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PEARL GLUCK: STRADDLING JEWISH WORLDS THROUGH FILMMAKING

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.

It's my great pleasure to welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, Pearl Gluck, who is a Jewish-American filmmaker and professor, and her films which explore themes of class, gender, and faith have appeared as part of the Sundance Lab, as well as played Cannes Film Festival, the Tribeca Film Festival, and on PBS. Pearl Gluck, thank you for joining us. It's really a pleasure to have you.

Pearl Gluck: It's a pleasure to be here, thank you.

JH: I wanna start with a question about Stars and Bars. It's in development right now, and it really captured my imagination. So I wondered if you can give us a brief intro to what the Stars and Bars is about.

PG: I'm now living in Central Pennsylvania, and I guess over the course of the last 15 or so years that I've been making films, it's the world around me that moved me to activism through my film projects. And so in this case, I'm living here in central Pennsylvania. My first year that I got here, a friend of mine, who's a poet, a local poet, recommended that I need someone in a town called Millheim, Pennsylvania, who started what was then called a flag war using Confederate flags and peace flags as a way to kick off tension and maybe a little dialogue around questions of identity here. And that was before Charlottesville, and it was certainly before the shooting in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life Synagogue. So I just knew this was going to be my next project. That was 2015.

I wanted to look at the question of Confederate flags being this subtle, and for some people, not so subtle way of expressing, for lack of a better term, hatred or disregard for whether it be Judaism, or race, or anyone other than who that Confederate flag was supposed to represent. And a lot of people say that's not the case; the Confederate flag is about American identity, it's part of our history. And we know the debates, we read the debates, they're very current right now. In '15 it wasn't that current. And at the time I'd spoken to a scholar to explore with him here at Penn State, what's going on with white supremacy in the United States, Neo-Nazism, and he said, "Neo-Nazism is a thing of the past.

And then Charlottesville happened. And it was so shocking on so many levels, including this one for me personally, because I was writing this project, and I was hoping that this scholar would be

right, but unfortunately, he was wrong. And I decided to look a little more deeply on at how something that appears to be subtle and just local and quiet, can actually rise up into all out an open expression of hatred and/or what we're seeing a lot more of now, which is that lone terrorism that gets inspired by this kind of language that's being used, unfortunately, by our leadership. And they'll come out there with a gun in a church, in a Synagogue, in a grocery store, and express what they believe they're being told to express. So that's what I'm doing now, and very deeply connected to my own background as a survivor's grandchild, and those two narratives meet somewhere towards the end of the film.

JH: I wanna ask you if there's anything about the desire to fly the Confederate flag that represents an argument that you buy, even partially, or is there anything with which you empathize when it...

PG: It's an excellent question. Yeah, that's a fantastic question. In fact, that's the whole reason I'm doing this film, which is to give voice to some degree, so we can understand... I don't wanna use the word the "other side", but at least that perspective. Because I think the divisive nature right now in our country is both hurting us on both sides of the perspective. The story that it's based on is a story about a woman who I believe she's in her 80s. She was jogging one morning, and it was the morning before a biker gathering. There's mountain biking excursion that happens once a year here, and people come from all over the world to bike here because it's beautiful.

And the day before a local woman in her 80s was out there jogging, and she saw this huge Confederate flag right by the bridge where they start the bike ride. And she knocked on this guy's door, and she's known him for years. He was raised there. He's half her age, so she's known him since he's in diapers. And she asked him if he wouldn't mind just removing the flag, just so the people coming from all over the world don't think that everybody stands for this in this town. That it's okay he has it, but maybe when outsiders come in, they might see a lack of understanding of the fact that we're actually open here, for everybody.

And he basically, in the nicest way told her, "This is my land, this is my lawn, and I'm gonna put what I want on my lawn, and this is what I believe, so I'm gonna leave it here." And so she's the one who then called her husband and asked him to order flags, peace flags, so that they can put them up so they can show both perspectives, I guess. And I think he pressed the wrong button when he ordered the flags and rainbow flags showed up the next day. And so they put them up anyway, which really pissed off some of the locals who are not maybe as evolved as we would like them to be about being open. And so even more people put up Confederate flags, and then of course, the peace flags showed up and those went up.

So the dialogue that I was privy to as I went back in with a documentary camera before I was writing the fiction, and we interviewed the woman and we interviewed the man who put up the flag, and we actually had them have a conversation with each other right there in front of the camera. And we weren't gonna use it for anything public, just for my own research. And what they were saying is that for him, it represents a piece of his American and family history, and for her, she was trying to say, "But some people are scared when they pass that flag, they don't feel welcome." And as much as they kept talking about it from each of their sides, they weren't finding a middle ground. He did write me an email the next day and he said that he's removed the

flag. But then we drove into town and it was still there. And at this point he also put up "All Lives Matter Poster", and some other things.

So, it really is about not that... I don't think, in this particular individual case, I don't think he really was willing to listen, where I do think there are some people, if they knew what it could lead to... And again, this was before Charlottesville, this was before the Pittsburg shooting in the synagogue and the shooting in the church in the South. I don't think everybody's willing to listen. I like to believe that they would be, but I do think it's worth trying to have a conversation. I think there is a lot of in-between, and that in-between is being stolen from us, where people are kind of in that little space, and they wouldn't put out a flag, but now they feel like they have to pick sides. And I think that is what's going on, and I'd like to problematize that, just a little bit and bring us back to a place where it's okay to be in the middle and trying to figure it out.

[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.

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JH: I wanna talk a little bit about your movie *Summer*, which is about girls in a Hasidic summer camp who through literature, begin to embark on a journey of self-discovery. I wonder if Hasidic women have seen the movie, I mean, women still in the fold, and how they've reacted to this or to other examples in your work of women's sexual awakening or sexuality.

PG: So, the film, not to give too much away, but the film ends in a place where the girl that discovers that she's not straight. In fact, her pain is how the film ends, where she really asks, "So is there no place for me in the Torah?" That's what's so painful for her. She wants a place in the Torah. So it's not really calling out the Hasidic perspective on being a lesbian, but more saying, "Can you understand, from this girl's perspective, that she wants to belong, and she's Orthodox, and she's very faith-driven, and she wants a place in it?" So, you asked about Orthodox people watching it. At the film festivals that I have attended, I didn't notice anyone Hasidic there, but there is someone that I did talk to about it when I was writing it, and I kind of thought that she would be super judgy about it when I told her, and she said, "This is no big deal. We all know about that. We all go to camp now, and we know that we're gonna be experimenting with each other."

And that was not the case when I was going to camp in the Hasidic world, but I guess that is the case to some degree now, or enough for her to say that to me. So we'll see. The film is gonna be available soon online, and I think that's when we'll see what happens in dialog, and my hope is that it causes women to, like we were saying earlier, just to start the conversation. I'm not saying

I know the answer to what we discussed earlier or this, it's just that I feel like it's important to ask the question, "So where is there a place for someone like this?" And also, I think, for me, the film also asks about access, access to information and access to knowledge, like "Our Bodies Ourselves", and other books that they're asking them not to read.

JH: So another major theme in your work is the straddling of and the crossing between boundaries and worlds. And your introduction to your documentary, or the teaser to your documentary "Williamsburg", you spend a lot of time talking about the fact that Williamsburg is not only a very small place, but it's also a place that from the outsider's perspective looks like it's populated by people who are all the same. And you point out that it's in fact teeming with differences and it's worlds and worlds in close proximity that you can easily cross from one synagogue to the next. You go to (*Hebrew*) or whatever. But I'm interested in your personal story and that of some of your protagonists, such as Joel Baum and Malke, who crossed boundaries of even more distant worlds, and seem to echo perhaps some of the boundaries that you personally had straddled as well. So I wondered if you might elaborate a bit about yourself in relation to these two protagonists, as travelers of worlds.

PG: I do like to look at the in-between. So just like in "Summer", where you have a 15-year-old girl who's not going to give up her commitment to her Orthodoxy and Ultra-Orthodoxy, but is now gonna be struggling with how her other desires might connect to that world. I am exploring the same thing in my newest short, which is "Castles in the Sky", and it looks at a college class teacher Malke, who slams poetry in the Lower East Side. And that's a huge difference between the world that she lived in, that's very modest, and she teaches modesty to these brides, and then she slams these erotic poems to explore her own eroticism. And I love that she's in her 80s, because I think people tend to forget that women of all ages, backgrounds, etcetera, have desires, and like to express them in different ways. And so she likes to express it in her poetry.

And one of her lines, when she gets discovered, to her protege, who is questioning her on this. She's like, "I do this for my poetry, it's the one thing Hitler couldn't take from me. He took my family, he took my fertility, but he could not take my poetry." And I think it's important to understand that when you look at Hasidim, people struggle in their own life, trying to find themselves and their identities. And so in her case, she just had to hide it for a long time. And then when she gets it discovered, spoiler alert, she chooses to stay in the community, she doesn't choose to leave, because that is where her spirit and her heart is, and she'll have to find another way to deal with that.

With Joel Baum, I was trying to look at a guy who... It is based on a true story about a man who was known to have murdered in cold blood, his polish cleaning lady. He wasn't well, and he was dealing with that post-traumatic stress after the Holocaust. I find it very interesting that the Poles and the Jews had this intricate history in Poland, and deeply tied to the Holocaust in different ways, for it to get recreated in a very strange way in Williamsburg is fascinating to me. And with this particular guy, I was trying to look at what if I took that real story and made it an accidental murder? And then what happens next? There you have a very conflicted character, but for a very different reason than what I later explored with "Summer", and "Castle", and what I will continue to explore, which is looking at women in the Hasidic community who are navigating their individuality within the world of faith, in the way that I kind of navigated it in a more subtle

way outside of that world. [chuckle] You know what I mean?

JH: I do know what you mean. I actually wanted to ask you a question, and it's a slightly pushy, perhaps a chutzpahtic question. So, I think I noticed, and call me out if I'm being unfair, but I think I noticed a dynamic which I've seen with many, many people, including myself, a lot of people do this, which is that we have a history that we actually affirmatively distance ourselves from, and yet we trade on it. We use that history as a tool for legitimacy to convey something, even though we've actually abandoned it or rejected it or at least largely so. Is it unfair of me to see you doing that? And if so, what's that all about?

PG: It's less so much a trading on it as it is a constant dance with my identity. We change over time in our lives, and as artists I believe, at least in my case, I believe it is my responsibility to be an activist through it. So, things that I want to see shift or change because of my knowledge of where I come from and who I am, I've instilled in my work. So yes, I agree with you on that level completely, and I'm fortunate to have it. I think what I'm most fortunate to have is a background of valuing storytelling, like whether it's the literal ritual in Judaism or it's the specific tradition in Hasidism. So sitting around at the Seder on Passover and constantly retelling the story, or the Megillah on Purim, or even Hanukkah, constantly creating ritual around the story, and we're reliving our history over and over again, and making it relevant to where we are today.

And then Hasidim, it's so specific that you're supposed to tell stories. And in fact, it's patriarchal, it's a man's voice. Generally, women are... They have other roles, and they're considered just as valuable, but they're not to be orators or storytellers. That's where I turned it on its head just a bit. So for that, I'm extremely grateful that I was given such a value system associated with story telling and teaching.

JH: I get it. I totally get it. And those of us who are not connected deeply to the Hasidic community, one of the things we most know about the Hasidic tradition is the story-telling tradition, because if we read anything, we read the Shiv^a ei ha-Besht, the glorification of the founder of Hasidism, Ba'al Shem Tov. So I totally get that, and I get how that remains authentic, even as you have walked away from other aspects of the tradition.

PG: Okay.

JH: Your movie "Junior" is a film adaptation of Elle Jae Stewart's one-woman show, about an African-American mother who's preparing to attend the funeral of her son who was killed by a police officer. And as I understand it, it's a fictional story with Ms. Stewart, who compiled it from real events and interviews. You say, "As a film maker, my work is inspired by the concept of Tikkun Olam, leaving the world a better place than how I found it. The moment I saw Ms. Stewart's work on stage, I knew that collaborating with her on developing this voice on film would be an opportunity to be a vessel for change." When did you first hear the term "Tikkun Olam" in this meaning?

PG: I think I gotta attribute that to my first crime, which is going to college. I think I first heard it when I was at Brandeis. We went on a trip to DC to fight for Pollard at the time, and that's, I think, where I heard that term, that full on Hebrew with that accent, Tikkun Olam, as opposed to

Tikkun Olam. And that was the big break from the community, is when I went to college. So that's interesting, that that's what kicked me off to be so deeply Jewish, in a way, in the work that I've done from then on, which is driven by that concept.

JH: I ask because it's a bit of a contentious term these days in the liberal world and the reform movements, and from critics of the reform movement from outside the movement; there is a sense of over-emphasis of Tikkun Olam to the point where it over shadows or stultifies or somehow diverts attention from the other dimensions of richness within the Jewish tradition in favor of, what in English people often call "social justice". And I can see how passionately your work is infused with Tikkun Olam. That in and of itself is not surprising to me, but what presents me with an interesting query for the research is, "How does that notion of Tikkun Olam develop in the Jewish world differently from the various Jewish perspectives?" And since you are a straddler of worlds, as I said before, this term is an interesting test of that.

PG: I think my interest in things outside of Jews and Judaism would be questionable from where I originated, but sometimes I think American Jews, and specifically even ultra orthodox ones, forget how we got here, and how hard it was for us to live a relatively comfortable life here. And how the fact that we can pass to some degree if you're not ultra orthodox and you are white, I'm meaning Ashkenazi, more Ashkenazi, you can pass as white. So I think we forget some of that. And certainly, where I'm from, there's so much concern about keeping the flame of ultra-orthodoxy alive and making sure all your generations remain in the Hasidic world. There isn't a lot of time to look outside and say, "What am I doing to help this stay a place that's open and make it even more open?"

And I feel like I'm positioned well to do that through my work, because I'm not in that world only anymore, and I feel like I can bring something to that understanding. So for a mother to be crying about burying her child, I instantly thought about my grandmother who lost her own daughter, or my grandmother's mother, who lost nine children in the Holocaust. For me, it's always somehow connected to looking at the struggle of loss, and really not forgetting that. And understanding how hard it was to get to where we are right now, at least in America, and at least among those of us that have enough comfort to be able to take a minute and look at that.

And by no means I'm I saying there aren't Jews that are struggling with poverty, struggling with issues of belonging and finding a place. But it's interesting, every year when Halloween comes around, people wonder, "Why? Why don't you guys celebrate Halloween? Is it because you didn't when you were Hasidic?" I'm like, "It's not even that. It's that we were dismissed early from school because they would throw eggs at the school buses that had Yiddish writing on it, or the people that they knew were Jewish." It was not safe, in the fullest sense of the word, back in the 80s in Brooklyn on Halloween. We'd have eggs thrown at us. I remember that every year - and it's nothing compared to the stuff that had to be overcome by generations before us.

So I don't think it's smart to let go off that, but I also think that we have be careful because, of course, there's the other reality, which is that, "Oh, American Jews are always looking back to the Holocaust, you need to get past it." Well, that might be true on certain levels, but I don't think that's true in general. And I think it's because sometimes we forget what the lessons actually are. And when you look at what happened in Pittsburgh, one of the things that really upset this man,

the shooter, was HIAS. And HIAS was a Hebrew immigrant that helped our people get here, and now it helps other refugees that are not Jewish. And it's still a Jewish organization, and I support it, I highly support it. And I think we forget that connection, I do. And I understand there's a lot of issues that we've to be worried about, but this is something that's really key. I have the time, and in fact, this is my work, to look at it.

JH: I just wanna clarify, HIAS is the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which shepherded thousands and thousands of Jews over 100 years ago into this country, and continues to shepherd needy immigrants and refugees. It's a legacy Jewish organization and a wonderful, wonderful source of pride for the Jewish community that we have HIAS. So I agree with you completely. Well, we're fortunate to have your films, and I consider myself fortunate to have gotten to know you. And I wanna thank you for taking the time to speak with us about your amazing work and share your thoughts together with us on the College Commons Podcast. Thank you so much.

PG: Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

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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.