IV. LEADERSHIP

RABBI ILANA GOLDHABER-GORDON Interview

By Leifur Christianson

WELCOMED: Our journal is interested in how people live their faith and moral commitments within a modern university. Some philosophical traditions, associated with thinkers like Kant and later Richard Rorty, have treated religion primarily as a private matter. Rorty once remarked that universities have a duty to transform students: "They arrive here from conservative, religious backgrounds, and we make them good liberal secular citizens." We are interested in hearing how your own lived experience affirms, resists, complicates, or goes beyond that idea. We also welcome your reflections on how university life and religious life together contribute to a campus where students can flourish intellectually, ethically, and in community. To begin, what aspects of your background, origins, or community are most important for readers to know?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: Given the framing you just offered, I would say that I came from a very tight-knit, very religious community. We called ourselves Modern Orthodox, and the "modern" part meant that we engaged intellectually with the secular world, so the expectation was that people would go to college. Many went to Jewish colleges, which felt a little more protected, but many of us, including me, went to secular universities. I went to Harvard.

Although we engaged intellectually with the secular world, socially there were still many barriers. Almost everyone I knew growing up was Jewish, and not just Jewish, but religious. I went to religious schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade. After thirteen years in religious school, I then spent a year in Israel in an intensely religious setting devoted entirely to religious study. So moving from that environment into the secular liberal world of Harvard was totally overwhelming for me.

It was very hard, but I would not change it looking back. There was something deeply nurturing about growing up in the closeness of that community. At the same time, staying in that kind of insulated environment and never encountering people who saw the world fundamentally differently from me would have made me a much poorer person intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually than I am today. So I carry both truths with me. I remember how difficult that transition was, and that helps me understand the students here who may be going through something similar. But I also know that, even though it was hard, it was good and worthwhile.

WELCOMED: What places, communities, or traditions shaped you most before college? What are some of the early positive experiences you had with your faith growing up in that tight-knit religious community?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: There were so many. My life was so infused with religion that it is actually hard to separate it out. More than any single moment, I remember the sense that the adults in my life were invested in me as a whole person. They cared not just about my intellectual accomplishments, but about the development of my soul and my moral character.

There were also many rituals that created very tight bonds within my family and community. They gave me a strong sense of place in the world. And there was something else too, though this is more double-edged. That upbringing also gave me a sense of moral certitude. On the one hand, that was powerful. I still tend to see the world through the lens of values. But that certitude also needed to be broken open, and that became part of both the challenge and the goodness of ending up at a secular university.

WELCOMED: How would you describe your relationship with faith now compared with what it was when you were young? What experiences complicated that relationship or changed it?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: Gender roles were a real challenge for me. They placed real limits on what I could do, and over time my frustration with that deepened into anger. That anger also opened my eyes to other ways in which people who do not fit communal expectations can be harmed by the tightness of a religious community.

A core Jewish teaching that I hold very dearly is that everything in G-d's world is created inherently neutral, and that it is how we use it that can be for good or for bad. I think the closeness of community is like that. It can be a wonderful and supportive thing, but it can also become damaging when someone does not fit in.

Where I stand now is in a place of being much more comfortable with ambiguity. I sometimes miss moral certitude, because there is something comforting about feeling sure that everything is right. But I also see how damaging that certainty can be. It is much easier to have strong faith when you feel certain about what it looks like. It is much harder to remain faithful in a space of ambiguity.

I am a woman rabbi. Today there are Orthodox women rabbis, but when I was making decisions at the end of college, that was not really an option. Even now, Orthodox women rabbis are accepted only in certain relatively liberal Orthodox communities. So what my Judaism looks like today is very different from what it looked like then. But I think it is also deeper and more honest.

WELCOMED: What do you think you gained by giving up that moral certitude?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: That is a great question. Even at the height of my Orthodoxy, there was a part of me that knew I was closing my eyes to certain things, and that did not feel right.

What I gained was the ability to have conversations with people who see the world very differently from me, to learn from them, and actually to revise my own way of seeing the world. My understanding became bigger, deeper, and richer.

WELCOMED: Many students draw their moral convictions, commitments to service, and ideas of justice directly from their faith traditions. How can universities recognize faith as a legitimate source of conscience and moral reasoning within academic and civic life?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: Faith and religion are powerful vessels for ethics and values. Universities have different ways of recognizing that. An office for religious and spiritual life matters enormously. Not every campus has one, and when they do not, something important is missing. The richness of campus life is diminished.

One of the profound possibilities of attending a secular university is the chance to engage people whose ethics and values come from very different traditions, and in that encounter, to let your own understanding shift and deepen. I also think students who do not identify with a particular faith are still shaped by the faith traditions of the past, whether through family inheritance or through the broader culture. It is part of the water we swim in.

Universities can support this kind of awareness through religious studies, through ethics courses, and through extracurricular life. Stanford has a strong religion program, and we have robust student-affiliated religious groups. I am also new to this role, but one of the things I most enjoy is getting to know students who are not Jewish, learning how their faith shapes their thinking, and sharing a little about how mine shapes mine.

WELCOMED: Faith traditions often do not align neatly with prevailing cultural or political norms. How can a university make space for students whose religious commitments place them in tension with dominant views while still upholding shared commitments to dignity and inclusion?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: That is a big question, and it was a large part of my own experience when I arrived at Harvard. It was overwhelming. I think it has only gotten harder as the world has become more polarized.

That is exactly why what happens on a campus like this matters so much. We need religious students from traditional backgrounds to show up as their full selves, if that is what they want, while also remaining open enough to hear students from very different backgrounds. And we need students from liberal or secular backgrounds to approach those students with curiosity rather than dismissal. Where else is that kind of encounter supposed to happen if not here?

Campuses across the country are grappling with this. It is hard right now. But in that context, I think Stanford is doing an exceptional job. Stanford has the ePluribus program, whose whole aim

is to bring people together across differences. Stanford is also strongly invested in religious and spiritual life. And even what might seem merely symbolic can matter. When the deans from this office stand together in public, a rabbi, an imam, a Christian minister, a Hindu chaplain, it creates a visible example of what is possible.

WELCOMED: Do you see religious literacy as part of a well-rounded education in a pluralistic society? If so, how can universities help students understand faith traditions not as stereotypes, but as living intellectual and ethical systems?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: Absolutely. Though I would add one caveat: there are so many religions, and we often fall into the trap of imagining that the major so-called world religions are the only ones that matter. But there are many beautiful traditions with much smaller communities as well. The Jains, the Sikhs, the Bahá'í, Christian Science, and many others all deserve attention and respect.

Complete religious literacy is probably not realistic. But I would love to see students leave Stanford with at least some awareness of the breadth of religious life in the world, and, even more importantly, with a deep respect for religion as a living and dynamic system rather than a stereotype. Religion gives many people a framework for life, growth, meaning, and moral reflection.

WELCOMED: What role do faculty and administrators play in building trust between students of faith and the broader university, especially in moments of grief, moral crisis, or public controversy?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: Faculty and administrators play somewhat different roles. Administrators represent the university, while faculty do not represent the institution in the same way. Faculty are thought leaders and can hold and express their own views.

When faculty are verbally supportive of religious observance, it can make a tremendous difference for students. And on the rare occasions when faculty say something dismissive or denigrating about religion, that can be very damaging.

For staff and administrators, our role is to support the full growth of students, and that includes spiritual growth. It also means making sure that spiritual growth happens in ways that are open rather than coercive. There are religious groups that can function primarily to control their members, and part of our responsibility here is to make sure that the groups supporting students on campus are doing so in ways that give students room to become who they need to be.

WELCOMED: For students who arrive at Stanford with deep religious commitments and are unsure whether there is space for them to grow intellectually and spiritually here, what would you want them to know?

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: I would want them to know about the resources that are here. I would want them to know about this office, and about the different student-affiliated religious groups, especially those connected to their own traditions, but also those outside them.

Most of all, I would want them to know that it is possible to be in both spaces. It is possible to remain rooted in the faith community that nurtured you while also having the courage to enter conversations with people of another faith, or of no faith, who see the world very differently from you. That was hard for me as an undergraduate, but I think it matters deeply.

I would want students to feel confident enough to articulate their own beliefs, and also to allow themselves some uncertainty about those beliefs. In fact, being able to articulate that uncertainty often requires an even deeper kind of confidence and vulnerability.