
THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER WASHINGTON
Imagine Israel Podcast:
Interview with Rabbi Esteban Gottfried

Robbie Gringras: Welcome to the Imagine Israel Podcast, brought to you by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Imagine Israel is the initiative of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, connecting Washingtonians to Israel and Israelis, through the lens of social change. With every Imagine Israel podcast, we get to meet innovative Israeli influences and changemakers, people addressing social and economic challenges in Israel. We'll hear from people whose lives and whose work intersect as they address issues in Israeli society. And I'm your host, Robbie Gringras, and I'm coming to you from Makom, the Israel Education Lab of The Jewish Agency for Israel.

So, one of the first times I met Rabbi Esteban Gottfried was at a Tel Aviv artists' soiree. All evening while the party was going on, there were two blokes sitting at a piano, tinkling on the keys and giggling to themselves. Everybody else was being very sociable and very darling and witty and arty, until at the end of the evening these two guys presented the results of their tinkering. It turns out that it was Esteban Gottfried accompanying on the piano while he and his mate Mendy launched into a Yiddish rendering of Bohemian Rhapsody. Yep, Bohemian Rhapsody in Yiddish, complete with a bit of a "Mama oy yo yo yoy." It was quite an event.

Twenty years later, one of the latest times that I've seen Esteban, he was involved in another surprising combination of seeming opposites. In the middle of secular Tel Aviv, on the branded-up Tel Aviv Port full of expensive restaurants and expensive clothes shops, there was Esteban

with a band and an audience of some 1,000 people, running a Friday- 1
night synagogue service outdoors, in front of the sea and the setting sun. 2
And just like 20 years ago and those strange wonderful combinations of 3
Yiddish and Freddie Mercury, this open-air service combined Israeli pop 4
songs and traditional liturgy, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, with the same 5
mischievously serious creativity that I'd seen some 20 years previously at 6
that strange party. 7

If you ever make it to Tel Aviv during the summer months, you should 8
go and participate in the Kabbalat Shabbat that Esteban's Beit Tefilah 9
Israeli run. And until that happens, you should go to ROUTES, Jewish 10
Day of Learning on November the 5th, because Rabbi Esteban Gottfried 11
will actually be there to introduce you to his unique approach to Jewish 12
pluralism in Israel. But in the meantime, let's meet him ourselves. 13

So, Esteban Gottfried. 14

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Hi. 15

Robbie Gringras: Lovely to meet you. 16

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Nice to meet you, too. 17

Robbie Gringras: So, "Esteban" strikes me as a very traditional Israeli name. 18

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Um-hum. 19

Robbie Gringras: I'm assuming you were born and bred in Jerusalem? 20

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Actually, the -- yeah, "Esteban" is not a Hebrew name. 21
My Hebrew name is Aharon. But, you know, a name, it's part of your 22
identity. And I grew up in Argentina and I made aliyah when I was 18. 23
And this 18 years that I was there, that was my name, and so that's the 24
name that I kept. 25

Robbie Gringras: And having come from Argentina, you started off studying to be 26
a rabbi? 27

-
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: No. Actually, when I was in Argentina, I was very involved in the Jewish life. I was already -- when I was 15, 16, 17 year-old, I was doing, like, rabbinical services in the provinces of Argentina. My rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Marshall Meyer -- there was so big the need for people to do -- that he took people like me, like, I was a kid --
- Robbie Gringras: Uh-huh.
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: -- and he sent me to lead services for High Holidays in different places. Even when I was 17, I already wrote a *machzor l'Rosh Hashana ve Yom Kippur*, for children, which is in use --
- Robbie Gringras: Sort of prayer book.
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Yeah, a prayer book for High Holidays, for children, which is used until now --
- Robbie Gringras: Wow.
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: -- 35 years later.
- Robbie Gringras: Only in Spanish?
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: It's in Spanish and Hebrew. Spanish and Hebrew.
- Robbie Gringras: In Spanish and Hebrew.
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Yes.
- Robbie Gringras: Okay. So, in Washington, I imagine, not many people use it yet.
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: No. No. I can bring one, like --
- So, if I say in Argentina -- it was -- my -- the logical move will be to go to a rabbinical school then when I was 18, as my brother did. My brother's a rabbi from *seminario* in Buenos Aires and then he moved to Brazil, and this is the rabbi of Sao Paolo, in a conservative community, for 25 years.
- And I remember myself sitting with my brother and trying to decide either to go to *seminario* to be a rabbi or to go to Israel to be an actor and

a writer and a screenwriter and film guy. 1

Robbie Gringras: Which is basically the same thing, isn't it? 2

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: I don't know. It was a very -- that was a dilemma when I 3
was 18, and the -- 4

Robbie Gringras: These were the choices before you. 5

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: -- and the decision was to come to Israel, because only in 6
Israel I can be free not to deal with Judaism and to do other things I like, 7
like theater and cinema and etc. So, that's what I did for 20 years; I 8
studied here theater and -- 9

Robbie Gringras: What, you were an actor here? 10

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Actor, director, and screenwriter, playwright. Yeah. I also 11
got even two of the Israeli Oscars, the Ophir prizes, for -- one as an actor, 12
one as a writer. 13

Robbie Gringras: What, two different films? 14

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: No, for the same film that we got seven awards. 15

Robbie Gringras: Wow. 16

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Two were mine, I mean, because I was also the 17
screenwriter and also the supporting actor. 18

Robbie Gringras: So, you're the Hollywood rabbi. 19

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: The -- yeah, in the Israeli '90s film arena, which was not 20
very big. 21

Robbie Gringras: So, to an extent you were leaving the Jewish life of Argentina, 22
coming to Israel, in order to get away from the Jewish stuff? 23

Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Not to get away, but there was a different need. But I 24
thought that when I came to Israel and I came with great Hebrew and it 25
was very easy for me -- but I didn't find Israel the Judaism that made me 26
come to Israel. 27

-
- a very influential organization and community in Tel Aviv, which is Beit Tefilah Israeli. 1
2
- And another funny thing is that I never decided to leave the theater or the film world. I just got absorbed into the Beit Tefilah and what is happening and what we are doing, that I didn't have time to do other projects. But I immersed -- 3
4
5
6
- Robbie Gringras: Evolved. 7
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Yes. Yes. 8
- Robbie Gringras: I'm sure that many people in Washington may well have even seen you or sang with you for Friday night in the summer, when there's the Kabbalat Shabbat at the docks at the *namal* in Tel Aviv. How did that start and this idea that we're looking in the direction not of Jerusalem but of this beautiful sunset? 9
10
11
12
13
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Well, you have the answer in your question, because if you have to decide to look to Jerusalem, which is the parking lot, or to look to the beautiful sunset on the Mediterranean, I think you don't have much choices for -- 14
15
16
17
- Robbie Gringras: Something of a no-brainer. 18
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: If you want to be inspired to pray, I mean, the -- I mean, you can pray also facing the parking lot, but it's a different feeling. 19
20
- Robbie Gringras: Yeah, blame G-d that the sea's on the wrong side. 21
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Yeah. No, it's -- actually, it's a funny story how we -- there're two different things: one is how we started to be in the port, and the second story's what it became: a phenomenon and a possibility that you can create and you can live and celebrate Judaism in the open space, in Israel, in a liberal, progressive, Israeli, authentic way, without apologizing and being non-halachic, non -- 22
23
24
25
26
27
-

-
- Robbie Gringras: Non-orthodox. 1
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: -- non-orthodox, and to see also that if you do it with 2
sincerity and for yourself, it speaks to hundreds and thousands of people. 3
I mean, we were amazed about the response of the -- when we came for 4
the first time to the port, we just wanted to go out like a once-in-a-time 5
thing that -- let's do a prayer outside. We didn't think that we're going to 6
change the Tel Aviv way of celebrating Shabbat. We just wanted, for us, 7
to have a nice experience of praying outside, davening with this beautiful 8
scenery. 9
We started 150 people, and we ended this Kabbalat Shabbat, like, 300 or 10
more, because people that went by and -- 11
- Robbie Gringras: Just passersby. 12
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Passersby. And they feel, "Okay, this speaks to me. This 13
is my language. This is my" -- "this kind of Shabbat, I will go." And 14
that's how the first time that -- it was 11 years ago. The first time we did 15
our one time only Kabbalat Shabbat at the port, the manager of the port, 16
the director of the port, came to us after the service and said, "Can you 17
do it every week, please? Because this is" -- "we need" -- 18
- Robbie Gringras: It resonated. 19
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: And that's how it started. Now we are doing for three 20
months of -- even four months, from June to September in the port, every 21
week, with 1,000 people every Kabbalat Shabbat, about. And other 22
places they started to ask us to -- "Can you do it also for us," in 23
Herzliyah, in Yehud, in Ashdod, in different cities. Also families that 24
they want to create their community based on this way, and also 25
municipalities that they want to offer to their -- 26
- Robbie Gringras: Their residents. 27

-
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: -- their residents this kind of experience of Shabbat
outside and to --
- Robbie Gringras: Because for those who haven't attended, what's particularly
striking about these services in Israel is that they are not orthodox
services. There are men and women sitting together. And the prayers,
some of them come from traditional liturgy and some of them are Israeli
pop songs turned into prayers or rediscovered as prayer. And when you
think about it --
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Or reframed as prayers.
- Robbie Gringras: Reframed. That's nice.
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Yeah.
- Robbie Gringras: And this is happening in a public space. I'm thinking there are
really only two other public spaces I know where public prayer takes
place, and that's at the Kotel and up at *Har Meron*, the grave of Shimon
bar Yochai at Lag b'Omer. And then in Tel Aviv there's Jewish prayer;
it's not properly secular, it's not properly orthodox --
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Um-hum.
- Robbie Gringras: -- and that's unusual in Israel, isn't it, that it doesn't fit into a box?
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Yes. I think part of the trick and part of the appeal of this
is that you cannot put it in a specific box. And we have very religious
people that share with us that they have a really uplifting experience, and
also very secular people. They share the same service. They are very,
very different in the way -- their outlook of the world and theology, and
they share the same uplifting, inspiring, spiritual experience of receiving
the Shabbat together. This is something that we didn't aim to this, but this
is what you get when you dialogue with the people who are coming.
And I think that the most important thing is the underground invitation,

- that it's always there: *Chevre*, let's do something meaningful for us, we 1
 have an hour together, let's do something meaningful. And I think this 2
 message passes through and people -- they say, "Okay, I'm here and I'm 3
 singing." And some, they will sing the same song as a prayer, some sing 4
 the song as a Yiddishkeit thing, and some would sing to teach his 5
 daughter or son that there's a connection with something, and some will 6
 sing because it's fun to sing. And it's spiritual also to sing just -- 7
- Robbie Gringras: Yes. And how are you going to bring the Israeli sunset to 8
 Washington? 9
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: With a PowerPoint. 10
- Robbie Gringras: That's great. So, Esteban Gottfried, you're going to be in 11
 Washington very soon. All the details will be at the end of this podcast 12
 and together with links. And all that remains to say, thank you very much 13
 and have a lovely time in Washington. 14
- Rabbi Esteban Gottfried: Thank you. I'm looking forward. Bye, Washington. 15
- Robbie Gringras: If you enjoyed this preview of changemaker Rabbi Esteban 16
 Gottfried and his incredible work promoting Jewish pluralism in Israel, 17
 come and meet him in person along with a great deal of other inspiring 18
 speakers, at The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington's ROUTES. 19
 It's a Jewish day of learning. It's on Sunday, November the 5th, at 20
 George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. You can choose from 21
 over 20 thought-provoking sessions designed to nourish your spiritual 22
 growth and stimulate your intellectual journey. 23
 There'll be acclaimed instructors tackling tough subject matters such as 24
 using media to open difficult conversations about Israel, and the 25
 emotional impact of the Six Day War, and developing a new narrative 26
 for our relationship with Israel. These are sort of some of the titles. It's an 27

enlightening day that you will not want to miss. You can register now by 1
visiting shalomdc.org/routes. That is shalomdc.org/, R-O-U-T-E-S. It's 2
not the tree one, it's the journey one. 3

And in general, you should know that The Jewish Federation of Greater 4
Washington provides financial support to three religious streams in 5
Israel: the reform and the conservative and the modern-orthodox 6
movements. It's a central component of our commitment to pluralism and 7
inclusion. Among the programs supported by this funding are youth 8
movements, leadership training, bar and bar mitzvah programs, 9
elementary-school networks, activities for young adults, and more and 10
more and more. It's a central value for the Jewish Federation that Jews 11
worldwide feel that their styles of Jewish expression can find a home in 12
Israel. 13

And Rabbi Esteban Gottfried is in the business of building a new home, 14
an additional home, for an Israeli Jewish style of expression. That in 15
effect is the name of his synagogue: Israeli Home of Prayer, Beit Tefilah 16
Israeli. 17

And thank you for listening. This podcast, part of the Imagine Israel 18
initiative, is brought to you by The Jewish Federation of Greater 19
Washington and hosted and produced by me, Robbie Gringras of 20
Makom. You can find us on shalomdc.org/imagineisraelpodcast. 21

(End of podcast) 22