

## Americas Table

[00:00:02] So this is different. We come back to that one place where all humans working toward the same goal in order to get there we have those courageous conversations and have permission to ask those questions that perhaps some people are uncomfortable asking for, even assuming we have so much that unites us. And so sometimes it takes a little bit of that act of kindness and togetherness to bring that out. And I think that's what America is all about.

**Linda** [00:00:35] Hi, everybody, it's Linda. My podcast today is promoting an event that is very near and dear to my heart because it is one that I hope will help bring us closer together in these post-election days, weeks, months, etc.. As we come to grips with the outcome of the presidential election and the divisions that seem to be getting wider and wider in our country. So on September 28th, at 8:00 p.m. on KPRC, Channel two here in beautiful Houston, Texas, there will be a television special called America's Table, which I have the honor and privilege of. Executive producer and co hosting Americas Table is an initiative from the American Jewish Committee, the Houston chapter and its community of conscience. And my guests today is Dorit Aaron, who is the president of AJC Houston, and James Harris, who is the director of Diversity and Inclusion and Supplier Diversity at HEB, which is one of the main sponsors of America's table. So we're going to talk with them about the mission, why it's important. And they both also share some really poignant personal perspectives on why they feel that this is such an important mission where we are in our country right now and how we can move forward together. So enjoy our conversation.

**Linda** [00:02:15] Dorit and James, thank you both so much for taking the time to talk with us today. We are in quite a moment as we are recording this podcast right now. We still don't know who the next president of the United States will be, although we're getting close to finding out the whole point of America's table. That will be broadcast on KPRC coming up here in a few weeks, right after Thanksgiving is to help bring us together. So Dorit as the as the president of AJC, Houston, tell our audience why. First of all, what America's table is and why it's so important that that it happened at this moment in time.

**Dorit** [00:03:06] Well, thank you, Linda, first of all, for having us on and for realizing how important this endeavor is to our city. America's table is a idea that came very naturally from AJC core roots of what's good. So what is good for everyone, as we say from one so many, there is one which is the way the American Jewish Committee sees its work. We can't we can't survive as Jews. We can't survive any particular minority if there is an equality and inclusiveness in the country that we live.

**Dorit** [00:03:43] And America's table is an idea that started with our founding fathers and the people who came here with the pilgrims, we are giving thanks for what we have so much to be grateful for. And so we took it on ourselves to say, wait, we are so grateful. Let's include the community celebration for when we started the community of Conscience last year here in Houston, where we brought together faith leaders of all kinds to sit together at the table. And what's interesting is if you look back at great people who've said great things about this country and Ronald Reagan, I know probably not who you would suspect said a great change in America begins at the dinner table. And so we want to have a virtual space, literally and figuratively, for everyone at our table.

**Linda** [00:04:41] I love that. I absolutely love that. And so when this took place as a live event, you would bring on people of different faiths to read certain inspirational messages, also to share immigrant stories of how people came here. And all of this is going to take place as now part of an hour long television program, since we cannot gather in person thanks to covid. And now that we're going to do this as a television program, of course, I want to thank KPRC for donating the air time and want to thank HEB as a primary sponsor of this event. James Harris HEB is so well known in the Houston community for so many endeavors, so many initiatives where it is constantly supporting and giving back. Why did HEB choose to support America's table and this specific initiative?

**James** [00:05:47] That is a very good question. Well, before I need to answer it, and I too would like to thank you Linda for having the forthought to host this and certainly AJC you guys for

coming up with the idea, is really a convergence or confluence of ideas. HEB some we for great support in the community. While this true comes with great responsibility and we can see ourselves in the space of who is the great convener, it is an opportunity where people come together to have discussions and healthy dialog. We will have differences of opinions and so the binding agent is food. So this kind of brings everything together to sit down, have those conversations, have those reflections. So for us, it fits hand and glove inside of what we do from our charitable giving and giving and supporting community HEB not just inside the 4 walls we bring in our customers through a shopping experience long before they come to the store to make the decision to shop in HEB as a motivating factor and be where we are in the community. Engagement gives a report to them. We saw what we believe is what the decision making points of who they choose to shop.

**Linda** [00:07:10] So as you as you look at where we are in. What's going on, and as I said, right now, we're still there waiting for the votes to come in from Pennsylvania, turned around to look at my at my TV. When you when you think about where we are, there's so much anxiety and angst right now about how we're going to move forward together as a country. There have been so many divisions, not just among friends, but also among family members. And we seem to have not been able to find a way to converse with each other when it comes across political divisions. What what James, what are what are your thoughts, particularly as a as a black man in this country who is in a in a corporate position? Obviously, you're you're doing very well for yourself and for your family. And yet you are a black man in America. And the issue of race has certainly come up many times in recent history as we are grappling with all of this in the midst of this momentous election. I'm curious as to what your thoughts are on a personal level and and what kinds of conversations you are having with your sphere of influence.

**James** [00:08:38] Sure. Thank you for that. And you're right, I can't divorce myself and the fact that I am an African-American man, which is like a double whammy. If you take a look at the social unrest in the community, not just in Houston, but in the entire country. And so I think that gives rise for concern for me. For those who look like me, I have a son. And so the list goes on. So there is an added responsibility, a burden to shoulder in this conversation. But this is a conversation that nevertheless needs to be had. I believe that many issues in the world today, whether it be in a professional setting or in your business or in your sororities, fraternities, whatever group really we really just down to communication. Unfortunately, some people try to divide us by there's a protagonist. Antagonist is a good guy and a bad guy in every scenario, every movie, every story that you read.

**James** [00:09:41] But nothing brings people together having a common enemy. And that any common enemy is, is that we have to come together and the enemy is survival in this world. We are stronger together than we are apart. And so when you take a look at some of the things that we've gone through this before, where you start talking about, you intentionally everything and breaks down to intentionality and you intentionally have a conversation with someone that's different than you and that's healthy. So you will get into based upon your religious your social preferences or political purposes in the season. Right now, you talk about so many things that you may differ on, but if you continue the conversation, you end up in a place of things that you actually can come together on. What we really want each of us is to have a way to earn an honest living, to support our family, to buy the American dream, the house and the car, to get your kids through college so they to do better in the next generation than what you've done to have health benefits. So in case you have some long term or short term illness, we all want those things. So once we dismiss with how we're different, we come back to the one place where all humans working toward the same goal in order to get there and have to have those courageous conversations and have permission to ask those questions that perhaps some people are uncomfortable in asking or even answering, what we have to get to that place, and not about how we're different, how we come together, what.

**Linda** [00:11:25] I love everything you just said. And it is so central to the mission of this podcast. Our one of our taglines is permission to speak, the courage to listen. So we have to give each other permission to speak and to have the courage to listen. And Dorit I know that the work that that you're doing it at AJC and with America's table and you talked about it, about how the Jewish community cannot survive and thrive unless it embraces all of the communities around it. And it's the bottom line is we are part of the human race. And so and you talked about just briefly

before we even started recording, you talked about when you first came to this country. So tell our audience a little bit about your personal story and how that plays into. Work that that you're doing now at AJC and with America stable.

**Dorit** [00:12:19] Thank you for that question, Linda, because I think it's really, really speaks to why I'm here and why this table is America's table is so important and how it literally embodies everything that I believe and everything that I've lived for since I can remember. When I grew, I was born in Israel. And when I was five and a half years old, my father, who was a general surgeon, was sent to Ethiopia to help with training the first group of Ethiopians, surgeons who came who were trained in Italy. And so we moved there most of my childhood. And so you can see that my worldview was different than most anyone, you know, from that point on. And my trajectory coming to the United States let me to go step three step further back. My father is a Holocaust survivor, and so he survived the Holocaust, where it is the ultimate racism, the ultimate in the horrific things we managed to do. When he came to Israel as a refugee, he met my mother, who was already there and never once had a negative things to say about anyone.

**Dorit** [00:13:35] Always saw the world is half full and continuous. So it gave me a world view of what's possible. That's not what's not possible, which is incredible if you think about it we were the United States as immigrants, as Jews. And I didn't realize it. No one told me that I was different. So I didn't act like I was different, even though I didn't really know the language. I had a horrible accent and my mother certainly didn't know the language. My father's six languages came from the great generation. But we we we lived our life as if we are Americans. We were very proud of our roots. We never seemed to be in conflict. In my mind. It was only in conflict on the things that I read, in the stories of others. So through my whole life, even through my work, my professional work, by the way, is I'm an occupational therapist and I specialize in hand therapy. And I have done much of my work in underserved and underdeveloped countries in areas.

**Dorit** [00:14:45] And all of it is building bridges between communities, between different peoples with different cultures, different beliefs. And so when I was introduced to AJC there non partisan, very pluralistic wrap your arms around everyone because ignorance is the biggest enemy. It is everyone's enemy. The minute somebody said I wish it was and said, oh, I don't know him, I don't like him very much, I should get to know him.

**Dorit** [00:15:17] And I really believe that. I believe them once you are. It's exactly what Jane said. Once we share our humanity, then the ignorance and the fear. Maybe it's fear of the unknown. There's so much it doesn't look like you doesn't believe like you, doesn't like you. But you know what? We all eat. We all love our children. We all love our families. We have so much that unites us. And so sometimes it takes a little bit of that act of kindness and togetherness to bring that out. And I think that's what America's Table is all about. And that's why it speaks so much to me and that's my work for AJC, feels like a gift to me because that's the idea is to reach out and touch someone. It's easy to touch someone that's just like you. It's not so easy to have someone who's different. And hopefully everybody will come to our America's Table to especially since it's going to be KPRC and so easy to see.

**Linda** [00:16:15] Yes, it's so easy to see. And I love your story and thank you for for really going into the detail and sharing with us your your family's journey. And, you know, the bottom line is we we all have a story of how we got here. And and, James, as you so beautifully said, we all want the same thing. We all want a quality of life and to make a good living and to contribute and leave this world a better place for our children and our grandchildren. When I got involved with this, because Dorit your your sister, Tali, came to me and asked me to co-chair the America's table for this year pre covid when we thought it was still going to be a live event. And now, as we've been saying, it has turned into this hour long television special that is going to be aired on KPRC.

**Dorit** [00:17:14] Linda, we have you to thank for that you made lemonade out of lemons. Well, thank you so much.

**Linda** [00:17:23] Thank you. I'm excited to be executive producing and cohosting it. And it's it's a passion of mine, this whole topic that we're talking about. And I want to share something that I took off of your website Dorit the AJC website about the community of conscience for those

who really want to understand what it is and to join the mission. And I'm going to read what it says here.

**Linda** [00:17:49] So it says, for those who believe, as we do, that our liberty and aspirations depend on the noble principles articulated by President Lincoln and defended by generations of brave Americans since the founding of this republic, our call could not be more urgent. We invite all who share our concern for the future of this great country, our appreciation of its fundamental strengths, our conviction that it must overcome its challenges and our resolve to honor the American spirit to join us in the community of conscience.

**Linda** [00:18:29] I don't think those words could be more appropriate on a day like today or at a moment like this when we are testing the very fabric of our democracy and whether and how it will hold. I firmly believe that it will. Our institutions are strong, but it's we, the people who make the democracy what it is. And until and unless we find a way to continue to be a part of that community of conscience and focus on our commonality and what binds us together, we're going to be OK. And I believe that we will, James. And I know that you do, too.

**James** [00:19:20] This is really interesting. I listen to certainly a beautiful statement that you read here. It really gets down to service, each of us. We're commissioned to be servants from the biblical aspect. And I'll just use this for a brief moment. Politics is in this season and this moment is that when the politicians are elected by the people to serve for the good of the people where you exist, to serve the role I think you are in great shape. When you think the role exists to serve you, then it's time to leave the role. And so I issued that all for all politicians today. Remember, why you're there is to serve the people, not the particular party, not a particular leader or a particular agenda. It is not the agenda of the people who elected you to be in that place from the.

**Linda** [00:20:23] Wow. That is that gave me chills. I think that pretty much pretty much sums it up. Dorit, what would you like to leave our audience with as we wrap up our conversation and urge them to join the community of conscience? I mean, how how would they go about doing that?

**Dorit** [00:20:45] Well, I have so much to say. I can't believe that we're ending but go for it during during our our live show, during our live on, I believe it's November 28th at 8:00 Central Time on Channel two. KPRC can be strange because we see a lot of different ways. There will be a way to sign up to the community conscience, which will put your name and email into our cue to start receiving some information and we'll get more information about how to be more involved. But I think I think for now, I'd like to leave the idea that we should all sit at our own Thanksgiving table. I'm sorry that we can't invite anyone to our own table, but there will be a reader that comes along with this America's table. This reader is going to be available to anyone who wants it to be distributed to all the HISD schools. There's a beautiful letter with it from our mayor about what it means, what, what we are thankful for and why we should all be sitting together at the table. I urge all the families that are getting together to not only ask everyone what is grateful for, but maybe take some lines from the reader and read it together and to read together the principles of the community of conscience.

**Dorit** [00:22:14] I want to read one thing to leave you, to leave you with, OK, join us at The Spirit of Pluralism as we promote mutual respect, not to merit tolerance as the standard for not mere tolerance, as the standard for enlightened coexistence. And there's so much here that they can read. So I urge them to get that and join us where they're on their own with us.

**Linda** [00:22:41] Well, and of course, during the year, we're going to be promoting this over the next few weeks on the podcast. And we'll have our show notes, will have links to AJC website to HEB or HEB. He's got so many wonderful initiatives that it is involved in, not only with this this particular one. So our audience will have an opportunity to go on the Web and see all the different ways that they can get involved in in and just helping us all be better humans and and lifting each other up. This is a very contentious time that we're living in. These next few weeks and months and months are not going to be easy. And while we all want the same things, I think what we have to remember is that however this election turns out that there will be an entire other half of the country that is mourning the loss that they are experiencing and feeling. And those who are on the other side should reach out. And and we need to try to heal our wounds. We need to try to

heal our wounds and find a way to come together. And America's table is is one way to do that. Dorit, You look like you wanted to say something there.

**Dorit** [00:23:57] For now, I always look like I have something to say.

**Linda** [00:24:03] OK, so Dorit Aaron and James Harris, thank you both so very much for your leadership and your support of America's table and the community of conscience and wishing you both a wonderful Thanksgiving and holiday season. And I will see you soon. So thank you so much and take care.

**Dorit** [00:24:25] Linda, On behalf of AJC. Thank you so much for all that you've done to make this happen.

**Linda** [00:24:30] So my pleasure. It is my pleasure and my honor. It is my pleasure and my honor. Thank you both so much.

**James** [00:24:36] Thank you.

**Linda** [00:24:38] Again, America's table is going to air on KPRC, TV Channel two here in Houston on Saturday, November twenty eight at 8:00 p.m. Central. That's the Saturday after Thanksgiving. And if you don't live in the Houston area, not to worry, you will be able to access the stream on click to Houston dot com. Just go to the show notes for all the links. Thanks so much for watching and listening. Please be safe. Be well. Don't forget to give each other permission to speak and have the courage to listen with an open mind. We'll see you next time.