



NATALIE MARCUS & ASAF BEISER: HUMOR ACROSS THE DIVIDE

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host. You're listening to a special episode recorded at Symposium Two, a conference held in Los Angeles at Stephen Wise Temple, in November of 2018.

It's my great pleasure to introduce you to our guests, Natalie Marcus and Asaf Beiser, who are the co-creators and head writers of the acclaimed historically-themed sketch show, 'The Jews are coming,' winner of the Israeli Academy Award for best satire and entertainment show. Natalie is also the creator and head writer of the TV show, 'Crowded' that won the best kids comedy award, in the Israeli Kids Choice Awards. And Asaf is a writer in the acclaimed 'Fauda' series currently airing on Netflix. Natalie and Asaf, thank you for joining us, it's a pleasure to have you.

Natalie Marcus: Thank you.

Asaf Beiser: Thanks, it's great being here.

JH: So, I wanna start with the scene behind the credits in 'The Jews are coming'. I'd like you to describe it, and then we'll talk about it. So, one of you describe the images, the visuals...

NM: The opening scene.

AB: The opening credits.

JH: Yeah, yeah.

NM: The opening credits. Well, it's a visual of all the items preparing ahead for a circumcision ceremony, and the hands of a Rabbi putting down all the kids that are supposed to prepare. And, in the end, you hear a baby crying, and there's a spot of blood next to the name, 'The Jews are coming'.

AB: I think it was maybe the 50th idea we had when we sat down to think about ideas for the opening credits. All the time...

NM: We even had one in... And we had a different one already in the making, you remember? Animation one.

AB: Right. An animated one, we already had storyboard and things, and all the time, we felt like

it's not there yet. It's not there yet. And when we got to the idea of the birth, suddenly we felt, "Okay, that's our show, because there's something about it that says it's gonna hurt."

JH: Yeah, yeah. Right, right. There's a threat...

AB: Exactly.

JH: And the title, of course, 'The Jews are coming', the notion is that the swarm of Jews are coming...

[laughter]

JH: It's great.

AB: But as a viewer, it's not gonna be all laughs, it's gonna hurt a little as well. So this...

JH: Right, there's some pain. [chuckle]

AB: Exactly.

NM: It's also the only thing that we... For us, as secular Jews, the only thing that actually we feel is in common with us and Abraham. This is the one thing that actually goes throughout the ages. And me, as a secular mom, just circumcised my son, even though I don't do almost any other Jewish traditions. And it's the only thing that we have in common with the first... The father of the nation. So, it's another thing that we felt was very part of this specific opening, and why we should do it.

JH: A lot of the humor in 'The Jews are coming' picks up on Jewish sensitivities about being Jewish, or things that we imagine might appear either absurd, or stupid, or antiquated, both to ourselves, and I think... Well, I live in diaspora, so it seems like there's also an implicit message about things that must surely look absolutely crazy to non-Jews as well. If that's true, what's the Israeli sensibility about other cultures viewing our absurdities, that might be different from the diaspora sensibility of the same phenomenon?

AB: When we write 'The Jews are coming', we always think about it as an inner thing. It's a thing which is, for us, it's our thing.

JH: Inside humor.

AB: Yeah, it's an inside humor. We never stop and think, how would it look like from the outside? We know that once we would stop and think how does it look from the outside, we will be in a problem. So we just eliminate this...

JH: A problem, meaning you would be defensive instead of funny?

NM: Yes.

AB: It would be defensive... And the things that we do would be considered anti-Semite, in some ways... I don't know. We're saying some horrible things about our own people. And I think we can say that only because it's from the inside, and the crowd is...

JH: The audience is...

AB: Yeah, the audience. That's one of the reason we're not selling the show to anywhere, I think, and that's why... Because it's our own conversation, in a way. The minute we'll start thinking about how other people would look at the show, we will be in a big problem. That's what I feel.

NM: But I think, in some ways, we are what we are. This makes us part of the story. But, as writers, and satire writers, we try to look at things a little bit from the outside. That's why we get to this statements of, "Look at this, isn't this ridiculous?" And it is kind of an outsider point of view, but it's not an outsider who doesn't understand the customs, because otherwise, we would be mocking something. We're not mocking... When you do it from the inside and from your own identity, which is Jewish and Israeli. So, we feel like we can allow ourselves to look at it and say, as kind of an outsider, and ask, "Isn't this story kind of weird? Don't you think that this is kind of absurd?"

[chuckle]

JH: So, tell me a little bit about how American Jews react when they see it? Is it the same as Israelis or is it... Can you sense a different gut reaction?

AB: That depends, I think, the American Jewish Community is so diverse by itself, so I think it depends, in many ways, the more... The ones who are closer to the Bible, that really studied the Bible more, I think they loved the show in a way that we're always amazed... When they react, we find the connection so fast. And they laugh sometimes at jokes that, in Israel, no one laughs at, because they know sometimes the Bible better than the secular people in Israel, and that's great to see. The more secular Jews here, I don't know, it's very much like in Israel, I think. I don't see a very big difference, cultural difference in the way they get the humor. Sometimes they don't get all the jokes, because we have... Not all the jokes are Biblical, not all the sketches...

JH: Right, they could be referring to things...

AB: Exactly, yeah.

NM: But the Jewish... The people who know the Bible more to its depth, they can find... When we write the sketches, we try to keep it in a kind of simple way, simple language, because we do want to... We address all... We're doing entertainment, we're finding people, we're doing TV after all. We're not here to teach anyone. We love that people use us for teaching, but that's not our job. But we do, because we do go in-depth reading the text, and reading the Shim. So, we do have more in-depth knowledge than what we want to... The sketch should portray...

JH: Assume.

NM: Yeah, assume. But sometimes... Because we do, we have dialogue that is very similar to an actual phrase or something from the Bible. And this thing, the secular Jews will never recognize. And people who are more into knowledge with the text will laugh, 'cause they will understand the reference. So, that's a part that we know when someone laughs from a sentence that is not a joke, but it's actually a reference to an actual text, we know we're in a crowd that knows it's Bible.

[foreign language]

AB: And, in Israel, it's rare to have people who really know the Bible, and yet have liberal views...

JH: I know. The secular religious divide is starker... Sharper.

AB: Yeah, that's why, when we first got here, for our first lecture in New York... When we first got to the lecture in New York, we looked at this audience that suddenly is more diverse politically, you can say. It was like finding... I don't know, finding a lost brother, in a way. Really it's okay, that's the crowd we're talking about. Someone who gets the Bible, and the Bible takes some part of their life, and still have liberal views. It's something you don't meet in Israel. You rarely meet a liberal.

NM: Liberal views can accept empirical facts, and can say that we have to adapt our faith as we go into modern times. And this, for us, it's like a match made in heaven. These are our people.

AB: Exactly, who can tolerate this kind of talking about the Bible.

JH: But I'm getting the sum total of the answer to my question, is actually pretty... There's a lot of continuity across Israeli and American Jewry, with respect to responding to your show, by and large. Today, in America, we're talking a lot about the growing divide between Israeli Jews and American Jews. And this kind of connectedness, which is so much from the Kishka, so much from the gut, seems to me to speak of something compelling and deep about our shared people, and our shared experience. I don't know if it's too much to read into it. But humor, as you know, is extremely...

AB: It's humor, and it's the fact that we grew up in similar houses in a way. Because our humor brings you back to the things you learned as a kid, the things you thought about when you studied those things as a kid. Many of our jokes are jokes that kids think about when they...

JH: Right. Like the questions that they don't ask when...

AB: Exactly, exactly.

JH: And our kids go to Hebrew school, they have the same questions...

NM: Exactly.

AB: Exactly. So, it's not only the humor, it's the way you get back to your roots in a way, to your childhood in a way. That's something that is in common between, I guess, Israeli Jews and American Jews.

[music]

JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called 'Making Prayer Real'. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out, and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

[music]

JH: So, Natalie, I'd like to ask you a specific question with respect to 'Crowded'. Were you inspired at all by 'The Brady Bunch'? 'Cause when I saw the opening credits to... I couldn't help but think of 'The Brady Bunch'.

NM: Yeah, it's inspired by 'The Brady Bunch'. There's also an American show called 'Step By Step', I don't know if you remember it. It's like when we pitched the show, it's 'The Brady Bunch' from hell.

JH: Yeah, they are less genteel than 'The Brady Bunch', is that...

NM: Yeah, exactly. It's more of a crazy Israeli family... Two families brought together, two divorced parents, with their teenage kids, and they all live together in hell. But it's... I think that family is just such a relatable thing. We're talking about the relatable thing about 'The Jews Are Coming', and we all came from Jewish houses, and we studied the Bible, and we all had the traditions at home. And, before that, before being Jewish, we're all just families. And that's even a bigger...

JH: A bigger catch, yeah.

NM: Yeah.

JH: Nice, nice. It's a lot of fun.

NM: Yeah.

JH: Asaf, I'd like to ask you about 'Fauda'.

AB: Sure.

JH: Here in the United States, as I'm sure you know, one of the main elements that people respond to is the capacity for the story to empathize with all of the parties. It plays, A, as narrative depth, and character depth. And B, it plays as a kind of political comment, about possibility. How does it play in Israel? And how does it play amongst Israeli Jews versus Israeli Arabs?

AB: When we wrote the show, I remember when I was writing the show, I said, "I don't know if it's gonna be successful. I know that it's gonna be important." And I felt that it's important exactly because of what you're saying, because the way we're humanizing the other side in a way. Because we're giving the Palestinian side... Their stories and their human stories. We're not telling the Palestinians' story in any way, because I can't tell the Palestinian side, you have to have a Palestinian writer to do that.

But we are doing something that wasn't done before in Israeli film or theater, I think, really humanizing the story from their side as well... Giving their side, giving them depth as you say. I think that the Palestinian side is way more interesting. The stories themselves are way more interesting than the one that's in the Israeli side. I think that the characters, the Palestinian characters... And I'm talking about season one. I wrote season one only. So, the characters, the Palestinian characters have way more depth than the Israeli ones.

And I think that's the importance of the show. There's one thing before, I talk about the differences between the way the Israeli Jews got it, and Israeli Arabs got it. In the Israeli Jews audience, people got it in both ways, that they're always asking me, "Is it a left-wing series, or is it right-wing?" And there's a very big divide. And I always ask them, "What do you think?" And people who come from the left side of the map will always think that it's from the left... The series itself is left-wing. And people from the right would think the opposite.

Everyone saw it from their own perspective. Everyone chose to take whatever they want from the show. I'm not sure about how it was accepted with Israeli Arabs. I know many of them loved it, and I know there were a lot of critics... Because of what I said, because it felt, and it was...

NM: Cultural...

JH: Appropriation...

NM: Yeah.

AB: Yeah.

JH: Colonial.

NM: Yeah.

AB: Colonial, yeah. Many Palestinians especially, but Israeli Arabs, Israeli Palestinians, as well felt that we were taking their own story and making it ours, in so many way. And they were right, because that's the way it was... Shuvak.

NM: Marketed.

AB: That's the way it was marketed, in a way. And when... Once you market it this way, so that's a bit of a problem.

JH: You're boxed in, yeah.

AB: Yeah. I can understand those of them felt angry about that, but they loved the show. We had millions of views, not only in Israel, but in the occupied territories as well.

JH: Interesting.

AB: I know that, yeah.

JH: So, you guys get to tell us what season of whatever show, or what episode of any show you really want people to see, any of the shows we've talked about, that you feel captures something special, that an American audience...

NM: First of all, we have a subtitled 'Best of Third Season of The Jews' online on YouTube.

JH: Okay, great.

NM: So, if you look for 'The Jews Are Coming', and you see it, I think it's called 'The Best of Season Three' or something. It's a whole episode of our new sketches, which is, I think, the best thing for people to see.

AB: I'm going with the same recommendation. [chuckle]

JH: Yeah.

AB: Yeah. Exactly. Suggest the 'The Best of Season Three'. Although we have something like 30 sketches more...

NM: Already more than that, I think.

AB: Maybe a little more than that... More translated or subtitled.

JH: Yeah.

AB: Just watch all of them. It's an hour off work for you.

JH: Well, I wanna thank you both for spending the time. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you. I had a lot of fun.

AB: Thank you.

NM: You too. Thank you so much for inviting us.

[music]

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts, or at The College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.