little or a lot or enormously helpful to you, please take a minute and go to unfuckyourbrain.com/podcastreview, all one word and leave a review and a rating. Give us some stars. Thank you, my chickens. I'll talk to you soon.