

LEARNING

HOW
TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 3, Episode 3

Christianity as Neighbor (Part I)

Brian: It's one thing to look at Christianity from the inside, but it's a very different thing to be on the outside of the Christian faith looking in. What is it like to be a person of another faith who is surrounded by Christians?

One day, I was leaving my home when I was still a pastor running off to a meeting. I was a little bit late. So I was going as fast as I could from my front door to my car and my next door neighbor, who was Jewish, yells across the lawn to me, "Hey, Brian. I need to talk to you. Do you have a minute?"

I said, "Well, I just have a minute. I'm already a little bit late."

She said, "It won't take long," and she came over and she said, "Brian, I was listening to Christian radio all this morning," she said, "not for inspiration, but for surveillance purposes." She said, "The preachers, I heard about five different preachers say somewhere in their broadcast the same thing. They said, 'We're going to take this country back for Jesus,'" and she tried to capture the accent that she heard it said in, "We're going to take this country back for Jesus."

She said, "Brian, what is that supposed to say to a Jewish person like me, to a Jewish mother like me? Does it mean I should pack up my kids and move to Canada?"

I remember in that moment, I felt what it must be like to be a part of the Jewish minority in a Christian majority country.

This will be a two part episode about understanding Christianity as neighbor. In this episode, we'll be speaking with my good friend, someone I deeply, deeply respect, Rabbi Jill Jacobs. She'll be talking about what it's like to be a Jew with Christians as your primary neighbors.

Here's a quote from *Do I Stay Christian*. "In my previous book, *Faith After Doubt*, I described an insight I had when I was nearly finished writing. I wrote, 'The greatest loss I experienced through doubt was the loss of supremacy, and that loss was one of my greatest gains.' By greatest, I mean, the loss that was deepest, most significant, most subtle, and most wonderful. The beliefs I held so piously had for all my life, without my consent or even awareness, contributed to a sense of religious privilege, superiority, and supremacy.

Those beliefs deserved to be doubted, and if I had not doubted them, that supremacy would still reign as a covert monarch in my psyche. The process of doubt, not only dethroned that sense of religious supremacy, it took away the taste for supremacy of any kind. I don't want to be better than anyone. I don't want to win in any way that makes others lose. Harmony is at its heart, a state and a stage that loves solidarity, not supremacy. If it took the agony of doubt to bring me to this place, then thanks be to God and blessed be doubt."

Brian: Rabbi Jill Jacobs, I am so happy to have this conversation with you. I'm remembering when I first met you through the Auburn Senior Fellows, and we've spent quite a bit of time together over the last, how many years? Do you remember? Eight years or-

Jill: At least five, six, seven, eight, really a long time.

- Brian: A long time, and our friendship has meant a lot to me. I am so impressed with the organization that you now lead, T'ruah. I wonder if you could just give everyone a brief introduction to you, your story, and also your current work.
- Jill: Thank you so much, Brian. It's really been also such a pleasure. I miss the time that we've gotten to spend together in-person, but it's really been a pleasure to have you as a friend for a number of years that neither of us can remember through Auburn and beyond. I'm Rabbi Jill Jacobs. I'm the CEO of T'ruah, which is an organization that mobilizes more than 2,300 rabbis and cantors throughout the IS and Canada on human rights, to protect and advance human rights, both here at home, in the US and Canada, and also in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.
- Jill: So we do that through organizing around specific campaigns and specific issues where we can have an impact through training rabbis and rabbinical students, cantors and cantorial students to be moral leaders, and by amplifying the voices of rabbis and cantors as moral leaders to make the point that part of what it means to be a religious leader in this country or any time is to be a moral leader.
- Jill: So that's some of the work that we do, and to move into some of what we've been talking about, over the past number of years, we've increasingly been teaching and working on antisemitism explicitly as we also work to fight racism and other bigotries because, of course, in the last few years, we've seen an explosion of antisemitism in this country, in public, as well as a lot of questions about what antisemitism is.
- Jill: So as an organization, we very much believe that we have to fight antisemitism together with fighting racism and xenophobia and other bigotries. We often have to spend some time even teaching about what antisemitism is and how it relates to those other bigotries.
- Brian: This is probably a good time to mention a phenomenal resource that T'ruah is making available called A Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism, and it's available on the T'ruah website, and we'll have all of those links. Anything you want to say about that specifically before we move on?
- Jill: I think we can move on. I'm sure we'll talk about it a little bit more as we go.
- Brian: Yeah, so super helpful resource. Actually, Jill, I'm having a memory just as you begin talking about antisemitism, and then this larger campaign and commitment to human rights. Many years ago when I was a pastor in the Washington, DC area, some folks might remember the crisis in Darfur in Western Sudan, where there was a genocide happening against a minority group, who had the misfortune of being on land that had oil underneath it. So we can imagine all the dynamics that go into that.
- Brian: So I helped organize something we called Worship in the Spirit of Justice, where we had, I forget if it was, I think it was about six weeks where we had a public spiritual gathering at particularly visible sites in Washington, DC that evoked justice. I think our very first speaker was Rabbi David Saperstein, who you probably know.
- Brian: I'll never forget that when Rabbi Saperstein, in fact, I remember exactly the text that he preached from, which was that it's a sin to stand idly by while your neighbor is oppressed,

but I remember he said, “We, Jews, have experienced depression and it becomes very tempting to only then be obsessed with your own self-preservation when you’ve had so many horrible attacks against you,” he said, “but we’ve made a decision that we’re not only concerned about oppression against us. We’re concerned about oppression against anybody.”

Brian: I just thought, “What a beautiful, beautiful attitude.” One of my favorite little slogans I’ve ever seen from T’ruah is, let’s see if I’ve got it right, “Resisting tyrants since Pharaoh.”

Jill: That’s exactly right. Yeah.

Brian: I just thought what a beautiful way to conceive of something close to the heart of Jewish identity, but I think a lot of Christians need to realize in trying to understand their own Christian identity, how they want to hold it. Then of course, many are getting rid of it because they learn about this, but when Christians learn about the history of antisemitism, that this has been deeply rooted in Christianity really since the end of the first century. I think it’s quite shocking, and I’m going to guess that many, many people in our own, who are listening to this conversation, this is going to be news to them. They maybe know a little bit about it, but if they were to really dig into the history, they would be really shocked.

Brian: I thought maybe we could start in the present and then maybe look back at the past, but you grew up in Massachusetts as I recall. I wonder if you could just talk about what it’s like to be a Jew in a Christian majority neighborhood, state, country, and so on because I think this is one of those things that’s very hard for Christians to understand.

Jill: Thanks. Yeah. I grew up outside of Massachusetts, sorry, outside of Boston in Massachusetts, about 30 miles outside of Boston in a suburb that was not particularly Jewish. There was a good Jewish community, but maybe 80%-90% of the kids I went to school with were not Jewish in a big public school. I would divide the question into maybe two categories. So one is about the ways in which Christianity, for many people, Christianity is really indistinguishable from being American, right?

Jill: So the things like Santa Claus showing up in school or singing Christmas carols or all of the things that people do that they think, “Oh, well, that’s not really religious because that’s Santa Claus. That’s the Easter bunny. That’s just this cute kids thing, and it’s more welcoming.”

Jill: I remember very specifically being told by my parents, which Christmas carols I had to mouth and not actually sing because maybe Rudolph was okay, but Silent Night, that one I had to not sing out loud. I remember coming home very confused about little drummer boy because it didn’t really sound like a religious song to me, and somebody had to explain what it actually meant.

Jill: So some of it was just about the ongoing just Christian hegemony, this assumption that Christianity is the norm, and everything else is the exception. So we’ll give, I mean, your one Hanukah song, Let Alone, I don’t think there was any consciousness

that there might have been Muslim kids or Hindu kids, which, by the way, there were, but there were certainly no songs for them. So there was at least some awareness that there were Jewish kids.

Jill: So that's part of it or the religious displays. Certainly, the way that the calendar is set and having Good Friday off, having Christmas break off. So that's one piece of it. Then I mean, I've thankfully been lucky as have my kids in being around people who really can understand observance and her really accommodating on observance.

Jill: So as a kid, we'd get pulled out from school on religious holidays as do my kids now. They're in a public school in New York City. Thankfully, we've always been around people who didn't make that any issue or who have bent over backwards to make sure that there's some kosher food for us to eat. So that I feel really grateful for.

Jill: I think the other piece that is maybe hard for people who don't grow up Jewish to understand is just the inherited trauma that all of us have, which is very much about the holocaust and not only about the holocaust.

Jill: So one of my key memories from growing up, I mean, my grandparents were already in the us when World War II happened. Both of my grandfathers were GIs, and I also grew up knowing that there was family that had been left behind in Lithuania and Ukraine, who they never heard from again after the war. They never found out what happened to them.

Jill: So growing up with that, as well as having survivors around, especially in the '80s, I had survivors. There's Hebrew school teachers. They were just around. It was just a part of the community, and really growing up with this message that America felt safe now, but so did Germany before the war, and that things could change at any moment.

Jill: Even we're recording on Purim, on the holiday of Purim, which is the story of the book of Esther, and it's really a story about a very assimilated Jewish community in Persia that's really part of the general community, and then all of a sudden something turns and there's an attempt to murder them. So I definitely grew up with that consciousness.

Jill: One thing I remember very clearly was my best friend growing up was Catholic, and in her house, there was an attic that we used to play in. I remember thinking, "Oh, I'm so glad that they have an attic because, for sure, they would hide us." I knew this was the family who would hide us, which I still believe. Thank God they didn't have to, but I do believe that they would have.

Jill: I think if you talk to Jews, certainly who grew up, who are, I don't know if this is still true for kids growing up now, but certainly a large percentage of the Jewish community grew up figuring out who was the friend who was going to hide them and exactly where their house they were going to be hidden. So that's very much part of the consciousness.

Brian: I just feel like that's something we have to let sync in for people to take that seriously.

It's think this idea that every child grows up having to negotiate that. I'm guessing, Jill, that there is a conversation that Jewish parents have to have with their children, and they have to decide what's the age or what's the inciting incident that they need to have this conversation, where this reality of antisemitism deeply rooted in European history, which means Christian history now children have to be taught this. Is that something you would feel okay to talk about a little bit?

Jill: Sure. So I think when I was growing up, I don't know that people thought about it. I think it was just around. I certainly remember learning things that were definitely not appropriate for kids at times that I shouldn't have learned them, but with my own kids who are now eight and 12, we were just much more conscious about what stories we told them when and how to introduce ideas. Though, often, they pick things up because they're reading some book and it mentions Hitler, right? It'll just come up. Even in kids' books, something will come up around.

Jill: I remember a book about Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was a major American Jewish leader, a rabbi, who was a survivor of the holocaust and then became an activist. I remember one of my kids at a very young age having a picture book about him and somewhere in the picture book it said, well, his family, where he escaped from Nazi Germany, right? Even though, of course, I know that about his biography, I was not exactly expecting it to come up in that moment in the picture book.

Jill: With my kids, we had really the great blessing that they or at least my older daughter got to know one set of great grandparents, my husband's grandparents who were survivors, who survived the war in Poland, and especially, my older daughter really got to know my husband's grandfather who was a survivor of Schindler's factory. So for her, we wanted her to have a relationship with him that was not clouded by horror stories. We wanted her to have just a direct relationship with him as she was probably, I think, seven or so when he died. She was very young, but we did start by telling that story, which is both a story about the horrors of the holocaust and also a story about the ways in which some people took risks to save Jews. So we wanted her to have that story.

Jill: Something else that we think about a lot in our family when we think about holocaust stories in particular, then maybe I'll talk about antisemitism a little bit more in general, is that a lot of the holocaust books for kids like Number Our Stars, which is the first one that a lot of kids read, which I think is actually a really good book, and The Boy with the Stripe Pajamas, which is not a good book or a movie, a lot of them center the stories of non-Jews who took these risks.

Jill: I remember particularly when my older daughter was reading Number The Stars, which is generally recommended as the first holocaust book because it takes place in, I think, Denmark or Norway, I can't remember, and is about saving Jews. So it's not the most horrible. You don't want to introduce the worst things, but I do remember this feeling of, "Wait, she's coming away with this story about these good people who saved Jews and that's important, but those people are the hero of the story as opposed to seeing Jews as the heroes of the story." So we've definitely tried to tell the stories of what Jews we're doing starting with our own family.

- Jill: In terms of other antisemitism, we want to balance between talking honestly about the history of antisemitism and also not frightening our kids. I will say that it's gotten harder because there have been these violent incidents, whether the murders of the Tree of Life synagogue or in Poway, the synagogue in Poway or just recently the hostage taking situation in Colleyville, Texas. Of course, when our kids see that, it's always on a Saturday night. I mean, the event has always happened on Shabbat, on a Saturday. We don't use our phones or electronics on Saturday. So we turn on our phone Saturday night, and oh, my God, this is what happened during the day, and our kids see this.
- Jill: Of course, they say to us, "Well, is that going to happen in our synagogue?" We can't promise them, "No, it won't." We also, in this moment in America, can't promise them that there's not going to be a shooting in their school or in the grocery store. Unfortunately, we can't make any promises to our children, which is life in a country with way too many guns, and we can't say to them, "This will not happen in our synagogue." We can say, "This will almost definitely not happen. This is very rare," but we really have to balance between being cautious and understanding the dangers and also not being so scared that we can't live our lives or so scared that we don't see ourselves as part of America and part of the American story.
- Brian: What a challenge. I remember being, I think I was 11 years old, and I had never even heard the word holocaust before, and I heard the word somewhere and I remember coming home and saying to my mother, "What does that mean?" So she took it very seriously because she had been a young adult in World War II. When I realized that, let's say I was 11 years old, that I was born in 1956, so that 11 years before I was born, so the length of life that I had lived before I was born, she described for me what really had made an impact on her is when she saw the photographs of the people who'd been in the prison caps, and when they were liberated, how thin they were and how horribly they had suffered.
- Brian: I remember my mother telling me, "We didn't know what was going on and it was so horrible." I remember feeling like, "Wow, that wasn't that long ago," and then, of course, to watch, but I also remember thinking, "Thank God that's behind us," but then to realize, "No, it's not," and then I think a big shock for me as I grew older, I became a pastor, I became a preacher, first, I had gradually realized how things that I took for granted that were just part of the Christian theology I had been taught were actually antisemitic, and actually could create the context for Jews in the present and the future to suffer just as they had in the past.
- Brian: I'm wondering, Jill would any things come to mind that you would encourage Christians to stop doing or avoid or take more seriously or do proactively to help turn around this tragic, ugly, vicious history?
- Jill: Yeah. I think that it's important, just like it's important for White people to really understand the history of racism and to do some what we would call in Judaism [foreign language 00:21:48] or self-examination, examination of our soul, and just try to repair the world. We can't obviously go back and fix things, but we can try to move forward in a more positive way that includes repair. I think it's important for Christians also to do that.
- Jill: So I'll give just the very, very short version of history of antisemitism, which starts before

Christianity. It's been dated even back to ancient Egypt, but really takes off, I would say, and at that point, the word antisemitism didn't exist, so I'll say more about that, but anti-Judaism. Really, I mean, early Christianity and early Judaism grow up together and in opposition with each other, but really bouncing off of each other.

Jill: So when we think about what was happening in the first century, it wasn't like there's Christians and there's Jews. There's lots of different sects and they're all figuring it out and there's different leaders and they're learning from each other or opposing each other. So there's lots of different things happening. So very much the history of Judaism and history of Christianity is, in some ways, in reaction and response to one another.

Jill: Once Christianity starts developing, then there's a theological question that has to be answered, which is, why is it that Jews are still around because if the Jewish Bible has been superseded, then Jews should have accepted Jesus and should be Christians, so what are they still doing here? So Christianity has to answer that question. Some of the ways that it answered the question were with pretty much what we would now call antisemitic ideas, but it really takes off once Rome converts to Christianity because now it's not just people thinking about theology, but it's actually got the power of a government behind it.

Jill: Throughout the history, there's, say, differing ideas about, "Well, what do we do with the Jews?" Augustine is credited, blamed, I don't know, something like that, for saying that Jews shouldn't be killed, but are preserved as maybe assigned Christians of something that went wrong. In some ways, that's how Christianity sometimes looked at Jews as a relic of the past. So that's one thing. I'll maybe talk a little more specifically about how that shows up now in a second.

Jill: Then the other thing is that Judaism was often seen as if you were a Christian, you were arguing about theology, anything that you didn't like would be seen as a Judaizing influence. So David Nierenberg, who's written the best book about antisemitism by far, it's called Anti-Judaism, talks about how you didn't even need Jews around. There were lots of places where there actually were no Jews around, but people were accusing each other of being Judaizers because it was like, "Well, that's a foreign idea so it must come from Judaism."

Jill: So fast forward, enlightenment thinkers, they're maybe not so involved with Christianity but still have to figure out how to hate Jews and start developing ideas about Judaism as something. It's basically saying, "Well, Christianity took the best parts of Judaism. It took the morality, and so there's something we can salvage in Christianity, but we can't salvage anything about Judaism." So those ideas are around.

Jill: I mean, at the same time, Jews just politically are in all sorts of different situations, really, depending on the place and the time, but in general, in most countries, at least in Western Europe, don't have political rights. So whether you can live in a particular place is very dependent on what kind of a place it is, the roles of either the king or the state or the empire or whoever is in-charge of that place.

Jill: Often couldn't be landowners, which led to Jews taking on portable professions that were needed by the Christian elite, and also that were not considered things that the Christian should do like money lending or trade. Jews were often forced into those professions because

you couldn't own land, you couldn't enter guilds, you couldn't be in a lot of the other professions. So that's what was left for you. You need money lenders. So if Christians can't be money lenders and Jews can't do almost anything else, then that's what Jews are going to end up doing, and also, it's portable. So if one day you're expelled from the country that you're in, you can take your profession and go, which is not true of let's say a farmer.

Jill: So Jews have different political rights in different places, different rights to even marry or have children or live in particular areas. Jews were expelled from lots of country. So it's just very precarious. It's very dependent on the time and place.

Jill: So just fast forward to the mid 19th century when really starting post the French revolution but really into the mid 19th century, when Western Europe starts to emancipate its Jews, which means all sorts of different things. It doesn't mean that suddenly Jews have equal rights. It's like, "Okay. Here you can vote and maybe here you can own land and here you can own land, but you can't vote and here ..." but it really is very dependent, but in the middle of the 19th century, at least the newly unified Germany in its constitution, officially emancipates its Jews.

Jill: Now, again, it doesn't mean they were emancipated in every single German state, but that was officially what happened. At that point, some people start getting very nervous because if Jews are emancipated and if Jews are allowed to live anywhere they want and to wear regular clothes and to be in any professions and to speak they're speaking German, how are we going to know who the Jews are? I mean, in some cases, Jews were even converting to Christianity in order to assimilate.

Jill: So this idea develops that, "Well, now, Jews are even a scarier, more nefarious presence because we can't even identify them. They're just this poison among us." At that point, the term antisemitism emerges. It was popularized by a pamphleteer named Wilhem Marr, who pushed this idea of antisemitism based on Hebrew being a Semitic language, one of several Semitic languages, but he wanted to create a pseudoscientific explanation for why Jews were other that was based in race as opposed to religion because you also have to explain, "Well, what about Jews who convert to Christianity? Why are they still a scary nefarious influence?"

Jill: That idea, by the way, originated after the inquisition when in Spain there were lots of complex family trees of Jews who had been forced to convert in a distrust of their family or accusations of different people of having Jewish roots. So that's when there was the real start to the idea that Jews were a race as opposed to a religion that you could move in or out of. So Wilhem Marr popularized this idea, antisemitism, that was supposed to be scientific like Jews are a race, and they're dangerous, and et cetera.

Jill: So that term has continued. It's important to know where that term came from because sometimes people will say, "Well, wait a second. Arabs or Semites. How does antisemitism mean hatred of Jews? People don't even know what the term means?" So it's important to know that that is the term that's been popularized for hatred of Jews. That's where it came from. It was created by an anti-Semite who was very proud of being an anti-Semite and defined himself like that.

Jill: Then some of the ideas that developed about Jews, and probably one of the most influential

ones in the early 20th century, there was a forgery called the Protocols of the Elders of Zion that emerged in Russia that really around the same time as a major set of pogroms in Russia attacks on Jewish towns, where people were murdered and raped and just horrible, horrible attacks.

- Jill: That forgery claims to be the minutes of a meeting among the so-called elders of Zion, the leaders of the Jewish community about how to run the world, how to take over the world, and that idea of Jews being behind the scenes and pulling the strings has unfortunately continued. I mean, Henry Ford very famously distributed that booklet. Still, you can find it very easily on any books, not any book-selling site, on many book-selling sites, and it unfortunately continues to go around and continues to lead to antisemitic stereotypes.
- Brian: So if we were doing a whole course on this subject, which would be grim, but it's important, Christians would have to go back and read what many of the early church fathers, early Christian scholars, people with familiar names like Augustine, Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, and then you come into the period of the reformation. Some of the bitterest, most vicious, anti-Semitic writings ever came from Martin Luther. So this deeply embedded sentiment there in Christianity, it's enfranchised in so many different theological ideas, including this theological tradition called Calvinism that has been so strong in American religious history, and has had a resurgence in recent years is all based on this idea of chosenness.
- Brian: One of the things that happens is that the Jews were the chosen people and then the Christians became the chosen people, which you used the word supersessionism before, it's this idea that the Christian superseded. So many of these ideas are so deeply embedded and then passages of the Bible get quoted, and it all feels holy to Christians because it's the Bible, but there are ways that these texts are understood that are so insulting and dehumanizing and demeaning to Jews.
- Brian: So for Christians, this requires a deep, moral self-examination, and a deep interrogation of our own history, and then a deep interrogation of our own current practices. Even the passages of the Bible that we read, of the Christian scriptures that we read without explanation, we start to realize, "Oh, my gosh! That could be used in such antisemitic ways."
- Brian: So this creates a new moral challenge, and a lot of people when they learn about this, and I have to confess, I have felt this at many points when I began examining this subject years ago. I think my first scholarly introduction was a Thomas K. Hills book, Constantine's Sword, but I remember thinking, "I don't even want to be a Christian," right? "I don't even want to be associated with this because of this ugly vicious history," but then I think there is maybe some value for Christians to say, "Well, the thing for me to do is to try to achieve innocence by distancing myself or by calling antisemitic Christians not true Christians." That's another way to get the taint away, but maybe it is, just as White people have to see regarding the extermination of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of African peoples, that this is part of an act of repentance and an act of deep inner work that has to happen. I don't know. I'd love to hear if you have any thoughts about that, Jill.
- Jill: Yeah. I definitely don't want to tell people not to be Christian anymore. I mean, it's a 2,000-year-old tradition that has really a lot of beautiful ideas and theology and history.

So that is absolutely not my goal. I do think, I mean, many of our religious traditions have ideas in them that we have to struggle with, and we have to reinterpret, and we have to understand differently now. Christianity is in a particular position because it has also been associated with ruling powers. So it's not only the theology, it's also that it's been the religion of kings and empires who have certain power that they've decided to carry out off into the detriment of Jews, as well as indigenous people, and Muslims, and other people who were not Christian and White.

Jill: So I really don't want anybody throwing away Christianity, and I think it is important to go back and to examine it and to think about, "Well, how do we understand these ideas now? Can we argue with our tradition? Are there things that we can reinterpret, like you said, not just teaching something without comment, but teaching not saying we're going to hide this and put it away, but we're going to teach with some scaffolding and we're going to talk about it?"

Jill: I will say that a lot of parts of Christianity, particularly the Lutheran church, and the Catholic church have done a lot of really good work in interfaith dialogue with Jews and have done a lot of this examination of history. So I also don't want to say that it hasn't been done at all.

Jill: You asked me before about what are some specific things that Christians could do. So for sure, 100% learning the history, reading some books about antisemitism, reading some books about the history of Christianity, and then also thinking about how Jews are perceived.

Jill: I mentioned before that sometimes Jews are perceived as this historically preserved remnant that for some parts of the Christian world, there's no difference between the Israelites of the Bible and Jews today, which doesn't recognize that there's thousands of years of Jewish tradition. In fact, Jews today are what we would call rabbinic Jews, which, by the way, is when you think about the Pharisees, that's who we're talking about. So that's another term to just be very careful about, but after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 of the Common era, that at that point, the Jewish community was scattered and had an oral tradition that started to be written down and developed.

Jill: The Talmud was developed primarily in Babylon, what's now Iraq, as well as in what's now Northern Israel. There were two Talmuds, but that's a whole other story, but that rabbinic tradition was developed, as well as a whole tradition of law. So when Jews live our Jewish lives, we're not living based on the Bible. The way that we practice is not a literal interpretation of the biblical text, it's filtered through thousands of years of interpretation and explanation and development. So it's important to know that.

Jill: I'll say because this is about to come up this time of year, it comes up a lot around so-called Christian Seders that sometimes Christians think, "Well, let me do a Seder because that's what Jesus would've done," but actually, Jesus wouldn't have done a Seder because the Seder was developed in the rabbinic period. So the Seder as we know it today was not something that was around during that time. Jesus would've brought probably sacrifices to the temple. That's what people were doing then, but that's not the same as the contemporary Seder. So also being careful just about appropriation of Jewish practices and Jewish concepts.

- Jill: Then another thing I'll say, this is also just a very simple thing, but in language, so there's what we call the Tanakh, which is the Torah, the first five books of Moses, the Nevi'im, which is the prophets, and Ketuvim, which are the writings, and that whole body is what Christians often call the Old Testament. We don't use that term because that implies that there's a New Testament. It's also, say, not necessarily the same book because it's not ordered in the same way, particularly once you get to the prophets and the writings. The order is different and based on our respective traditions. Most translations are based in the original Greek translation. They're not necessarily directly from the Hebrew, right? So we're not even necessarily reading the same words.
- Jill: So I think one basic language choice that we can make is to say the Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible. So the Christian Bible would include both of those parts, but not to imply that the Old Testament, which sounds like it's something that should have been thrown away a long time ago.
- Brian: Yes. Beautiful. Beautifully said. Anything else you wanted to add or-
- Jill: I think it's just really important to have relationships with Jews and to talk to Jews to understand what our tradition is, to have those kinds of relationships also because if something comes up, we wanted the kind of relationship where if something problematic happens, that there's somebody to call or that people are in a relationship that they feel comfortable saying, "Oops, I messed that up. I'm so sorry."
- Brian: Jill, we're having this conversation while the invasion of Ukraine carries on, and all kinds of memories of World War II are coming back. So in some ways, there's a lot of people looking back and thinking, "We thought that those things were not going to happen again." Of course, that phrase, never again, has taken on profound emotional and spiritual intensity. I wonder if I could be speaking to you as a religious leader who I respect a great deal, and I've read a beautiful piece that you wrote about responding as a Jew to what's happening in Ukraine, but I wonder if you could give all of us who are listening a chance to be part of your congregation and just what are you encouraging people to do and feel and think and pray as we're all experiencing the agony of watching things unfold that we wish we would've outgrown but we haven't, and this feeling that the human species is still so vulnerable to horrible backsliding. So yeah, we need you to be our rabbi for a couple minutes maybe.
- Jill: Thanks. Yeah. Definitely. Like you said, it's horrible to watch the millions of refugees who are coming out of Ukraine, and the bombing, and the fact that this was all because one autocratic leader decided that he wanted to go to war. There was no other reason for this war, and that is, unfortunately, very often the way that things happen. It does bring back that trauma certainly for Jews even though this is not specifically about Jews for the most part. In a couple of ways, it is, but just reliving that trauma, remembering how our own families had to, if they were lucky they could flee, if they weren't lucky, they weren't able to flee. So that's bringing back some historical trauma.
- Jill: The Ukraine has miraculously rebuilt a Jewish community after the fall of the Soviet Union, which is really miraculous because under the Soviet Union, people couldn't practice religion at all. There was no religion. So Jews were identified because they had Jew as their nationality and their passport, but it was only a bad thing. I mean, there was some underground,

thank God, there was some underground Jewish culture and Jewish practice, but it wasn't something that you could practice in public.

Jill: So there were generations of Jews who grew up in the Soviet Union knowing very little about Judaism other than what was on their passport and that they might get mocked at school or discriminated against because of it. So it's amazing. So then in the '70s and '80s when there were Jews who were asking to leave the Soviet Union, the refuseniks, and many of whom who thankfully were able to come to either the US or Israel, but some people stayed and there's hundreds of thousands or there were hundreds of thousands of Jews in Ukraine and they had synagogues, and they had Jewish community centers, and they had a Jewish life that is now literally being bombed. So that is bringing up some trauma.

Jill: So for those of us who are watching this situation, it is really important for us to remember that in World War II, for the most part, the world did nothing. The world, including the United States, would not take in Jews who are trying to flee when it was possible to flee. We have to take that lesson and open our borders to people who are fleeing, whether it's from Ukraine or Afghanistan or Syria or Honduras, but wherever people are fleeing from and live out that moral responsibility that we failed on during the holocaust.

Jill: Certainly, we have to pray. It's not enough, but I believe that it helps, and just also practically, the thing I'm doing is giving money to the people on the ground because they're the people who know, to the organizations that are on the ground because they're the ones who know what's needed there, and really, just not to look away. I mean, we've looked away from so many disasters, but just not to look away and to imagine ourselves in the place of every one of those people who is either deciding to stay or not or has to stay or who's fleeing for their life.

Brian: It reminds me of those precious passages in the Hebrew Bible known as Lamentations, where we're invited to hold pain and not try to fix it or explain it away, but to hold it and feel it in the presence of God and let it do its work of softening our hearts and fortifying our hearts to stand for justice and to work for peace.

Jill: Yeah. I think, I mean, since you brought up Lamentations, I'll say that, I mean, for Jews, displacement is just a part of our history ever since the destruction of the temple and that's recorded there. Something that I do find comforting is not only are those words of Lamentations about just mourning, not saying it's going to be better or this was part of God's plan, it's just mourning. In the rabbinic tradition, in the interpretive tradition, we have images of God mourning along with the people, and this idea that God is mourning and crying and praying along with us.

Jill: We also have an idea in Judaism that God comes with us out of exile, that when we go into exile, that God doesn't just stay in place but comes with us. I very much believe that God is traveling with people who are going into exile, and also that God is weeping right along with us.

Brian: One other issue would be great for us to talk about, Jill, some years ago, I got to spend some time in Israel and in the West Bank, and I was among Jews. We visited settlers in settlements. We visited Jews working against house demolitions. We visited Muslims, stayed in homes

of Muslims and Christian, Palestinians. So we were just feeling the agony and complexity of that whole world.

Brian: One of the things that's very disturbing for me, as you know, I grew up in an evangelical background, was watching how this nation of Israel and Judaism become a prop in a Christian vision of the future and so on. I wonder if you could just talk to us a little bit about that.

Jill: Thanks. That definitely is one of the thorniest issues. I'll start by saying something about what Israel means to Jews both historically and also now, and then I want to talk a little bit about how Christians in different ways relate to Israel and can relate to Israel.

Jill: So Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people. Judaism, let's see, one confusing thing about Judaism is that people want it to be just a religion or just questions about is it a race, is it not a race? It's a people. That's the term that we use, peoplehood, that's probably the best term, this idea that we're a people, which means that we have religious practices and we have homeland and we have one sacred language and many other vernacular languages, and we have a history, et cetera.

Jill: So the land of Israel is our sacred homeland, and it's where the early part of Jewish history happened until the destruction of the first temple, and then the second temple, and the Roman occupation. So it's a place that the Jews have always felt connected to that we continue to pray to return to three times a day in our prayers. We pray for return to Jerusalem. We have multiple fast days during the course of the year, mourning the destruction of Jerusalem, and praying to be back. So it is very, very much built into our tradition, this desire to go back to this homeland.

Jill: There's always been a small Jewish community, particularly in the holy cities, Jerusalem, Safed, Hebron, Tiberias. So there's always been Jewish communities in Israel, but usually very, very small for much of history. Then in the 19th century, during a time of nationalism and the fights for minority rights in general, Jews also started to say, "Well, wait a second. If the Lithuanians are fighting for a state and the Poles are fighting for minority rights, if you're Polish in Germany, there's all these different fights for either national rights where you are or for states, then what about Jews because Jews were a minority everywhere?"

Jill: So the real shift in the Zionist movement at that time was not saying that Jews had a connection to Israel. That has always been true since the beginning of Judaism, but saying that Jews rather than waiting and praying and waiting for divine intervention and waiting for the Messiah to come to bring us back into Israel, that we could use political means specifically appealing to first the sultan of the Ottoman empire when it was under Ottoman control, and then after World War I to the British empire, which had become the colonial power there. So that was the shift.

Jill: So I want to say, first of all, that sometimes arguments about Zionism get very simplified with some people saying there is no difference between Zionism and Judaism, and those people are ignoring the fact that Zionism was a political movement that made the radical step of saying, "We don't have to wait for the messianic era. We can use modern political means now."

- Jill: Then there are people who say, “Well, Zionism has nothing to do with Judaism,” and sometimes even go as far as to say things like the alleged temple or to say Jews invented this history with Israel or even one antisemitic conspiracy that I hear a lot, unfortunately, is, “Well, today’s Jews aren’t real Jews.” That goes back to this idea that the king of the Khazar is converted. It’s this old antisemitic theory that says that today’s Jews aren’t actually descended from ancient Jews.
- Jill: So that other side says, “Well, Zionism has nothing to do with Judaism. It’s just a political movement,” but neither of those are true. So Jews have a very long connection to the land of Israel and denying that it’s antisemitic, and it was a specific decision to turn that into a political movement in the context of other minority rights and political movements.
- Jill: Of course, some of the backdrop of this is, and there were arguments in that period about, “Well, maybe Jews instead should claim national rights in the countries that we are,” so Jewish schools, Jewish political parties. We think about national rights very differently now, right? We think about citizenship differently, but the idea is maybe there would be a Lithuanian school and a Polish school, and why shouldn’t there be a Jewish school in that place?
- Jill: So different ways that Jews started moving to Israel, but then obviously in the Holocaust, when every other country, including the United States, closed its doors to Jews, some Jews were able to sneak into Palestine then under British control, but they weren’t actually allowed. There were very strict quotas there, but Israel then became something that most Jews feel very strongly this idea that Israel is a refuge and is the place that we could go, and Israel has a history of being a place that Jews from not only post-holocaust, but also Jews were expelled from Iraq or Jews who fled Egypt. Very much in response to Zionism, some of those countries started taking away Jewish rights, but that’s not to say there was an antisemitism before or Jews fleeing to Soviet. It was a place that could take in Jews now, Jews fleeing Ukraine.
- Jill: So it’s important to understand that deep relationship and commitment. Now, that doesn’t mean that we should ignore the human rights situation of Palestinians at all. So in 1967, the six-day war, Israel captured a number of territories, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, and the Golan Heights, and the East Jerusalem, Gaza, and West Bank, they have different legal statuses, which I’m not going to go into, but essentially, Palestinians are living under occupation, which means without citizenship rights.
- Jill: So that is a political issue because once Israel just made the decision to be a country, to be a member of the UN, it has to observe the same international human rights laws as other countries.
- Jill: So T’ruah, as an organization, we fight for the human rights of both Israelis and Palestinians. I mean, when I say Israelis, actually, I should say that about 80% of Israeli citizens are Jewish citizens, about 20% are Palestinian citizens, and then there’s another five million or so, and there’s about nine million Israeli citizens, 80% Jewish, 20% Palestinian, and another five million or so Palestinians who are not citizens, who are living under occupation.
- Jill: So we fight for all of those people. We start with the assumption that none of those people

are going anywhere, that almost none of those people have another passport. They are all staying exactly where they are more or less. So we need to create a situation that preserves the human rights of both of those people. We need to also create a situation that allows Israel to continue being a place that Jews know that we can flee because, unfortunately, there's still being reasons that we have to flee.

Jill: So T'ruah, as an organization, we support two states side-by-side. So there would be a place where there would be Israel, there would be Palestine. It would mean that all of the people who are living there can have the right to citizenship in a country, and people can work out the details, but that's what we support as an organization.

Jill: I'll say that within the Christian world, which obviously is very big, there are some who often consider themselves Christian Zionist, evangelical Zionist, I'll say some very general things, I want to be clear that I know not everybody fits in this category, but some of the ideas that are out there are, first, Jews as this remnant of a biblical people, today's Jews as being exactly like the Israelites in the Bible, and the sense of trying to preserve us as a museum piece and preserve Israel as a museum piece without attention to who we actually are now.

Jill: Some of those communities are very involved in supporting right wing Israeli politicians and right wing Israeli policies that are focused on expanding and holding onto the settlements, which are the Jewish communities inside of the occupied West Bank. So that is not helpful because it doesn't move us any closer to a solution. Also, the idea in there that Jews are basically a tool to reaching the end of days, that Jews have to move back to Israel so that there can be this end of days moment that very much sees Jews as a pond within or a supporting character within Christian history as opposed to subjects with our own agency and our own messianic dreams and hopes and ideas.

Jill: Then the second trend, this is more complicated, but many progressive churches are very connected with Palestinian communities and are very involved in fighting occupation. I want to say, first of all, that criticizing Israel fighting occupation is not antisemitic, just like fighting for the rights of Uyghurs, for example, against the genocide of Uyghurs or fighting or boycotting Russia, right? These are not things that are necessarily prejudiced because they're actions that are taken against a country in order to force that country to do something.

Jill: There are times when those actions cross the line into antisemitism. So for example, denying Jewish history in the land of Israel or any kind of disregard for Jews like any language about, "Well, they should all go back to where they came from," as though that were even possible. I mean, I'm telling you the Jews are not going back to Iraq or Poland or Ukraine. So any kind of language like that. I do think that it's important for Christians, in thinking about why and how to take action against Israel, really to examine what the motivations are.

Jill: Now, for sure, I think that it's important for Christians to be connected to Palestinian communities and to push any country, including Israel, to follow international law, but I do think that sometimes there has to be just a self-searching and thinking, "Well, okay, why is it that this issue is really important to me?" For some, it might be because of the connections to Palestinian Christian communities, particularly on the ground. For some, it might be, like

you said, because you visited there and have a relationship.

- Jill: I think sometimes there is a grain of antisemitism, and so it's important to be able to push that out and to make sure that any action that one is taking is one that doesn't cross that line. I'll say also that Jews are particularly sensitive to being lectured by Christians about human rights because of the history of the holocaust and because of the history of antisemitism. So that's a dynamic that comes up that I think it's important for Christians to be sensitive to.
- Brian: There was a moment in my conversation with Rabbi Jill Jacobs that I want to return to. Do you remember her talking about how, as a Jewish child, she learned about the holocaust and other atrocities against Jews, and she was visiting a friend who had an attic? This was a safe friend, she thought, who would protect her if another holocaust broke out.
- Brian: Those two images of potential Christian identity, one, Christians who stigmatize Jews, proving themselves dangerous as neighbors, that's one possible Christian identity, and I invite you to face this reality that many of our fellow Christians are indeed dangerous neighbors, and that we may also be dangerous neighbors and not realize it.
- Brian: The other image, the image of good Christian neighbors who would protect their Jewish neighbor, open their attic, open their home, protect them. I invite you to consider that that is an option all of us can embrace, that to be a Christian is to be the kind of person who would risk one's own self and safety to protect and serve, to be in solidarity with one's neighbor of another faith.
- Brian: Then Rabbi Jill reminded us, when Jews wanted to escape Germany and other countries under Nazi control, they were turned away by the so-called Christian nation of the United States. America wouldn't welcome them. So I think today of people who are in danger, whether they're Jews, Ukrainians, Syrians, Hondurans, Guatemalans, and I wonder who would be neighbors who would welcome the other into our country, our homes for protection, for safety.
- Brian: One last image, I invite you to imagine a Christian who has learned about how Christians have been dangerous neighbors in the past and now commits to speaking out to their fellow Christians to help them see the potential dangers hidden in their beliefs and behaviors so that they can more consciously choose what kind of neighbor and what kind of Christian each of us wants to be.
- Brian: I want to thank Rabbi Jill Jacobs for being a guest on this episode, the Center for Action and Contemplation for supporting and hosting these important conversations, and I want to thank each of you, listeners, for devoting this time to learning how to see our own Christian faith in a fresh and healthy way. And a special thanks to Corey Pigg, the producer of this program, who is such a joy to work with.