

## TRANSCRIPT

### *The Spirituality & Health Podcast*

JOHN PAVLOVITZ

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**Rabbi:** From the *Spirituality and Health* magazine, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is the Spirituality and Health podcast. Our guest today, John Pavlovitz is a writer, pastor, activist committed to equality, diversity, and justice both inside and outside faith communities. He's the author of *Bigger Table, Hope and Other Superpowers, Low, and Stuff That Needs To Be Said*. His newest book is *If God Is Love, Don't Be a Jerk. Finding a Faith That Makes Us Better Humans*. John Pavlovitz, welcome to the spirituality and health podcast.

**John:** Thank you so much. It is wonderful to be with you.

**Rabbi:** I really appreciate you giving us your time, I think we'll let the listeners know what's going on with you at the moment. You want to tell us what your big plan is for the weekend?

**John:** Yes. I've got a good time going on I guess about eight weeks ago, I wasn't feeling well after about with COVID and did some blood work, and hormones were all over the place and my doctor said, "Well, you know it could be but it probably isn't this particular type of tumor in your pituitary at the base of your brain, but don't be worried." Then he said, "Let's do a brain MRI." He also said, don't be worried about that and that confirmed that it was indeed, this particular type of usually benign tumor. Then you ordered more blood work to find out if it required surgery, which it does. Tomorrow, in just about 12 hours or so I will be taking care of that and seeing what the weekend looks like after that.

**Rabbi:** We all wish you well with the surgery.

**John:** Thank you.

**Rabbi:** All right, so try to put that out of your mind while I come up with some absolutely distracting questions-

**John:** Perfect.

[laughter]

**Rabbi:** -to engage you with. I do want to talk about the book, that was really the impetus for the conversation, but I get your newsletter, I read a lot of your material. I wanted to start by asking you about being a pastor, given that you seem to be engaged in an endless and to me futile effort to remake your church. Tell us why you enter the ministry and why you haven't yet given up on it like I did.

**John:** I guess it depends on the day if I've given up or not but my journey was-- ministry, for me, was completely unexpected. I was raised in a Italian Roman Catholic family predominantly and had a pretty strong faith, but had this God who

adored me who I was also terrified of. As I drifted from that faith in college, really was far from organized religion and it was only about 24 years ago, and my wife and I were going to be married, we couldn't find a local faith community that would marry us and a little Methodist Church, a female pastor said, "Why don't you come to our building and see what we're about and then we can talk about it."

Had a wonderful experience really felt connected to that community and what they were doing there and I started volunteering with teenagers and part-time youth leader. Then finally was offered a position to and I had the choice to leave my career as an art director, and do ministry full-time, which is what I did. It was completely unexpected and that was just about 24 years ago. While I don't bail on the whole thing, I think I'm in a fortunate position because I don't have a local congregation, I have this really desperate virtual community and that allows me to be exactly the minister I want to be and say what I feel like I need to say and so I'm fighting with and for my faith tradition often at the same time.

**Rabbi:** I like that you're fighting with and for your faith tradition at the same time. Actually, we're more similar, you don't have a local in-person community, you can always just turn off the messaging on Twitter and avoid all the negative side that people want to dump on you.

**John:** That was my story, by the way. Real quick as I went down this road of ministry, and the churches got larger, and my profile got bigger, I started to realize there were a lot of tensions in me between the person I thought I should be and the pastor I was expected to be. That tension is really what began to weigh on me as I walked down that road and I realized in a certain setting, "Hey, I'm going to have to be there, be an authentic pastor or an employed pastor at this congregation. That's led me to this place where you and I are standing.

**Rabbi:** I ended up having to create my own congregation. Nobody would hire me. I didn't even go to interviews, but I was told in advance by my seminary, that if I was honest about what I believed and how I understood Judaism, that you're never going to get a job. I said, "I'll just start my own."

**John:** In my case, it was getting to a new church after having been at one for 10 years having equity of trust and relational capital, I can nudge people, and then I got to a new Church. I like to say that five months in I heard God calling me to leave that church and it came in the form of my pastor's voice saying you're fired and then it was easy.

[laughter]

**Rabbi:** God does not work in mysterious ways, in that case, it was pretty dry.

**John:** It was a Starbucks on Thursday afternoon.

**Rabbi:** There you go. In the book, you talk about this notion of unboxing God. It seems to me that one of the primary aims of any religion is to place God in a box and the box is defined by that religion. The Jewish God fits the Jewish box and chooses the Jewish people and the Christian God fits the Christian box and those who would be saved, join the church. To truly unbox God, it seems to me as to realize that God

can't be boxed at all and that any God in a box, isn't God with a capital G, but only an idol so is this what you have in mind that a really unboxed, unboxable divine reality?

**John:** I think what happens is, in the book, I say the first problem is small religion is the real problem and the second problem was that all religion is small religion, that it's all doing our best with words to capture the ineffable and that eventually, we can adore our tradition and respect it and find great meaning there. Ultimately, it's okay to admit that our tradition may not be large enough for whatever this entity is, and to be okay with that, to not be threatened by the idea because over and over, I say in the book, if God is God-sized, then hey, I think we're going to be okay here. There should be a fearlessness, and less of a territorialism about your own tradition.

**Rabbi:** When I read the Hebrew prophets, not all of them are not everything that they all say but a theme that runs through the Hebrew prophets is unboxing God, just to stick with the term. For example, in Isaiah, I going to make sure I remember this right, Isaiah 66, in the beginning, verses 3 and 4. Isaiah or God talks about, if you slaughter an ox for your ritual, it's like you kill a person. If you're sacrificing a lamb, it's like you're breaking the neck of a dog.

He just goes through these things that would be horrifying to Isaiah's listener but they're all the things that they think God wants them to do. Then I wrote down the last part of it, God says, "I also will choose to mock them, those who do the ritual things, and bring upon them what they fear, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they didn't listen." Sounds like Matthew 25, doing it for the least of these. They did what was evil in my sight and chose what did not please me.

He's talking about what was at that time, corporate Judaism, in the priestly Judaism. I think if you modernized it and addressed it to rabbinic Jewish structures, the prophets would be saying the same thing that this is not what God wants. Micah says what God wants is to do justly, love, mercy, walk humbly with your God. Do you get a sense and if-- I should never ask a yes or no question, to what extent do you see Jesus as paradigmatic God unboxer?

**John:** I think right away of Jesus saying that he's got this new wine, and you've got these old wineskins and this is brittle, and you're not pliable enough, your mind needs to be pliable enough, your heart needs to be open enough to stretch to a place where you don't imagine your Creator calling you to. I see that his ministry was doing the same thing. It was always inviting in the kept out and always pulling people from the periphery. He was stretching people to a wider embrace than they were comfortable with.

**Rabbi:** It seems to me, with what information we get from a printed text, that he does it with a little more, oh, I don't know, grace, maybe than Isaiah, he's not hitting you over the head with it the way the Hebrew prophets do, but he is making a similar point. What happens, I am suggesting, is that after you get a prophet, whether it's the Hebrew prophets or Jesus, if you look at him as a prophetic figure, you then get a new institution that undoes what the prophet was trying to do, reboxes God in the image of the new institution. Is that how you see what happened to Christianity? What makes it like all the other religions too small?

**John:** I do. I even see in Paul and the early church in the New Testament. Paul had to essentially become a heretic to his former self, and he had to really change the entire way that he had the lenses through which he viewed human beings and God. I think religion at its best is always allowing itself to be reinvented and infused with new energy. I think that's something that we resist, many of us, because if you love a tradition, you can often come beholden to that tradition to the point where you no longer have that openness that I think a real true growing spirituality requires.

**Rabbi:** Yes, nice. That it becomes dead. It becomes imitative.

**John:** Yes. For me, I go back to my Catholic roots and every once in a while, when I'm in a Catholic church, there is a beautiful muscle memory that I experience, and there are things about that ritual and the tradition that is so beautiful. Yet there are things in there where you can see it's difficult to invite the present into that sometimes.

**Rabbi:** Yes. I'm speaking completely as an outsider, but Eucharist intrigues me on a lot of different levels. I can't imagine anything more intimate than taking God into your mouth, eating the divine. It's got all this anthropological weirdness to it, but it seems very, very powerful. I haven't done this now since COVID started, but when I would go to churches, and I would watch people take communion, it's almost like, and this is not true for everybody, I get that it's a broad-brush, but if there were word bubbles over their head and they kneel down and the priest offers them the body of Christ, you could almost see in the word bubble that they're thinking, "What, this again?"

[laughter]

**Rabbi:** I had this last week, what else is on the menu? To an outsider, "It seems like, what could be more transformative?" Yet it turns out, at least again, from an outsider's looking at it, it's highly performative rather than transformative. How do you get the freshness back into it?

**John:** The challenge is, you take something that the first book that I wrote *A Bigger Table*, it was all about the table ministry of Jesus. All the times that he broke bread with people and shared a meal with them. There's nothing we experience that's more intimate and beautiful and sacred. For me, I think having an act like that, if we could replicate that act, that communal part of it, but I think that's the only way that you can get fresh eyes to see that and have your heart be ready to experience it in that way. You talk about something being a 10- or 11-year-old, and having to think about, "Okay, you're eating this God." You talk about the mind of a fourth-grader, what that does to you. It's a pretty jarring idea.

**Rabbi:** How does it feel, if you can remember?

**John:** It felt terrifying, especially because you combine that with the sacrament that I was raised in of confession, where you have to go and tell the priest all these things that I remember, I had two versions of my sins. I had the ones I was going to tell the priest because that felt like they were good and serious enough that I could get away with it, but there was stuff that I said, "I can't tell him." You talk about something that's that intimate and yet also fraught with guilt and worry.

**Rabbi:** I love the fact that in Hebrew, the word for fear and the word for awe are the same word. It can be terrifying, but it can also be awe-inspiring. They may actually be-- I was going to say flip sides of the same coin. They may actually be on the same side of the coin, but it's such a powerful thing.

**John:** Really quickly that idea, too, is something that I think in my tradition is often leveraged that fear of God, rather than the just wondrous awe that you experience when something that massive, the way you're in the Grand Canyon or you're at the ocean, where that beauty is welcoming and it's safe rather than something you should be running from.

**Rabbi:** Yes, and then it becomes politicized.

**John:** Without a doubt.

**Rabbi:** Do you give communion to President Biden? I think that's why, when you look at current studies of millennials, Gen Z, their approach to religion. They're really not interested, because they look at it as, it's just another form of politics.

**John:** That's right.

**Rabbi:** The beauty, the enchantment of it is oftentimes lost. Let me quote you something you wrote in the book that I really liked, and get your response to this. You're writing to the reader and you say, "You were born without a box for God. You met God before you had a religious container. You experienced beauty and wonder without needing a church or a Bible verse or a pastor to explain it to you, and you don't need that now."

Then you go on to call people to embrace something bigger than their preferred box, which is what we've been talking about, but you say this isn't the same thing as telling people to abandon their box. It seems to me that that's exactly what you're asking people to do. To move into a bigger box. How is it different?

**John:** I think I know that the reality for me is that I will never be able to completely jettison my tradition. Even if I wanted to, I'm cognizant of the fact that those values and those lessons are embedded in me. As much as I try to get a more expansive view of the divine, I'm honest with myself enough to know that there are going to be those things that I can't shake, but I'm going to take those and-- I think that "and" community that I want to build, that I love seeing people who are adventurous enough to say, "I don't have to have an adversarial position with my former tradition or another, or a new tradition. I can just welcome it all." That's what I'm hoping can happen, but it's not easy at all.

**Rabbi:** My sense when I speak at churches or synagogues or other settings, when people are oftentimes comfortable in their respective boxes, my challenge to them, most of the time is not to leave your box, but to go deeper into the box and to the mysticism. In Judaism, Jewish mysticism is cool now. There's classes in Kabbalah and Hasidic philosophy, and it's cool to be in if you're Jewish, not only if you're Jewish, but it's cool to be into Jewish mysticism.

When I'm at a church, and I bring up classic Christian mysticism, Hildegard of Bingham, Meister Eckhart, these amazing mystics. Let's just leave it at that. These amazing mystics in that tradition who without getting rid of the box have expanded the box, as far as the mind, heart can imagine, deepen the box as far as anyone can imagine. If brought out, the universal truth that each religion contains and articulates in its own way, the mystics I think all agree. Is there a sense that the people you run into, the Christians that you're working with, are they hungry for a mystical Christianity?

**John:** I think the ones who are, tend to right now, not quite feel at home in many local faith communities. I think many local faith communities, they almost don't make time for that wonder, and they don't make time for the messiness and the waiting of that. I can remember being in a megachurch and everything about our gathering was so scripted. Yet we were talking about this spirit that encompasses, and that can change and do all these things, and yet we really never simply trusted that. I think people are hungry for something that's that deep, and that's beyond what they can reach. They want something that's just a little bit beyond their grasp that keeps them going.

Right now, I think much of the church is about the business of God, the pragmatic exercise of religion. We just don't make time for exploration of the deeper thing.

**Rabbi:** Yes, which I think is such a shame. There's two global movements of Christian meditation. There's the Centering Prayer movement, Father Thomas Keating and Father Basil Pennington, created centering prayer. Then there's the Worldwide Christian Meditation Movement. These are authentic Christian practices. They speak to a lot of people, but not in the local churches so much, though just to be fair, I do run into numerous centering prayer groups that do meet in churches, even if they're not supported by the specific church that provides them with room for gathering. Christianity is so much more rich than most Christians know as is Judaism, and other churches.

**John:** I think that's a great point to make because when we talk about movements and American Christianity is a very specific entity that I think very uniquely has veered off the message and had mission drift. That's even probably even more difficult, because there are people throughout this country who agree with all the things that we're talking about and yet they feel like there is no home for them and because most of high profile churches and denominations are moving away from that mysticism **[unintelligible 00:21:16]**.

**Rabbi:** Which is a shame. Your new book is called *If God is Love, Don't Be a Jerk*. I read the book, so it's a safe assumption that when you say, if God is love, you're not leaving a lot of room for if God isn't love. The sequel would be, if God isn't love, go ahead and be a jerk.

**John:** Yes, we're in trouble [laughs].

**Rabbi:** How do you understand this notion that God is love? I think it's unique to Christianity. It certainly isn't a Jewish position or a Hindu or, well, Buddhism doesn't have this kind of deity to deal with. Or even in Islam, God is love is sort of a classic Christian trope. How does that play in your mind? What does that mean to you?

**John:** For me, it means that for God, to be having a defining character that is love if that's true and even really to be God, God has to be able to out-love me and out-forgive me and out-welcome me. If I'm always aspiring to something that's just a little better and a little bit kinder than I'm comfortable with, that's the road to the character of God. For me, there's no other option. For me, a God who would place me here in a place I've never been in a life I've never lived, in a day I've never experienced, that's asking a lot of human beings to then figure out, how do I please or keep this God from being angry with me. I lean into the hope that God is benevolence first. That is the Christian trope, God is love. I'm speaking more to the people who think they have that figured out and yet their expression of their religion is often marked by contempt for humanity and the planet.

**Rabbi:** The implication they often give is God is anything but love or their motto is God is love and I'm a jerk.

**John:** That's right or God is, they're telling me to be a jerk to you in love.

**Rabbi:** Even worse. I live in a very Christian neighborhood, primarily Protestant, primarily evangelical. My neighbors take heaven and hell very seriously. They seem to have a clear idea as to what heaven and hell is. They're pretty sure they know where they're going. I've had a number of people tell me with only love in their hearts, that because I'm not one of them I'm going to the other place that they're not going. I'm assuming you're familiar with Rob Bell.

**John:** Yes.

**Rabbi:** I think he has a book called *If God is Love* and it's a book about hell and-

**John:** Or *Love Wins*.

**Rabbi:** *Love Wins*. Thank you. Right. *Love Wins*. It's his book about hell where he says, his problem with hell is not-- he has no problem with Adolf Hitler burning forever in hell. What bothers him he wrote in that book is that Mahatma Gandhi is standing right next to Hitler. As I remember, the book, *Love Wins*, there is no hell. There's no room for hell in a divine reality that is love. Is that true for you also?

**John:** It is, I find the idea of hell incompatible with a God whose character is love. Jesus is teaching about forgiveness and he says, essentially, every time that you're asked to forgive, you need to forgive. Then every time you're asked again, you have to forgive again. That forgiveness cannot wear out.

Yet the idea of hell to me is God not living to those standards, not existing to those standards, and saying, you're going to do something that is going to offend me so deeply that I'm going to close myself down to you, and I'm not going to offer the forgiveness that I'm asking you to offer one another. That was a disconnect, even as a teenager that I couldn't quite grasp.

**Rabbi:** I've seen pastors from different denominations say to one another, that the other is going to hell because their baptism practice isn't the right one. Their list of what you have to believe to be in that denomination violates different denomination and therefore you're going to hell. Being a Christian is no-- even a devout Christian is

no protection against going to hell if you're talking to a different kind of Christian who really needs you to go to hell.

**John:** That's correct. Most people's idea of hell is it's always full. The place where they're going is there's only a few people and you talk about the God box. Our tradition has the God box. Then our denomination has the even better one. Our particular expression in this local community, ours is the ultimate box. That is just so sad to me. It's such wasted energy.

**Rabbi:** Absolutely. It's a complete distraction from the sole dimension of humankind and complete addiction to the egoic dimension, I think.

**John:** That's right.

**Rabbi:** We're just about out of time. I want to ask you one more question. One of my favorite verses in the Bible in the Torah is, Genesis 12:3 and that's where it says, it's sort of, God is speaking to Abram and Sarai, before they become Abraham and Sarah and, and tells them to take leave of their nation where they're living. Step away from their culture, their ethnicity, leave their parents' house, and go to a place that God will show them. No map is provided, no tradition to follow. God is only going to let you know you got there when you got there, even though you have no idea how to get there and what you do when you get there is you are a blessing.

This is Genesis 12:3. You are a blessing to all the families of the earth and because it says all it implies both human and otherwise that you engage with life in such a way as to be a blessing to whomever or whatever you are engaging with. I'm wondering, or let me put it this way for me, the only way you can be a blessing to all the families of the earth, with all the diversity that exists. You can even just stick with human beings. The only way you can be a blessing is to be box-free because otherwise, you're just going to drag your box and either try to get the other person into your box or have a war of boxes.

The reason Genesis 12:3 be a blessing follows 1 and 2, which is about getting out of your box is because getting out of your box is a prerequisite for being a blessing. That isn't your position, but how would you wrestle with that reading of the text?

**John:** For me, I think that the idea of, how can I describe this? Even the word box can be too limiting. I think ultimately our theology is relational. Whoever I am, however people experience my life that has to be something that is more and more beautiful and more and more expansive. If I can do that with a tradition in holding tightly to that, then that's okay. For me, my journey has been, the restriction was the tradition. It was a piece of that thing tethering me to the fear. I think the book is actually that fear and grief are at the bedrock of our barriers so if our religious tradition can pull us out of fear and out of that contempt for the other, then I think, traditions are a wonderful thing. That's why this isn't so difficult because some days I have this tradition that I've experienced so much joy from and I want people to experience that and yet I want to spare them the toxicity of that story. I still don't know quite how to do that. Maybe that's because I'm still wrestling with both of those things.

**Rabbi:** We're glad you're still wrestling. We hope you'll still be wrestling after your operation.

**John:** You and me both.

[laughter]

**Rabbi:** I'm sure. Our guest today, John Pavlovitz, is the author of *If God Is Love, Don't Be a Jerk: Finding a Faith That Makes Us Better Humans*. You can learn more about John's work at his website, [johnpavlovitz.com](http://johnpavlovitz.com). John, thank you so much for talking with us on Spirituality and Health podcast.

**John:** What a joy to be with you. Thank you.

[music]

**Rabbi:** You've been listening to the Spirituality and Health podcast. If you liked this episode please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. If you enjoyed 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 Musings. 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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**[00:32:11] [END OF AUDIO]**

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