



ALANA NEWHOUSE: JOURNALISM, JEWISH IDENTITY AND SOCIETY

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HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah with a Point of View, produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host, and Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles. You've tuned into a Bully Pulpit special series for Symposium 1, which the Hebrew Union College convened in New York City in November of 2016. Symposium 1 was organized around the theme of crafting Jewish life in a complex religious landscape. We at the Bully Pulpit had the privilege of interviewing some of the outstanding thinkers who participated in Symposium 1, and we think you'll enjoy the conversation.

It's my pleasure to welcome Alana Newhouse. Alana has contributed to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *New York Magazine*, *Slate* and others. But she is probably best known as the Founder and Editor in Chief of *Tablet* magazine. Alana, thank you for taking the time to join us. It's a pleasure to have you.

NEWHOUSE: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

HOLO: I wanted to ask you—what was the need that you felt you wanted to serve or fulfil with creating *Tablet*?

NEWHOUSE: Well the need that I think we wanted to fill when we started has changed over time. Originally, the idea was that we wanted to create a really smart magazine that engaged with questions of Jewish identity, Jewish history, and Jewish culture for a particularly curious and engaged audience. I think we thought we were going to be a third or fourth read for most people. And this was going to be a very highly sophisticated audience—whatever their backgrounds. What happened then was that we started *Tablet* in 2009. In the ensuing years, both Jewish journalistic outlets and also general interest journalistic outlets have been very challenged. And it's not a secret that the journalism industry is in a real state of tumult and stress. And very many of those outlets found their resources cut and their ability to cover Jewish communities was compromised. So, all of a sudden, *Tablet* was just supposed to be this sort of small...

HOLO: Boutique.

NEWHOUSE: Boutique, yes. That's actually—it's a very good term for it. It ended up becoming an outlet for a much larger audience. Now, at this point across the world who either don't have coverage of Jewish – their own Jewish community that they see as reflective or who

want to understand stuff about other Jewish communities and want to really be able to process what's going on globally – how global and American politics, and identity questions are affecting Jews around the world.

HOLO: I can imagine and see the shift you're speaking about with respect to their demand. Did that actually shape your editorial choices and content inclusion?

NEWHOUSE: It did because—just to take one example—I always wanted to cover politics. But the way that I wanted to cover politics and I thought we'd cover politics was in some very sort of 60,000 feet kind of bird's eye view. But now we ended up having to cover politics on the ground. We have to cover communities and the effects of political movements on those communities.

The example I'll give is France in the last few years. We have a wonderful writer from France who we thought was going to write one nice piece for us about Jewish life in France. That piece turned into a five part series. Which then, after the various issues that happened in France, ended up becoming a much more regular feature because now, all of a sudden, both Jews inside of France—and also Jews outside of France—want to know, “What does this mean?” So that's just one example.

HOLO: And they're letting you know, meaning *Tablet* gets wind of the fact that there's a French readership.

NEWHOUSE: Yes. Yes. I mean Google controls everything about all of our lives now, so we all know our readership. So yeah, it can tell you we have ex-Pat readers, mainly English speaking. But in France, actually, it's a lot of native French Jewish readers. But there's a nice ex-Pat readership, for example, in a place like Hong Kong.

HOLO: Yeah, I can imagine. Right. Southeast Asia is all Jewishly Anglo.

NEWHOUSE: Yes. And also in Israel.

HOLO: Right. Of course. Lots of Anglos in Israel. So you started off online. I'm very intrigued by your characterization of how you imagined *Tablet* would be designed and taken, and we landed on that word boutique which implies a certain kind of sophistication of the readership, and depth on the part of the journalism or comments or cultural reporting. I agree with you in the sense that I receive it the way you intend it to be received. And, all the more reason, I was struck by your interview with your own podcast (Hebrew) shalom where you kicked off the print edition. In that podcast, as I recall, your interviewers, your staff, your team asked you—why print. Just like I asked you why *Tablet* at all.

But you seem to be saying that digital is rather fleeting. It's got a – you almost implied a certain superficiality and ephemeral quality. We all know it's ephemeral but – but it didn't need to necessarily be shallow. And certainly *Tablet* isn't received that way. But that you were reaching for something even deeper or more durable somehow in the print both conceptually

and physically. But I was, frankly, struck by that and I continue to be struck by it by your comments right now because I felt like all the qualities that you were trying to achieve in print had already been the direction of *Tablet* online.

NEWHOUSE: First of all, I'm grateful. It's one of those funny psychological tricks. That statement actually says more about you than it does about *Tablet*. Not that I think – not that I hear you say that I think *Tablet*'s digital presence is not sophisticated. It is. But the absorption of a digital product says a lot about the person who's doing the absorbing. For example, the *New York Times* can put out a very sophisticated article but tons of people will receive it and distill it down to its dumbest meaning, right?

HOLO: The form shapes the content's reception.

NEWHOUSE: Absolutely. And the platform is important here. And so, the example that I think is important now to understand about the internet, is one of the things we're seeing as a consequence of the election, of last week's election, is a conversation in and outside of Facebook about Facebook's effect and influence on the election. And one of the things that actually has come out is that, on Facebook, there's no way to differentiate between fake news sites—which were created in this particular instance largely by people who put out news that was seen as supportive of Donald Trump's campaign—and “real news sites.” Whatever those even are anymore. The question is if people can't distinguish anymore because they're getting everything through Facebook and it says it's the, you know, the Chicago Morning News...

HOLO: Right. And they're not from Chicago.

NEWHOUSE: Right. They just assume it's a legitimate outlet. The internet doesn't have rules by which people can discern what are legitimate outlets and what aren't. I think increasingly, particularly younger generations of people may not be able to discern.

HOLO: There's no rules for print, hard copy either. There's only reputation and the settling of time.

NEWHOUSE: Absolutely. That's true. Except the, I think the barrier for entry is higher.

HOLO: Just because it's more expensive?

NEWHOUSE: Yes.

HOLO: Certainly wasn't true in the heyday of political newspapers when there was six different...

NEWHOUSE: Completely. And it's not – I mean when – you know, I used to work at The Forward and when the Yiddish Forward started the Yiddish Forward started in 1897 and there were 13 other Yiddish daily newspapers.

HOLO: Right.

NEWHOUSE: Right? So I mean think about – it’s true on some level that the digital marketplace is mimicking some of the features of the vibrant print market before it sort of settled into what we know of as American journalism. That said, I don’t necessarily see it moving in the same direction. It might.

HOLO: It might. It might not. You made an interesting comment, pregnant with irony, when you were charmingly reflecting on a naïve beginning of *Tablet* imagining an internet of free encounter of ideas. And the irony, I’m not sure what the intent of the irony was, but I received it in opposite fashion, meaning I thought that’s exactly what happened. We get Alt Right. We get Breitbart. Which is the free encounter of ideas and likeminded. You use these words, and I was thinking exactly to our, depending on your position I suppose, sometimes frustration. Which gets to the rules you were speaking about, and the lack thereof, and the cost of, I suppose, freedom.

NEWHOUSE: There’s a real question here about journalism. Right? Because *Tablet’s* a journalistic outlet. And we talked a lot today about the Pew study of American Jews. Pew does lots of different studies, and they actually did a study of millennials and news consumption about a year and a half ago. To read it is to want to give yourself an aneurysm because you have tons of kids who literally have no idea how news gets produced. And they say things like, “News is my right. It should be free because it’s my right as a citizen to know what’s going on in the world.” And you want to look at them and say, “Right, okay. Who’s paying the person who’s standing in the middle of Syria to bring you the news?” And they don’t make that leap. Journalism, when done right, is an expensive proposition.

HOLO: Indeed.

NEWHOUSE: And the question then becomes who’s paying for it. And if no one is paying for it, the chances are it’s not very good. And if someone’s paying for it with a very active agenda, it’s also important for you to understand what that is. So, for my money, I feel that a future in which we return to some of the values of American journalism in its heyday is going to be essential to American democracy.

HOLO: And it’s not just the cost of structure. It’s also the cost of expertise. There are certain professions, I think, that lend themselves to the expertise not being self-evident.

NEWHOUSE: Yeah.

HOLO: You go to a doctor, you get why you need an expert.

NEWHOUSE: Right.

HOLO: There are other professions which you kind of think you could do it.

NEWHOUSE: That's a very good point. Yeah.

HOLO: And certainly the digital revolution has promoted that attitude with respect to journalism.

NEWHOUSE: Absolutely.

HOLO: And so that's expensive, too. But it's an invisible expense. And if you don't take the time, or care to know, you won't want to pay it.

NEWHOUSE: Right. That's true of journalism. Absolutely it's a very, very good point. It's also true of any kind of media product. So, on my way over here, a young woman buttonholed me and said, "I love *Tablet*, but you know, when are you guys going to publish good fiction? Like when are you going to publish fiction? I wish there was fiction every week." And my answer to her was quite clear, which is when we have funding to pay fiction writers legitimate fees for fiction. And, you know, her argument back to me, which was right, was "I'm sure a lot of fiction writers would publish for nothing." But I don't want that. I don't think that's actually the economy that we should be creating.

HOLO: Understood. And I think in other fields, like music or similarly, it's really – in this case, as you said, the medium and forum really does matter. So your point's well taken.

(Break)

HOLO: Shifting gears a bit, I happened to be in San Francisco, and I went to the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. And they had a Roman Vishniac show. Then, coincidentally, I read your 2010 article, "A Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac." Perhaps, because of your article, the show had already incorporated some of the more critical lens—forgive the pun—on Vishniac, so that my first encounter, aside from the book "A Vanished World," which you cited and we all know—my first encounter had already been rather nuanced thanks to the San Francisco Contemporary Jewish Museum.

But your article still was really fertile, and I enjoyed reading it. And I wanted to ask you about it. In particular I wanted to pick up on a quote. The subject, of course, was Vishniac. But the person, the protagonist of your piece, was a woman named Mya Benton. And she digs into Vishniac's past and his oeuvre, and she finds all these inconsistencies and digs more. It was very, very interesting.

One of the triggers as presented in the article that caused her to question the narrative as presented by Vishniac's "A Vanished World" was the following. She says, "I thought to myself, this is an odd publication," referring to "A Vanished World." "You would think that right after the Holocaust they would choose images that readers could identify with. But these images are most other." And I remember reading that quote and thinking, you know, I wouldn't think that. I would actually expect what I got, which was the romanticized other that I didn't

actually have to deal with in real life, but that I could fetishize and romanticize and put in my top drawer—or better yet—on my coffee table. So I wanted to hear your thoughts on that.

NEWHOUSE: You're right. And your impulse is the impulse that created a mythic circle around Vishniac and his work. Mya's very, very brilliant. Part of the reason why Jewish life is Shakespearian is because of characters like Mya who essentially have their own ideas and go off and go to Harvard and decide that they're going to be photography maidens—and then all of a sudden remember about this random book and decide to write about it in a paper. And what she ended up doing was upending an entire...

HOLO: Myth?

NEWHOUSE: An entire myth. That myth is not only about Vishniac. It's also about American Jews. We wanted to create an idea of the shtetl as poor and religious. Because you're right, we wanted to make them other because then their fate wasn't a threat. If what happened in World War II happened to a community that was very, very diverse and actually looked scarily like our own, then all of a sudden we have to reckon with what – where the threat came from. Now, I happen to think that there are a lot of differences that don't have to do with that. But I understand what the impulse was.

The really interesting thing for me about the Vishniac piece was, you know, both Mya and I got enormous amounts of hate mail from all – from everyone. From religious Jews. From non-religious Jews. From Jews who identify themselves as poor Jews, to Jews who identify themselves as “rich” Jews. I mean you never know what any of this stuff means.

HOLO: Right.

NEWHOUSE: Mya and I did a bunch of events together, and the interesting piece was the people who come up to you who say that the Hasidic communities in America today are recreating the lost world of European Jewry. And you want to look at them and say, “Not really. Actually if you really want to recreate...”

HOLO: When they make that comment they're granting them a modicum of legitimacy. They're actually conceding something.

NEWHOUSE: They're saying this is what European Jewish life...

HOLO: And these are non-Orthodox people looking at them and saying they're important because they do this service.

NEWHOUSE: Yes. There are also Orthodox Jews who say this is why we live this way.

HOLO: Yes. No, I'm familiar with the claim.

NEWHOUSE: Right. So, and the idea is no, actually. Here is the way that you can recreate much of Polish Jewish life—is if me and my Hasidic sister sat on my stoop on Shabbos morning and she was on her way to shul and I sat there with some socialist pamphlet and a cigarette. That’s how we would recreate Polish Jewish life. It was politically and socioeconomically and religiously diverse. And all the Jews lived together in many communities. Now, obviously, there were small towns that were much more homogenous. Particularly in the big cities, that was not the case.

HOLO: And the proportions of them – I mean a lot of people lived in (Hebrew) too. But a lot of people didn’t in large...

NEWHOUSE: Right.

HOLO: So it’s ...

NEWHOUSE: And so then the question is why did American Jews need to do that? Right? Why did American Jews need to see European Jewry as very different from them? And I think in the post Holocaust years, the answer is completely legitimate and understandable, which is we didn’t want their fate to be a threat to us. And that makes sense. Doesn’t make it anymore true though.

HOLO: Yeah, it’s a rather generous interpretation of why we wanted it that way, I think. Anyone of us can understand why we would be skittish about confronting the prospect of real victimization and pain. I have a feeling it’s a little bit cushier. It has to do with the convenience of bracketing and putting under a glass, or in this case a book, a kind of pain that you can get points for, without actually having to pay for. I think that’s implicit in a lot of American Jewish critique of our over reliance on the Holocaust to build identity as well.

NEWHOUSE: I think that that’s a really interesting argument to make about contemporary Jews. My sense is the Jews that lived in this country during and after World War II—even those who were incredibly lucky—they just saw, basically, millions of Jews murdered in the most ghastly way possible. You have to be terrified. It doesn’t matter that you live here.

I think you’re right that maybe I’m being overly generous, but I also think it’s okay to err on the side of generosity of those people, because I don’t know what it would be like to live at a time when millions of Jews just got murdered and an entire world just watched it. And you have to wonder whether or not you’re next.

HOLO: I appreciate the generous impulse. And I appreciate the – the gentle admonition as well.

NEWHOUSE: It’s not. I mean...

HOLO: No, no. No, it’s – but it’s well – it’s well taken. It’s well taken. Truly. But when was it published. It wasn’t published until the ‘70s.

NEWHOUSE: No, actually the first Vishniac book was published right after the war. And the other thing I will say though that I think is where you are – I mean you’re on the money about contemporary Jewish life now. I think you’re also onto something in the direct post-war decade, and even during the war, which is part of the reason why Vishniac curated his work in the way that he did—because that’s what was going to make money.

HOLO: Right.

NEWHOUSE: You weren’t going to generate – you weren’t going to raise money running a bunch of pictures of rich Jews.

HOLO: Again, to be generous, it was to raise money, not to make money.

NEWHOUSE: Correct.

HOLO: So that’s important.

NEWHOUSE: It was for the joint, and it was to raise money to help get Jews out.

HOLO: Right. Right.

NEWHOUSE: So, you know, I mean a lie is a hard word to use about this. But was it a falsification of the picture of Eastern European Jewish life? It was.

HOLO: Was it a pious falsification is the question. You know, this is a genre in ancient literature that we have, and we know that there’s a legitimacy in the course of human events over time that is recognized in certain pious falsifications and pious – if the piety is deemed sincere and if it’s not gratuitous. I think we would agree it’s not gratuitous.

NEWHOUSE: Right.

HOLO: And certainly the consumers of the book were sincere.

NEWHOUSE: I also think that a lot of the consumers of the book were actually Holocaust survivors. I mean Mya’s grandparents...

HOLO: I wasn’t accounting for it. And that’s, again, duly noted.

NEWHOUSE: I mean that’s – but what’s interesting is is that then you have an American Jewish community where it’s all mixed up. Right?

HOLO: Right.

NEWHOUSE: And, you know, you have a lot of American Jews who watch this thing happen. Tell me though, can you take me into how this works in contemporary Jewish life? How you see it working?

HOLO: Well, first of all, it's not working anymore because that's how it's working. At some point, you know, I don't know if we want to peg this on the millennials because a lot of the discussion goes millennial, and it doesn't mean much to me. And I don't have a handle on it, although people claim to. But clearly it's not working anymore. I think, by the way, an important, important message is that in my experience as a Jewish scholar coming into my own in the '90s, the most articulate impulses against the over reliance on the Holocaust for the formation of Jewish identity came from the Orthodox.

NEWHOUSE: Yeah.

HOLO: Who are asking what one of the questions was asked of you today, which was where is God in this? And whether or not that's a necessary question, it's a productive one in this context.

NEWHOUSE: Agreed.

HOLO: And I appreciated it. And then I see a generation, basically younger than me, so I was born in '71 and anyone younger than that I see – it just means something different. At the risk of stereotyping, I think there is this way in which all communities, in some ways Jews implement a certain kind of pain, because it's the Holocaust and because it's our story, and because we milk it and because it's true, and because of all of these things. In conversations you leverage it. You leverage your pain. And it's particularly leverageable when you didn't actually experience the pain, because you get something for nothing.

And you see it in the claims of anti-Semitism. You know, you see it, not all the time, of course, frequently it's very real. I mean we use it. It's all jumbled up. And you're dead right because that's the truth. How do you distill out when it's – when it's someone milking their history, or when it's real? And how do they know? And...

NEWHOUSE: Again, I will say this, and, you know, this is not a comment on any specific person or institution. But there is a failure of Jewish leadership at, kind of, all the levels. Which is to say, you know, communal levels are supposed to engage with people and actually reflect back what those people believe. And they're supposed to actually run challenging conversations there. Then they're supposed to sort of transmit that to a middle level, who's supposed to transmit it to a national level. And you're supposed to have a national leadership that on some – in some way is able to articulate for people sort of how much and when and in what ways to use history, and politics, and culture, and tradition. And we don't have a national Jewish leadership that I think functions in that way anymore, if we ever did.

HOLO: If we ever did. I experience it as a Jewish kid growing up in the '70s and '80s between the Six Day War and Lebanon feeling like we had landed on that homeostasis of a productive,

sincere, particularist claim on the world for our history and on ourselves that felt appropriate. And it felt appropriate largely because the rest of the world validated it.

Vatican, too, figures into that with the Six Day War, as well. So you figure those are the bookends in my mind. And we had landed on that. And the – that moment of Zionism co-validated it. Gentile America co-validated it. We dug it because it rocked. I mean it was very convenient. And it wasn't insincere. And I'm not saying convenient in a dismissive way. But it happened to be convenient. It was comfortable. And it worked. That use of history had percolated up and it made good coffee.

So the change in the story of Israel, the change in the relationship of your Joe and Jane Jew, vis a vis, liberalism, leftist American culture, vis a vis, Zionism created tensions that have begun to create fissures. That's my read.

NEWHOUSE: But here's a thing. I think that that's right. The thing for me that I would love is, I would love to have a Jewish community again that found excitement in the contradictions. That found in the fighting and the controversies and the contradictions and the ambivalences, fertile soil for their own identity formation. And who understood that nothing stays the same today as it was yesterday. And part of the fun is being on the ride. That, to me, feels like what we don't have. We don't have an appreciation for that. And, in fact, too many Jewish institutions want there to be an answer that is applicable to everyone. And there isn't one.

HOLO: I agree. I couldn't agree more. I think we lack that terribly. And I think it's not just that it's not fun. It's that there's productive and there's destructive tension. And we have crossed the line, and that's just a loss. So we have our work cut out for us. And certainly you and *Tablet* are doing your part for the fun and the good.

NEWHOUSE: Thanks.

HOLO: And thank you for taking the time. It was really a pleasure talking to you.

NEWHOUSE: Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

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