**TRANSCRIPT**

***The Spirituality & Health Podcast***

**ALEJANDRO MANDES**

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**Rabbi Rami:** From *Spirituality and Health* magazine, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is the *Spirituality and Health* podcast. Our guest today, Alejandro Mandes, is a social worker and theologian. He's the founder of Immigrant Hope, a non-profit organization affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of America and devoted to equipping churches to provide immigrants with the hope of the gospel, help finding a path to legal residency, and a home in a church that cares for their needs. His new book is *Embracing the New Samaria: Opening Our Eyes to Our Multiethnic Future*. A review of the book appears in the July-August issue of *Spirituality and Health* magazine. Alejandro Mandes, welcome to the *Spirituality and Health* podcast.

**Alex Mandes:** Thank you, Rabbi. You can call me Alex.

**Rabbi Rami:** Alex it is. I want to unpack the title of your book, *Embracing the New Samaria*. What is the new Samaria?

**Alex:** Ever since I was working on my master's in social work, I was doing a lot of work on terms of demographics and they started back in the '80s documenting this tipping point that was happening. That is, minority becoming majority. For the most part, for me that Samaria is the immigrant ethnic majority happening. It's a little bit more than that in as far as I'm concerned. Who haven't we reached as a movement? I think there's pockets of people that if they're interested in Christ, we need to be reaching out to them. Neighborhoods are changing.

For me really, Rabbi, it's not even that because like I have a-- North Dakota is such a homogeneous group, but my mother-in-law who was in a church that was transitioning kept telling me that they were strangers coming. Of course, I'm thinking African-American, Hispanic, I get there, and they're strangers all right. They're still Nordic, but they're wearing shorts, sandals, earrings, and pet peeves. For me, the Samaria is who are we reaching? That's really where the heart of it is for me. Yes, the tip of the spear certainly is ethnics and immigrants, but it includes anybody that's being left out that would be interested in Christ.

**Rabbi Rami:** In the very beginning of the book you talk about your evangelical family. This is what you say, ''My evangelical family, specifically those who are part of the majority culture,'' and you want to help them transcend the status quo by loving and reaching their neighbors in the margins as God has called us to do. When you say majority culture, you're talking about what you just said, Nordic, is that? White people?

**Alex:** I hate to call it Anglo because it's not Anglo. I hate to call it majority culture because majority can change. I have a hard time putting my hand around that, but whoever is the majority of where your community is.

**Rabbi Rami:** Oh, okay. That's a good way of putting it because you do use the word majority culture. When I think of majority culture, I think Christian. I don't make the distinction between different denominations of Christians or Hispanic Christians or African American Christians or Nordic Christians. [chuckles] This is going to sound silly, but you're all just Christians to me. When I first moved to Tennessee, the bookstores made big distinctions between Christians and Catholics and they would have a huge Christian section, so it was labeled that way and a small Catholic section and a tiny little Mormon section.

When I first moved here, I didn't understand it because it seemed to me they were all Christians. When I asked about it at the bookstore they said, ''Oh, absolutely not.'' There are Christians and then there's Catholics.'' They're a different thing altogether. My bias as a minority is that the majority is Christians and while I know that the demographic trends are moving toward a time in the not too distant future where white Americans are going to be a one minority among others, I wonder if your work could speak not only to Christians who belong to various minorities but minorities like Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist, secularists, the spiritual but not religious.

It seems to me there's something in Embracing the New Samaria that speaks to all of those minority groups. Does that make sense to you when you wrote the book or when you think about the book now that it's out?

**Alex:** It makes a lot of sense. They say that 87% or 90% of America is Christian, and I'm a firm believer in that we ought not to be throwing rocks. I grew up Catholic. I know what you're saying, but people aren't saved by knowing what's wrong, they're saved by knowing who's right and that's faith in Jesus Christ. The only way I can reduce it to is I reducible core. People that put their faith in him for their salvation. I'll tell you right now, there's evangelicals that don't meet that mark and there's Catholics who do reach that mark and the same goes for Jews and anybody else, frankly.

Romans 1:16 is powerful for me it says, "for I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it salvation for the Jew and for the Gentile". In the book, the whole issue I started there was with the 12 disciples who had a problem with Samaritans, but Jesus didn't. He sat down had a 15, 20, 30-minute conversation, and the disciples are walking out of this city that they're not even supposed to associate with, and the woman leaves. While they came with chips, bacon, [chuckles] chorizo, but no people.

Here comes a woman who'd only been a believer in Christ for a few minutes, and she's bringing out all of these people to know who He is by a simple testimony. Come see a man that told me everything I ever did. The point in there wasn't that He knew what her sin was as much as these people looked at her as a transformed person. Someone who had had a personal encounter. For me, I chuckle at that a little bit because these are guys that should have known better. [chuckles]

**Rabbi Rami:** Well, the apostles don't seem to know what they're doing very well in the gospel.

**Alex:** That gives me comfort for a person.

**Rabbi:** You're right. They're hanging out with Jesus and they haven't got a clue. He says to them, ''Who do you say I am?'' They're not too sure. Even when Peter gets it, I don't think Peter ever really gets it, but the way-- [crosstalk]

**Alex:** The uncomfortable ones are those who are absolutely sure of everything.

**Rabbi Rami:** Sure, right. But you're still saying, I understand that anyone Jew, Muslim, Hindu, secularist, humanist can come to know Christ, but then they're no longer a Jew, a Hindu. From the way Judaism would define itself, there's no room for accepting Jesus as your Lord and savior and still maintaining your fidelity to the Jewish past, which is an alternative. [crosstalk]

**Alex:** In Judaism, there's all variations of it. There's even messianic Christians, but I do know what you mean. Christianity isn't that rock-solid all in lockstep and I imagine that would be true for you.

**Rabbi Rami:** Well, that's true. Sure. That's absolutely true, but what I'm getting from the book and just even listening to you in this conversation is there, in a sense, salvation outside the church? When Jesus says nobody gets to the Father except through me, is that your position also or are there-- my Father's house has many mansions and there's ways for everyone to get there on their own path?

**Alex:** Well, there is no salvation in church.

**Rabbi Rami:** [chuckles] I didn't mean the literal church, but okay.

**Alex:** I know, but I wanted to make that clear. For me, it's about a relationship with Christ. It's, for me, very experiential but I think that there has to be some abstract elements, and so, yes, I do believe the scriptures when Jesus says I am the way, the truth, and life. No one comes to me but by the Father. If He is the creator, and I believe He is, if He sends His Son and raises Him from the dead, that gives him a little bit of say. That doesn't mean He doesn't love the whole world. That doesn't mean that He doesn't care about all people's suffering, but there is a claim that He has as the creator that is different from other philosophies of how to live your life.

**Rabbi Rami:** I appreciate your honesty. It's not surprising when the book is quite straightforward as someone who does not accept Jesus that way we've got a fairly large divide. Let me tell you a quick story. I'll do it briefly, so it will be quick. I was leading an interfaith group in Israel a number of years ago, and we were visiting the Garden Tomb that is run by the Anglican Church. It's where they claim Jesus was buried, and we're just going through the tour and there's an Anglican guide and he is very sure that there's only one-- it's not only that Jesus is the only way to reach God, but Anglican Christianity is the only way to reach God and that everything else is a false religion even if it claims to be Christian.

That was insulting to our group. We were interfaith, we were made up of all different kinds of people. He and I got into an altercation and I didn't want to ruin it for everybody else, so I left the group and I went and sat and meditated in the garden. I'd been there before. It's a really gorgeous place. I'm sitting in meditation and another guide comes over to me, and she gives me or she poses to me what I've heard described as C.S Lewis's trilemma. She says, "When Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me, is he lying? Is he a lunatic? Or is he the Lord?'' C.S Lewis came up with that. It's supposed to be a pretty decent way of getting people to say, "Well, how could Jesus be lying and Jesus can't be a lunatic, so Jesus must be Lord."

I responded, I reject those three possibilities and I have a fourth. She was very nice and she said, "What is it?" I said, "I think Jesus was a God-intoxicated Jewish mystic, who when he says, no one gets to the Father except through me, he's not talking about himself, the ego Jesus, the human Jesus. He's talking about the mind of Christ. He's talking about Christ's consciousness. He's talking about an awakened mind and not Jesus himself, and that the only way to get to the divine is to achieve that state of mind. Like Jesus says, "you can do even greater things than I."

What's your sense of understanding Jesus as one expression of Christ consciousness or what the Buddhists will call Buddha mind? I kept trying to lift this out of a Christian-only setting and bring it to something more universal, but it may just be my thing.

**Alex:** Well, let me first say that I love C.S Lewis and I appreciate what he's saying. I think he's trying to bring it down to something that's understandable to people. I also love ecumenical relationships. I think that God certainly can be expressed by other people's views but I have a hard time when a religion starts saying-- a denomination saying mine is the truth. I've been to Israel also, I know that there's at least two or three other places where they say Jesus was buried. Frankly, I'm not going to go light a candle at any one of them. That's not the hill I'm going to die on. The thing that I think is important for us to remember is that God is great and He doesn't need me to fight for Him.

I like that place. I think it was Gideon where He's told to burn the Asherah or something like that, and then he burns his father's Asherah and then uses it to put the oxygen for sacrifice. Then in the morning, the city people come and they're going to really go and get this guy and kill him. The father who owned the idol said if that is God, he can defend himself. Frankly, I do believe that God is real. He is normal. I believe he's propositional in that he has declared himself. I do believe that the miracles and many of the prophecies can speak for themselves, but it's faith, isn't it? There is that element in which people are required to declare where they stand and what they believe.

I'm not real hit on people drawing lines in the sand and saying this is 100% absolute. Now, I will do that in very few places, but one of them is where Jesus is God the Father, and there is a Father and there is a Spirit, and I have to believe that He died for my sins. One of my favorite movies is *Rudy*. He wants to be on the Notre Dame football team and it's not working out for him and every year he goes and he prays, and finally, this Monsignor comes out and he starts arguing with the Monsignor saying, "Hey, you know everything. Why isn't God letting me in?" The priest says, "After all my years of studying theology, I have come to the conclusion of two things. There is a God and I'm not him." Those things are certain for me also.

When I think that there are some things that are propositional and clear, there is a God creator because we didn't come from random nothing and I believe that He has declared Himself, but I don't need to go rub that in anybody's face because God can defend himself. What he has sent me here, and I believe this for me, is to be His representative of love, compassion, service, but not His executioner of any of His children.

**Rabbi Rami:** Yes. I appreciate that. I've been in settings in my hometown where it was made clear to me with that I will burn in hell for all eternity because I haven't accepted Jesus the way one denomination or another of Christianity has accepted Jesus. Let's switch topics a little bit. You're right about you want people to see one another as God sees them. I love that idea, but I'm curious to know how you think God sees people? Does God make a distinction between people based on race, or ethnicity, or gender, or religion? How does God see humanity?

**Alex:** We're all made in the image of God. That is something that is sacred, foundational, and if anything that should give all of us a moment of pause before we start throwing rocks or being mean, ugly, or anything like that to each other.

**Rabbi Rami:** Before you go any further, what does that mean to you that we're made in the image of God?

**Interviewee:** I think obviously, that doesn't mean characteristics because men and women are different, and I don't think that race was ever in God's mind because you don't see that necessarily in the scriptures. The Hebrews never distinguished between different races. Obviously, there were Ethiopians, there were Jewish, but the Ethiopian Eunuch was never called, "Oh, he's the black guy." When I think of how God thinks about us, I think about Revelation Chapter 7, where it's a vision of the throne room of God and they're all around the throne, and he says, "From different nations and different languages." He never talks about gender, he doesn't talk about race.

It's just people that are standing before God and it's not broken down into the different segments that we break it down to. It is interesting to me, it really, really is around me, and I've thought about this because God just does see us differently than we do, and I'm okay with not totally understanding everything that he sees, but I do know that He loves you as much as He loves me. While Israel may be the apple of God's eye, and He never takes that back, He still prayed for the others in John Chapter 17 and He calls him His own also. I think we try to understand God by paradigms that we set up that are not always crystal clear and I'm okay with that abstraction.

In fact, I'm fascinated by it. If God can see us all together and isn't saying I like these guys more than these guys, that's actually exciting and it draws me in to want to know other people. To want to experience what they see of God because I'm a firm believer that different cultures demonstrate a different facet about God. I think I even shared that in the book. I was just at a Native American Indian conference, and it's interesting how they saw so many things similar to Hispanics. There's this God-consciousness which isn't necessarily Jesus, there's this sense of God. African-Americans have quite a soulish ability. Asians have this honor for parents, of course. You have to be careful not to really typeset people because not all Hispanics are the same. There is an element in which women and men see different facets of God. For me, it's really intriguing to get to know other people and how they see God and culture and life. That doesn't shy me away from saying there is one way to God and that Jesus is the Savior.

I also believe that he's drawing all people to himself. People who say there is one way aren't wrong, and to be exclusive saying, he's not your God is something that I think we need to be very, very careful with. There's a little balance here if you're noticing, Rami. I do believe that God out is drawing people to Himself and that God is Jesus the Father and the Holy Spirit. We need to hold that with a little bit of tension because he's the one that's drawing them and he will.

**Rabbi Rami:** My sense is, let me just go with that, I guess the way you said it, God is drawing us to the divine. When I look at, let's say early, early Christianity, St. Paul stuff, specifically I'm thinking of Galatians 3:28 where Paul says, because not, everyone's going to know that quote. Where Paul says there's neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male or female for your all one in Christ Jesus. The realization of Christ Jesus. Now, I would say it's Christ consciousness or Buddha-mind or whatever, but the realization of Christ Jesus to use the language of Galatians strips away all these divisions that humans have created. It seems to me that's the way God sees the human being as neither Jew or Greek. Meaning, neither Jew or Christian or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or secularist.

There's neither slave nor free, there's neither male nor female. All those binaries disappear when God looks at us. We impose those on one another for, I don't know, you could maybe come up with sociological, psychological reasons, but the closer we get to God, the less we make these distinctions. This is my estimation. When you are talking about getting Christians to embrace even other Christians of different ethnicities and races and how difficult that is, it seems to me it's a violation. Not what you are saying, but the difficulty itself violates what Paul is saying. Why is it so hard for people, do you think? Christians, let's keep it right there. Why is it so hard for Christians whose primary text tells them to get beyond these binaries, to, in fact, get on the binaries?

**Alex:** I want to go back to what I was saying, it's not this, it's not that. I think what we're talking about is a separation, so, for example, Ephesians and Galatians may have been written at the same time and sent to different places. What you're looking at in these books is when it's saying "He's broken the wall of separation." You understand what that means coming out of temple vernacular, but you also know the temple had a temple for women, a court of women, the court of the Gentiles. I think what he's making an illusion to there is that we're all His children. He's not talking about the force. He's talking about in terms of Judaic dichotomies where there were people that seemed to be more favored. There was the court of the Gentiles, the court of the women.

Each one of these was a sort of degree of separation. What he's talking about is in terms of we're all equally valuable in the sight of God, and we're talking in terms of Judaic Christianity. I don't see that as speaking about the force or Buddha or these others. It's a Judeo-Christian dichotomy that God created, and it's called the mystery in the book of Ephesians. Initially, it was set up to help people learn what it looks like to have a relationship with God. Israel was the city up on a hill and what God is saying, "That's all gone now, I'm here, and we're one." That's not saying Judeo-Christianity is the same as all these others. That's the way I take it.

**Rabbi Rami:** No. I think putting the text in its historical context, that makes a lot of sense. It seems to me that the Gospels speak beyond their historical setting, and when you lift it out, I wanted to see a greater universalism. That's my passion.

**Alex:** Let me give you some universalism, okay? God loves the world, period.

**Rabbi Rami:** But He's still going to send some of us to hell.

**Alex:** Well, there's going to be a lot of people who are in evangelical churches that are going to go to hell, too.

**Rabbi Rami:** Well, yes. I'm just saying. He doesn't love us that much. [laughs] My mom loves me because she doesn't want me to go to hell.

**Alex:** Well, I'll tell you how much He loves us. Let me tell you how much He loves us. He sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for us. You know, you read the gospels. The only people that Jesus had a hard time with were the religious leaders. The disciples. Try to even keep children away from Him and the Samaritans away from Him. There is a sense in which God is drawing all people to Himself and He loves all people, but He does get very, very irritated when people make artificial separations between Him. It has to be understood that He does have a provision for the eternal life that He's given. We don't want to say that's not love, it is love. But if we want to reject that, that's our choice.

**Rabbi Rami:** Yes. No, I get it. I'm just giving you a hard time, I guess. We're going to have to--

**Alex:** You're going to live by the sword, you die by the sword.

**Rabbi Rami:** Right.

I get it. I get it.

**Alex:** We're going to have to wrap this up, but I'm sure you're familiar with Rob Bell. I'm a fan of his work and his book, *Love Wins.* I think it's that book. He talks about his problem with the idea of hell is he has no problem that Adolf Hitler is burning in hell for all eternity. His problem is that Mahatma Gandhi is burning right next to him because neither one of them accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but we're going to have to leave that discussion to another time. Our guest today, Alex Mandes is the founder of Immigrant Hope and author of *Embracing the New Samaria:* *Opening Our Eyes to Our Multiethnic Future.* A review of the book appears in the July-August issue of Spirituality and Health magazine. You can learn more about Alejandro's work on his website, immigranthope.org. Alex, thank you so much for talking with us on the *Spirituality and Health* podcast.

**Alex:** Thank you, Rami.

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**Rabbi Rami:** You've been listening to the *Spirituality and Health* podcast. If you like this episode, please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. To enjoy this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us @spirithealthmag. You can also follow me on the Spirituality and Health website where I write a regular column called Roadside Music. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. The *Spirituality and Health* podcast is produced by Ezra Baker Trupiano, and our Executive Producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami, thanks for listening.

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