ANITA DIAMANT: OUR UNTOLD STORIES

(Begin audio)

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. It is my great pleasure to welcome to the Bully Pulpit Podcast Anita Diamant, who was the founding President of Mayyim Hayyim, Living Waters Community Mikveh, and is the award winning author of *The Red Tent, The Boston Girl,* three other novels, and six guidebooks on contemporary Jewish life. May I call you Anita?

DAIMANT: I hope so.

HOLO: Anita, it's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

DAIMANT: It's a pleasure to be here.

HOLO: I want to start off my questions about your book, *Saying Kaddish,* because I was particularly attracted to the way you opened it. You refer to the Kaddish as beyond words. And you also go on to explain a little bit about the problems that exist in the words. And if you were to get in the weeds on what the Kaddish actually says, you describe it, I think you use the word "opaque" or difficult—one would have to wrestle with it. But I wonder if those two things aren't related to one another. If the opacity and the difficulty, the kind of impenetrability of the actual meaning of the Kaddish text isn't, in fact, related to the fact that experientially it's completely beyond words.

Most Jews don't know what it means. It's so impenetrable that if you read, like a mid-Century translation of the Kaddish, it makes no sense. I mean you really don't walk away with much to work with. If those two things are co-related, if the opacity and the density of the text, or the impenetrability of the text is one of the reasons it's beyond words and that it has become such a thing where it's kind of an incantation more than an actual text.

DAIMANT: I wouldn't go there myself. Isn't Kaddish sort of a doxology?

HOLO: It is a doxology.

DAIMANT: It is a doxology so…

HOLO: A doxology which most Jews probably don't believe in.

DAIMANT: No, exactly. But I don't think that's why Kaddish is so powerful. And I think I wrote that. It's kind of a – it is an incantation. It is a lullaby. People identify it from childhood. Even if you went to services 10 times in your life, you heard Kaddish, and people stood up, and it was in memory of somebody. So I think there's an association with it. And I think if there's shuckling, if there's motion in the body anywhere, it's around Kaddish, and there's a kind of – it's almost a dance, too. And so I think it's a very physical and oral rather than intellectual experience.

The transliteration is that it gives you access to participating in it. And the language is very secondary, because what it does is summons up the people you are remembering or mourning for. Or you're standing in solidarity with somebody who's mourning.

I think the language is really secondary. So I think that's kind of a rabbinic question. I don't think it's a question from the pews somehow.

HOLO: I intend it as an anti-rabbinical question, which is to say it's precisely because it is somewhere between impenetrable and nonsensical for most Jews in any meaningful way. That is, therefore, relegated to being an incantation. We can't do anything with the text, except make it abracadabra.

DAIMANT: It is abracadabra. And it works that way, doesn't it?

HOLO: Oh yeah, no. It absolutely does. I think – I remember trying to make sense of it in English, and it meaning absolutely nothing to me except the choreography of it, as you say, and reliability of the emotional.

DAIMANT: And it sounds – it's got a – because it's repetitive, it's got the power of song. That, sort of, it's the spoken word of the Jewish people.

HOLO: It's interesting you said if you've only gone to shul 10 times, it's the one prayer you will have statistically heard the most because it's repeated the most throughout for non-mourning purposes. It's repeated so many times throughout the service anyway.

DAIMANT: It is the best known. And people who don't even know what it means to say Kaddish – if they've lost somebody or are disconnected from their Jewishness, they would know nothing. They'll say, "I want to do something. I want to say Kaddish." Without knowing – all they know is that it means connecting to the memory in a kind of visceral way with other people, perhaps.

The books that I write, like *Saying Kaddish* in particular, are for people who are in tremendous need of something at that particular moment. Nobody buys that book unless they've had a loss, or unless a friend of theirs has had a loss, and they're bringing it to the house for Shiva. That's the only reason people pick that book up. And so it's written – it's really a…

HOLO: A manual.

DAIMANT: A manual, yeah. It's a manual to walk you through. So there are intellectual parts of it, and the rabbinic parts play a real second fiddle in this book—more than even the other guidebooks.

HOLO: Yeah, no, I agree. And I enjoyed your putting your finger exactly on that emotive quality and its utility, frankly. I'm making the intellectual argument on top of it.

DAIMANT: It's helpful – it's helpful to step away from it. People don't believe it. If they actually read it they go, "Well, I don't believe that."

HOLO: Yeah, most Jews aren't actively messianic. And it's a messianic prayer.

DAIMANT: Right.

HOLO: It's about the rising of the dead. I mean that's a – I have a beef actually. I have a thing. You know, it's kind of commonplace that many rabbis say in an almost offhand way, as if to reflect on the counter-intuitive wisdom of the Jewish tradition, that the prayer in memory of the dead speaks of life. When in fact, of course, the life that they're referring to is the life after death.

DAIMANT: Well, and that part of the prayer where it talks about the raising of the dead—people tend to put it in parenthesis or take it out because it's weird.

HOLO: It is weird.

DAIMANT: We don't believe in it, but it's in there. It's in there.

HOLO: And it's our go to, as you say. It's the one reliable go to in the liturgy for all Jews.

DAIMANT: I just want to say one thing. I don't know if we're talking…

HOLO: Please. No, jump in.

DAIMANT: We're talking more about the book. I think that's my best book. I think it's the best thing I've written. I wrote it the year after my father died—after I had walked through the steps of Kaddish, which I really had no experience of. I would never have written it without that experience. But I felt like I was in – I still was doing it for a second year. It was – it was like two years of Kaddish.

HOLO: It was by you for you, at least partially.

DAIMANT: Yeah. And I also knew that I would have liked a book like that, because I didn't know most of that. Or I knew – I knew the shape of it. But I didn't know other parts. And I was – I didn't have the language that other people could give me too, so.

HOLO: Is your affection for the book also because it helped you through it?

DAIMANT: I didn't enjoy it. I don't enjoy writing any book. But I was doing a second year of Kaddish, so it wasn't – I wasn't – it didn't help me through, particularly – I felt like I had to relive it. But I felt good, because I knew it was useful. And I knew it would be helpful to people. And I was also doing research for it, once again, overwhelmed with the wisdom of the tradition—especially around grieving and death and taking care of people who are dying.

After it came out, I was lucky enough to be on panels with people from different religious traditions. There was also an NPR, big, long series on end of life traditions and funeral traditions. And Judaism wins. It is like priests, ministers envy the structure of Jewish mourning traditions. That you have a week. You have a month. I don't know so much about…

HOLO: Probably…

DAIMANT: I don't know. I really don't – because I was talking to Christians.

HOLO: Yeah, Christian tradition.

DAIMANT: But Christian tradition doesn't….

HOLO: They envy the structure.

DAIMANT: Yeah. You have a week. You have a month. You have a year.

HOLO: Right, there's a logic to it.

DAIMANT: There's a logic to it. And it makes sense. And you don't go to work for the first week if you can avoid it—or as little as you can. And I, you know, I have a friend I remember whose father died very young. And she went back to work two days later. And she didn't know why she was so spaced out.

HOLO: Right. Yeah, yeah. So I'd like to shift, if I may—but, please, I like the offhand. I was struck by a theme that emerged in and NPR interview you had about *The Boston Girl*. And the theme that came up was about otherness. You reflected on otherness in relation to the protagonist, Addie, but not as a Jew in America or as a minority. But in that particular interview, you reflected on Addie's otherness in relation to her own family.

DAIMANT: And as an immigrant. Yeah, yes. As a child immigrant in an immigrant family. Yes. And she was different in the way that first generation children often are.

HOLO: Which was counter-intuitive to me, not because in and of itself that's so surprising, but the othernesses that I tend to pick up on as a Jew in America tend to be the sociological ones— not the familial ones. The ones that are about being a small minority, racial, ethnic, Judaic, religious, whatever.

If I could probe you as a person and your own sense of otherness as a Jew or as a woman, what motivates you in that regard? Is otherness something that you were able to draw on for Addie? Or is this just a fictional exercise?

DAIMANT: Well I'm drawn to, in fiction particularly, delving into under-told or untold stories. Maybe that's another way of talking about otherness. Particularly women's stories, which were not told before 1923.

Virginia Wolfe's wonderful remove of one's own, saying there's nothing written from a point of view of women until quite recently. And I think there's lots of room on the bookshelf still and filmography and video—lots of stories that haven't been told. So that's where I'm drawn. And there are people who are voiceless, often, and are not included in history books.

HOLO: I've heard or read you comment on the voicelessness with respect to the Red Tent and sort of affording a voice from Midrash and imagination effectively.

DAIMANT: But that's true in all of my fiction. The second novel was *Good Harbor*, which is the only contemporary book I wrote, but it's about – it celebrates women's friendships in a way that I think is underrepresented.

I think women's friendships—conversations women have with one another—have been off the map, off the charts for centuries. So that was put forward. So giving a voice to the importance of the redemptive power of women's friendships.

And then *Last Days of Dogtown* is poor people, rural poor people in Massachusetts in the mid-1800s. Who have been totally voiceless. And living in the same time as Mozart or Beethoven. The world is having all kinds of moments everywhere. And these people are struggling to live. And yet their lives have meaning. So telling the story of a freed African man, freed African woman, of women who live alone so that they don't have to put up with whatever they had to put up with in society, including prostitutes and orphans. So those people were other in a way too.

In *Day After Night*, which is post-Holocaust set in Palestine in 1945, telling women's experiences of the Holocaust I still think is – I think there are fewer stories, fewer novels, there's – we know less about their experience during the war, and also after the war. So that's why.

HOLO: Is this a curiosity, or is this a feminist or a Judaist urge—a corrective—you feel? Or does it just happen to be the vector of your curiosity?

DAIMANT: That's a nice way to put it. It's the vector of my curiosity fed by, I think, by being first generation, being Jewish in America, being feminist, politically to the left, all of that. It also expresses the fact that I was born now, in this period in history, and that English is my language.

HOLO: What is English being your language? Elaborate on that.

DAIMANT: English is just a great language.

HOLO: You like English.

DAIMANT: I like English. I think it's got the biggest vocabulary of any language.

HOLO: I've heard that.

DAIMANT: It's a great, big melting pot of words and language, American English, in particular. And, you know, being an American, too—which I used to be prouder of. But the dream of America is still salient. My parents came to this country and thought the world of it.

HOLO: Yeah.

DAIMANT: Even though they screamed and ranted and railed at politics, they had seen the other side, so...

HOLO: Do you think that's something we can generalize about American Jews, in general? It's certainly been my experience. My parents – I'm of the more, the bigger bulk of American Jewry which came in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. So I'm already fourth generation. Third generation born. But I was raised on that same pride, that same commitment to the vision, the enlightenment ideal. And believing that it was within our grasp. Or at least a beacon that we could meaningfully aim towards, even if we didn't necessarily reach it. A lot of people feel this way.

DAIMANT: I think a lot of people feel that way. I hate generalizing. I think – I hope it's part of – I certainly hope it's part of Jewish consciousness. I hope so.

HOLO: Fed by our own otherness.

DAIMANT: Yes, by our otherness, but also by our beliefs and that the world is basically good, and it's up to us to improve it and all that rabbinic and prophetic tradition. So I think that's kind of baked in.

There was a great Op Ed in the New York Times two days ago by an African American woman talking about her patriotism. And it was very much along these lines. It was about being upset, certainly, about what's going on—but feeling enormous pride in African American athletes taking a knee. And of people working to vote. And now she's taking her voting much more seriously. And she still believes in the vision of this country. And I thought – it was next to Charles Blough despairing. And it was just a beautiful, very Jewish, to me, statement of hope. That we have this goal and we have these ideals that are American. And I'm patriotic for those.

HOLO: I find that American Jewish Zionism is often expressed in the same way that quasi, or not even quasi, but full-blown redemptive hope and the attribution of Israel's capacity may be to approach that, if it's at its best. And tested, of course…

DAIMANT: I find it harder.

HOLO: As we do in America today, as you, yourself, said. So there's no question it undergoes, you know, daunting tasks all the time. But somehow we invest both of these countries with similar hopes in that way.

DAIMANT: Yes, I think so. Yeah.

HOLO: For understandable reasons.

DAIMANT: So I don't know – so otherness, I guess I said it's not the language I used, but the voicelessness is really kind of the same thing. I don't actually feel like an outsider in a lot of ways.

I feel really lucky. I got a college education. When I started working in a newsroom, nobody bothered me. And while it was hard to get a column in a major newspaper because they already had Allen Goodman, I still got published everywhere. And I have had a great career. And I wrote lots of stuff about Judaism in the Boston Phoenix, and the Boston Globe, in New England Monthly, in Parenting magazine. So I've been able to express all of me in settings that are both Jewish and general, not Jewish particularly. So I feel really, again, I sort of squeaked in at a great moment in history. And I'm very aware of my privilege that way.

(Break)

HOLO: Among things you write, you also write a blog.

DAIMANT: Oh, thank you for reading it.

HOLO: You're welcome. It was a pleasure. In the midst of sexual harassment headlines, a recent one of yours picked up on two very stark observations that I want to engage you with, if I may. The first one I really felt was an overdue comment. And I want to thank you for it, because I thought it was spot on.

You wrote, "Good people are shocked! Shocked to discover that women face a potential minefield every time we walk down the street." I like this because you're reminding us of two things. One is we shouldn't be surprised. This has been going on in the public sphere for a long time. There's really no shock. But not only should we not be surprised, we shouldn't act surprised. And that's really important. So, I don't actually have a question there. I just want to agree with you.

But there's a second observation that I found more challenging to me. On the heels of this comment, you picked up on a type of confusion that many people protest to suffer, to undergo in the phrase, "How am I supposed to know the difference between flirting and harassment?" You describe this particular response as moronic mewling. Now I really…

DAIMANT: Ooh, that's tough, isn't it?

HOLO: I like the turn of phrase. I, like you, appreciate a good turn of phrase. So I appreciate that. But I do find – I guess I find it uncharitable.

DAIMANT: Oh, gee.

HOLO: No, no, but I don't mean in a touchy, feely way. I mean in an analytical way. It seems to me, there is a place in this conversation for a component where there are blurry lines, not the bright lines. Not the President of the United States having groped another person. But other lines that are blurrier. And I think that – is that unreasonable to recognize the legitimately blurry parts and challenge yourself to…?

DAIMANT: As you said, you like the turn of the shocked! Shocked! Pretend that we didn't know that. It's sort of part of the same language here. It's like, to me it's a whiny "I'm sorry, what's been coming out." I think there need to be interesting conversations, real genuine conversations about, well, I'm not supposed – how am I supposed to know how to behave. I mean, you know how to behave. I'm sorry. And if you…

HOLO: If you – do you deny the presence of a blurry line? Of any…?

DAIMANT: No, there is a blurry line. But it's really….

HOLO: Okay, so there's a place…

DAIMANT: Yeah, but the blurry line is so far away from the conversation we're having now.

HOLO: No, I disagree. I mean – well okay let's… I heard of an actress, an empowered woman and an actress referring to her experience on the set and invoking the media context of harassment, and even assault, although she didn't use assault. And she referred to the fact that men commonly, in her description, in guiding her from one place on the set to another place may put their hand on the small of her back.

DAIMANT: Okay, so what you have to do is think about it from the other side. Especially thinking if something has happened to you in your life that somebody touched you really inappropriately, somebody putting their hand on you, especially when you're hyper-aware right now about this, especially if you're an actress and your body is a big part of what you do. It's not pleasant. It's uncomfortable.

So – and, you know, I think this has been unspoken for a long time. It has. All the depth of this – and actually I was listening to – who's the woman who went public with – she was on NPR the other night talking about Trump's and people – now that she's been – her face is known, her name is known. People come up to her. And she was getting tired of being asked. So what she would do is ask the women who were asking her, "Well, what's your story?" And they all had a story. They all had a story.

And when you think back, when you've had a story like that and someone gives you permission to remember it, then all the little, micro things that you shut off, or that is painful or difficult- or weird, just weird bubble up. And people are hyper-aware right now. And I think this is not the moment about – perhaps this is not the moment to have the fuzzy conversation.

HOLO: Okay, but here's why – here's why I want to disagree with you. Everything you said in the affirmative is non-controversial. I get that. I get why. For me, it's not controversial. I'm agreeing with you. I'm saying yes, yes to everything you said. But that's not what I'm talking about. From the point of view of the perpetrator in this case, is it so mewling and moronic for the man, in this case I'm assuming it was a man, who put his hand on the small of her back or whatever the action was, is it – is it – isn't it not in fact productive for a man to say, "Whoa! Okay."

DAIMANT: That not what I've heard in the media. I'm sorry. Maybe that's what I'm reacting to more. And this was early on. Okay, so this was early on - and I saw letters to the editor saying,

“How am I supposed – I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to behave.” I actually think you do know how to behave. I think there still needs to be conversations about touching and what’s appropriate and not appropriate to say. But especially in the beginning. I’m not going to defend mewling. Okay. I’m not going to defend moronic.

HOLO: And I don’t mean to nitpick on the word. I’m trying to get at the spirit behind it.

DAIMANT: Everyone says, “Oh we know. We know. We understand.” I actually don’t think most men understand. I really don’t. I really don’t. I mean that notion of a minefield of what it feels like to walk with your keys out, to think when you get out of the – no it’s like – it’s like being – I mean I can’t – I can’t make a racial – I won’t let you make a racial observation, but you can’t tell black people what it’s like to be a black person in America. And you can’t tell women what it’s like to be a woman in America. Which is – I know I’m not getting to exactly what you’re saying, but…

HOLO: But you’re not getting at all to what I’m saying.

DAIMANT: I know.

HOLO: The whole point is – what I’m saying is, yes I exceed to the definitions defined by the people who need to define it. Fair enough. I’m not – I’m not even going there. It’s not even what I’m talking about. What I’m talking about is…

DAIMANT: What did I write? Sorry. Read the whole – I’ll read the whole sentence. Do you have the whole sentence?

HOLO: Hold on. We can edit it out.

DAIMANT: No, no.

HOLO: No, it’s worth it. So we’re – We’re talking across purposes because…

DAIMANT: No, I don’t really disagree with you to be perfectly honest. But I’m trying to also get at the fact that…

HOLO: Because I don’t disagree with you.

DAIMANT: Yeah, I know. We're not really disagreeing. Yeah, it was a strong turn of face but I am…

HOLO: Again, I'm not picking on the fact…

DAIMANT: Did you get it after moronic mewling?

HOLO: Okay, I will read it for the record here, alright. Alright. "The daily dispatches about sexual harassment and abuse have unleashed a parade of celebrity perp walks, howls of denial, shamed face confessions, moronic mewling." How am I supposed to know the line between flirting and harassment?

DAIMANT: Okay, here's the context. It's in the context of the perp walk.

HOLO: Oh, you mean at like - like Weinstein.

DAIMANT: Yes, that's the next sentence. That follows the sentence of howls of denial. Wait a minute. So it's howls of denial – it's a three...

HOLO: Howls of denial, shame faced confessions and moronic…

DAIMANT: And mewling.

HOLO: Okay.

DAIMANT: I win. It was in context. But I agree that there's a conversation – there are many conversations. And I wrote a piece many years ago about when friends of mine who are teaching in colleges were feeling – and I'm – at campuses this happened a long time ago. There was this Title I letter about how you're supposed to behave when there's an accusation. And I have friends who were – I have an acquaintance who was accused of not sexual misconduct but disrespect and not giving somebody tenure just because she was a woman.

Anyway, I had a teacher in college, my English teacher, Harry Martin, who was really important to me. He made me – took me from being a B student to being an A student by sending me to a tutor. And I sat in his office for hours. I mean and I – as I wrote in there to watch him tie his shoes, which is a reference to the Baal Shem Tov, right. The guy who goes to study with his rabbi. And what did you go to learn? You know this story?

HOLO: No.

DAIMANT: Oh, well, it's – he – the student comes back and they say, "What did you learn?" And he says, "I watched him tie his shoes," because everything he did was holy.

HOLO: Right, right.

DAIMANT: Harry was a super mench. Really smart guy. Sort of an older brother. He was probably, I don't know, eight years older than me. I didn't – at the time he seemed old – he was married. He was all grown up. I was an undergraduate. And I spent hours in his office. And I wrote this thing saying, "I wonder – I feel bad for students who don't get that kind of intimacy now with teachers and professors." Because there's no way that would happen. The door would have to – I mean the door was closed. He was in there – I'm sure the door was closed sometimes. You couldn't do that. And I'm not sure spending enough – that much time – to me it was a lot of time. Maybe it wasn't. I don't think it's accessible, especially for women who have mentors and teachers who are really important to them who are male. And I mourn that.

HOLO: Yeah. No, I get that.

DAIMANT: So, when he read it he said, "I wanted to have a t-shirt made." So, yeah, I'm cognizant that we're losing something here for now. So perhaps in some distant future when the power relationships are different, people can close the door and have a private relationship without it being…

HOLO: And I'm cognizant of the fact that the pendulum may have to swing a bit before it finds equilibrium. And I think that's all – I get…

DAIMANT: But the mewling goes with the howls, alright. Howls, mewling and…

HOLO: First of all, kudos on the word choice. Second of all…

DAIMANT: Boy is this getting at it now.

HOLO: I get this – I get the context.

DAIMANT: It's context.

HOLO: And I guess what I'm yearning for in this conversation—I think that there's a critical mass of men who see themselves as decent people and actually approximate decency one way or the other. And the blurry line is where the work and the progress can be made. And so we shouldn't – it behooves us all to recognize the legitimacy of the blurry line, where it's blurry, without – without using that as an excuse to call what is not blurry blurry.

DAIMANT: I think where the work is to be done is far from the blurry line. It's actually the danger that women are in every day. I mean real danger. So that's where the – that's really where the focus is now.

HOLO: Yeah, but with a certain interlocutor you're not going to get any friction there. You're going to get allies. You say, "Yeah, send them to jail." You know, like all thumbs up.

DAIMANT: No, but we live in a culture where that's sort of normal.

HOLO: We have – we have elected officials. I mean there's a lot – it's a lot.

DAIMANT: Yes. It's a lot. Power.

HOLO: Exactly. And it's probably even going back and we just didn't know about it for – forever.

DAIMANT: We knew that. We knew about it. But it was not given voice.

HOLO: By the way, we knew about it with Clinton, to be fair.

DAIMANT: We knew about it with lots of people.

HOLO: Yeah, lots of people. That's right. I really, really appreciated your comment about the shocked! Shocked! And then – and then the value…

DAIMANT: And women participated in it. I have to say because nobody – nobody listened when – even when it was called.

HOLO: And on the progressive side, I remember the Clinton presidency where we all – those of us on the left side of the spectrum, we completely gave him a pass. You know, much to our shame.

DAIMANT: There's enough to go around.

HOLO: There's enough to go around.

DAIMANT: Always enough to go around.

HOLO: So…

DAIMANT: I didn't think we'd be talking about this.

HOLO: Well, anything that's juicy.

DAIMANT: You don't want to talk about Shakespeare?

HOLO: Let's close on Shakespeare. Give me…

DAIMANT: No, no. I've been writing blog posts about Shakespeare.

HOLO: I saw that.

DAIMANT: My Shakespeare crush. I was in need of creative nurturance. So I always felt like I really didn't understand – loved going to the theater. I'm a big theater nerd but Shakespeare always felt, at least for the first act, for the first three scenes, impenetrable. So I wanted to understand more.

HOLO: Was that because of the language?

DAIMANT: Yeah, the language mostly. Because it's – you have to – it's hard. It's really hard. So I took a class called Shakespeare Workout. And so – which is kind of an acting class for people who don't necessarily act. And I learned a lot. And basically I learned that you have to – you have to rehearse if you want to understand it. You have to be inside it. You have to say it. You have to work it.

HOLO: You have to try to inhabit the…

DAIMANT: Yeah, inhabit it. And do it over and over again. And say it out loud with other people. You can't do it alone. So it's been a beginner's mind approach to something that is intimidating to a lot of people. So I've written several...And, even in this piece, there's a quotation from Shakespeare from *Measure for Measure.* Angelo's the judge who's just a real terrible human being. He sentences somebody to death for no good reason. And his sister, who's about to become a nun, comes to plead for his life. And all of a sudden he's overcome with lust for her. And he propositions her. He says, "If you sleep with me, I won't put your brother to death." And she threatens to go public with it. And he answers her this way. He says, "Who will believe thee, Isabel? My unsoiled name, the austereness of my life, my vouch against you and my place in the state will sow your accusation overweigh that you shall stifle in your own report and smell of calumny."

HOLO: My God. That's topical.

DAIMANT: Yeah, it's 400 years old.

HOLO: He wrote it for you.

DAIMANT: Four hundred years ago. So there you go.

HOLO: That's good. That's good. And yes, that's the – the weight of – the weight of telling the truth.

DAIMANT: Yeah, no one's going to believe you. I've got power.

HOLO: So now I want to know—can you package in a brief statement the essence of your passion for Shakespeare? What is it about him that captures your imagination?

DAIMANT: Well, you know, it's 400 year old stuff that is still incredibly alive and present and in the news. You know, the Julius Caesar on the common in New York was played as Trump like – and people came up on the stage and were screaming and howling at how terrible this was. Of course, when they did that and Obama was Julius Caesar a few years ago, nobody protested. But it still tells the truth. And it's difficult and it's still – people still go and see it. And young people will go and see it as well.

I have the pleasure of being part of a smaller theater company these days just as an observer. And young people who are passionate about Shakespeare—studying it, and young people are coming to watch it. You know, I think the kids are alright. It's just alive after 400 years. And not static.

And maybe this is where my Jewishness comes in, because you have to wrestle with Shakespeare. You can't just sit there and passively take it in. You won't get it. If you want to understand it, you have to think it through. You have to have it translated for you by directors and actors and people who are trying to come to terms with it in a modern way so that the audience can connect. And that's how I feel about Jewish tradition as well.

HOLO: Right. There's a combination of its intrinsic depth and the beauty of the layers, the accretion of meaning and mediation that have even added to that intricately.

DAIMANT: And the fact that you have to keep doing it.

HOLO: Keep doing it. It's worth it to keep doing it. That's the beauty of it.

DAIMANT: And, you know, I think it's great this notion that anybody can teach you. My teacher, Rabbi Larry Kushner, from long ago was my rabbi for many years and used to tell this story about carrying a big book of Talmud into some little kosher café in the Lower Eastside. And an old guy with a, you know, with the full sort of Orthodox regalia sat down and said, (*Hebrew*) which is tell me a – you know, teach me something.

HOLO: Right. Teach me…

DAIMANT: And he's teaching this kid, you can teach me a chapter. Anybody can teach anybody. Everybody's got something to teach if you're willing to engage with this stuff. So I think they're connected that way.

HOLO: From my students most of all have I learned.

DAIMANT: Exactly. There you go. So from people who you don't expect – that's why Torah study still is a growth industry.

HOLO: It is a growth industry. I think it's been one of the most successful elements of non-Orthodoxy. Not because it doesn't apply to Orthodoxy as well, but because it has been growing fastest in the non-Orthodox world. In the time of my growing up and becoming an adult where Torah study was a recondited activity, now there's not a shul in the country that I know of, and I visit lots of shuls, that doesn't have Torah study either on Shabbos or on Sunday.

DAIMANT: Or during the week. Or at a lawyer's office downtown. Or, you know, any number of places.

HOLO: That's right. I teach one of those at the lawyers' offices.

DAIMANT: There you go. And also, and in the world of women in particular, we have doubled the capacity of Jewish people to study Torah and to understand it, and to reshape the way we live it. So we have a generation of learned and learning women who have engaged with Torah study.

HOLO: And speaking of the layers and accretion of mediated Torah and Midrash, I think I saw somewhere either written about you or by you that you attribute the boom of *The Red Tent* to the distribution of the book amongst book clubs and the like. Is that…?

DAIMANT: Yeah, but…

HOLO: And that seems to be a…

DAIMANT: That has nothing to do with Torah study in a way though.

HOLO: No, I'm asking if it doesn't. Because that communal, that willingness to carve out time in your week to read together, to think together…

DAIMANT: Most of the book groups aren't Jewish. Most of the book groups – the reason it's a best seller is because of women's book groups, for the most part. And if it was only Jewish women it would not be a best seller.

HOLO: Right. Right. There aren't enough of them.

DAIMANT: Jewish women, thank God, talk to non-Jewish women. And everybody talks to everybody. It's all word of mouth. I can't tell you the number of emails I've gotten from people who have nothing to do with Judaism. To them, it's a book that is about women's empowerment, and respecting the power of women and their own bodies and their own lives. Agency.

HOLO: And the voice…

DAIMANT: And the voice thing. For Jewish women and Christian women. It gives voice to scripture. And that's very powerful.

HOLO: Yeah.

DAIMANT: But there are a lot of people who, you know, they – and a lot of people don't know this story particularly, Dinah's terrible story, and it's a shock that it's even in a Bible. But it's interesting. It's got a much bigger reach than I could have – it's in Japanese, you know.

HOLO: That's pretty cool. Well thank you very much for coming to spend the time.

DAIMANT: Well this is the most interesting conversation I've had as a podcast, yeah.

HOLO: Thank you.

DAIMANT: None of the questions have ever been asked of me before.

HOLO: Well, I'll take that as a compliment.

DAIMANT: It's a huge compliment. I've been doing this a long time.

HOLO: And it was really a pleasure to get to know you.

DAIMANT: Thank you.

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