



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Can a Jewish awakening
inspire America?

Josh Stanton & Ben Spratt

In This Episode...

Is the new model for American Judaism a deliciously eclectic Brooklyn food hall or the brick-and-mortar synagogue built by previous generations? Rabbi Joshua Stanton and Rabbi Ben Spratt, who each lead a synagogue in New York City, speak with Eboo about their new book, “Awakenings: American Jewish Transformations in Identity, Leadership, and Belonging.”

Episode Guest: Josh Stanton

Rabbi Joshua Stanton is spiritual co-leader of East End Temple and Senior Fellow at CLAL—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. He has appeared on CNN, CNBC, and CBS, and his work has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, the Daily Beast, Vox, the Associated Press, Religion News Service, and the Jerusalem Post, as well as in documentary films and international media in over a dozen languages.

Episode Guest: Ben Spratt

Rabbi Benjamin Spratt is the senior rabbi of Congregation Rodeph Sholom in Manhattan. He cofounded Shireinu for Jewish families with special needs; Tribe, to engage Jewish millennials through grassroots leadership; and New Day Fellowship, to foster connection between Muslim and Jewish millennials. His work has been featured in The New York Times, Vogue, Associated Press, Religion New Service, the Jewish Week, and numerous podcasts.

Suggested Discussion Questions

- Ben and Josh characterize the past few years as a “tri-apocalypse”, for the country and for Jewish life in particular. However, they also witnessed rebirth and resilience in the midst of crisis. Where have you witnessed resiliency and rebirth in recent years? What were the conditions that allowed it to happen?
- Josh describes Ben as a “North Star” to whom he could reach out to recalibrate his bearings and regain clarity in his view of the world and his place in it. To whom do you reach out when the world feels murky? What perspectives have you gained in these relationships?



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- Ben says that the story of American Jewish life in the 20th century was largely about acceptance in America and the establishment of the state of Israel. He describes how, as the community became closer to meeting those goals, the institutions set up to support those aims have struggled for a sense of purpose. What stories do you and your community tell about your purpose? Which of those stories are still being written? Are there stories that no longer serve you?
- Eboo, Ben, and Josh discuss the interplay between institutions and individuals. Josh says, “when we put institution before people both do poorly, when we center human needs, we can thrive. And the decline of many denominations across the spectrum of belief is because we have centered institution. And that means that there is profound hope for the future.”
- What place do you think institutions have in contemporary religious and spiritual practice? Do you think that their role is changing? What opportunities and challenges might this create for your own tradition?
- Josh and Ben discuss their efforts to appreciate the good in things with which they find flaws. For instance, they describe LGBTQ people feeling welcome at Orthodox Jewish Chabad houses, even though the institution itself is conservative in its understanding of gender and sexuality. Instead of taking issue with the theological differences, Josh describes trying to learn from the remarkable hospitality that Chabad houses show to communities who may not feel welcome in other contexts. What is something that you’ve learned from someone or something with which you had a deep disagreement?
- Ben says, “So often in my own life, if I’m looking just at the two inches in front of me, it’s terrifying. But if you can pull back and draw on perspective, you see the long arc ahead of you and behind you, and suddenly you’re able to make much more intentional thoughtful choices. Choices that tell a story of purpose, that anchors us in the sense that we are continuing on.” What aspects of your own or someone else’s religious tradition give you this kind of perspective?