



YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: STORYTELLING TRADITIONS, COMMUNICATED  
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**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.

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It is my great pleasure to welcome to the College Commons Podcast, Yiddishist, poet, writer and translator, Yermiyahu Ahron Taub. His translation, together with Ellen Cassedy, of *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories* By Blume Lempel, recently won the Fenia & Yaakov Leviant Memorial Prize in Yiddish Studies from the Modern Language Association. He writes of his own work, "Many of my poems and short stories explore the plight of individuals at the margins of society, striving to formulate a coherent response to a changing world. I see myself as a storyteller, illuminating the drama of reaching against isolation towards connection." Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, thank you so much for joining us on the Commons Podcast and I look forward to our connection.

**Yermiyahu Ahron Taub:** Thanks so much for having me, Josh. It's a pleasure to speak with you.

**JH:** I want to start off by asking you about your prose because I want to share with our listeners the fact that one of your short stories, *Angel of the Underworld*, is available online at [jewrotica.org](http://jewrotica.org). In the story, which describes Meyer, the protagonist, who is trying to come to terms with the fact that he's gay, many interesting things develop, and one of the qualities of this particular story is a deep cultural embeddedness of the Jewish things. Specifically, Orthodox, Jewish, Yeshiva bocher, a student in the Yeshiva. And I wanted to talk about some of the ways in which this cultural embeddedness comes out. And the first thing I wanna point out is this great quote that I absolutely loved. It's just a phrase from the early part of the story, where you talk about how focused Meyer tends to be in his studies and you say, "Nor was he prone to bouts of looking around the room." And I just love that, because if you ever go to traditional prayer, not necessarily even Orthodox, but just in general, there's this whole body language thing where people kinda scout the room. You know what I'm talking about?

**YT:** Yes, I do.

**JH:** Is that what you were talking about?

**YT:** I think there is an awareness of space, bodies, bodies in relationship to each other, bodies in

relationship to texts and textuality, bodies in relationship to lights. And I think there is a movement and a rhythm of study that is really paramount, movement of the body in relationship to the words being studied. So yeah, I think all of those things were kind of flying through my mind.

**JH:** Another component of the embeddedness of Jewish culture is actually about the medium on which I read the story, rather than the actual story, which is online. And if you read *Angel of the Underworld* online, there are live definitions of Yiddish and Hebrew words, and if you hover over them with your cursor, a definition pops up, and you pepper the prose with quite a few of these words. So I wanted to draw you out on this power of the digital medium as a tool for unpacking a deeply, deeply, specifically, culturally embedded story.

**YT:** Yeah, so I do think the way the editors of *Jewrotica* handled the issue of the glossary was actually beautiful, as you pointed out. I thought it worked really, really well. Kind of, it's a way of interacting with the text in a different way, very tactile. I could easily have used English words and it is an English text, but I chose to include Yiddish to give a feel, to give a flavor. But I was thinking, maybe I could read some of that opening passage of *Angel of the Underworld*, which I actually had set aside to read. So this is the opening section of *Angel of the Underworld*, and it's from my most recently published book, which is *Prodigal Children in the House of God*. And it's a book of short stories:

A tepid afternoon light filled the beys-medresh, a house of study. It was the sort of day when it wasn't clear whether it was sunny or cloudy, mild or chilly. The gilt bindings of the sacred books that lined the walls and covered shtenders, standing lectern, seemed to glow more steadily, more brightly, in such ambiguity of light and climate. The scholars, all of them married, were in various poses of study. Some were seated, some were standing. Some were bent over the shtenders in concentration while others gestured passionately. Some even jumped up and down to emphasize a point or an insight only just gleaned from a particularly thorny passage of the Talmud.

Although Meyer had seen and been a participant in this scene and others like it for many years, everything seemed sharper and clearer to him today. Maybe it was because of the weather. Maybe it was because Yerukhem, his khavruse, his study partner, wasn't there. Yerukhem's wife Brokhe was in the hospital, about to give birth to their first child. Although he occasionally spotted other scholars bumming around in the hallway, or the coat room, or sometimes even in the beys-medresh itself, Meyer rarely joined them. Nor was he prone to bouts of looking around the room. As a rule, Meyer tried to stay focused on the texts he was studying. His time here was precious and he didn't want anything to distract him from learning.

**JH:** The two surprises that I see in the story, or potential surprises, are first, the surprising degree of matter-of-factness with which the rabbi encounters Meyer's own confession of attraction to men and his concerns. And the second, is the overarching message of the story is a counterintuitive comfort with the leading of a double life. I think in popular culture, the gay experience is couched in the world in general, in ways that are about freeing oneself from the implicit and sometimes explicit lie that is part of leading a double life. And this story, I think, engages with some of the dimensionality and richness of a double life, in ways that I found

moving and challenging. So, I wanted to engage you on those two themes, two characteristics, I guess, of the story.

**YT:** I mean, I think there are a range of grapplings, reactions within this collection around the question of "Gayness encounters Orthodoxy." Some of them are harsher than others. In this particular story, the Rabbi is not surprised, he's not particularly shocked, he's kind of a man-of-the-world, who's kinda seen a lot, he's definitely a character who, even in his position of communal leadership, does not see an obligation to come down harshly on this particularly earnest young man who's already gone through familial tragedies. And in terms of the overall feel the story, Meyer's feeling his way into some kind of movement around his identity. He's starting to act, it's starting to move from the realm of unconscious or conscious desire. And so he's not particularly rushing towards any rash decision, he's not storming out of his marriage, or storming away from the world that he knows. He's living with it for now and we leave it up to the reader to kind of piece together or imagine what happens beyond the narrative confines of the story.

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**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](http://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](http://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.

One of your poems from *The Insatiable Psalm*, which is a collection of your poems, struck me for its irreducibly religious content and feeling, and I found it very moving. It's *The Figure Prostrate on Tisha B'Av Stone*. May I read it?

**YT:** Absolutely.

**JH:** "While the Second Temple burned, while the Jews huddled in lament, Mother stared into a smaller flame. Even in the narrow of the last August rain, the flame's sword, persistent into beads of corn and careful salmon, the feast after the fast. Its concentration refused to be touched by the return of men who collapsed into sticky beds and napped under the maps of their blank hunger. And as the surrounding flames against the edifice grew more furious, and the desecration more lurid, pigs and swastikas, Mother found she had to put the food aside to forgo the solitary light, she had to hurry to shelter by the side of the road under the kitchen table. She needed to lie prostrate, biting into the wooden columns, in order to avoid the oncoming hooves of the terrified horses."

**JH:** The reason this felt so powerful to me was because the religious experience of Tisha B'Av, commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which is a pious lament for the historic suffering of the Jews, takes on a storyful, historicized episode in the life of this woman. And I found it very moving.

**YT:** Thank you, the nice thing about poetry is that I don't feel as bound by the rigors of impurism the way I did it when I was a graduate student in history, and yet, I can allow history to inflect my creative writing, to seep into, to inspire, to jostle, to move, the rhythms of a poem. It's kind of freeing. And I think that is one of the main reasons why I turned in my writing life from studying history to creative writing. It provided this route of freedom to interact with Jewish sources, in ways that were meaningful to me. I didn't have to worry about the omniscient dissertation advisor looking over my shoulder. And this poem, yeah there's a lot, a lot going on. There's, first, the historical timeframe. Then, even within the question of history, there's different histories. There's swastikas, then there's Second Temple. So there's this very purposeful collision of time and space, within just a few lines.

**JH:** From your collection of poems called Prayers of a Heretic, I saw two poems that picked up on really, very different themes from the ones that we've been talking about now, specifically the challenges of digital or post-industrial world. One of the poems is called Crossing the Big Box Store Parking Lot, and the other one, from which I'd like to quote, is called The People of the Book Without Books. And I wanna read a section of the latter:

How shall we pray on the Sabbath and on holidays, when electronic devices are forbidden? And how dare we depart from the path of our ancestors, they who touched and swayed over and died for these holy books, and from the ground below where the fragments are buried, cried the canter in intonation normally reserved for the Days of Awe. And how shall the weekly Torah portion be recited? The words that unite our people in homeland and diaspora. "For surely scrolls will not be spared," wept the Torah reader, so young and already renowned across several provinces for a style of cantillation stunning in its precision of enunciation and mastery of melody. "We shall descend underground." "No, we shall study the ways of the martyrs." "Enough, God will reveal the means," the rabbi said, resuming prayer. Leaves rustling in gratitude. Only the trees rejoiced.

**JH:** Can you comment on this digital anxiety that I'm reading into this poem, or am I misreading it?

**YT:** You're right on. There are a number of poems in Prayers of a Heretic about reading, books, libraries. I am a librarian, and there is a generalized anxiety in our profession and archives as well, where people just aren't writing physical letters anymore. So within both of those professions, the librarian or archival profession, there is a fear about, what is gonna happen to the book? What is gonna happen to that experience when you open up a cover and you're magically drawn in? So, it's a playful meditation on envisioning a world without books, for the people of the book, the people that venerate the written word on paper. It doesn't provide any obvious answers, but it certainly raises the question. It's a dystopic anxiety poem, of which there are several in this book, some more political than others. It's definitely a particularly Jewish poem.

**JH:** It's refreshing to encounter a dystopic poem that also is good humored in its way, or at least ironic. And the punchline at the end, "only the trees rejoiced," was great. That was really... That sent it home. I had a good chuckle. So I'd like to close. It's part of your authorial personality as we've discussed, is this encounter between being gay and being Orthodox, or having been Orthodox. I don't know how to characterize your relationship with Orthodoxy, so I want to ask

you to characterize it and tell us today, a snapshot of who you are now, in relation to Orthodoxy?

**YT:** So, I've lived as an Orthodox Jew 'til I was 22, I no longer regularly go to Synagogue. I do visit my family, who are all Orthodox, and kind of re-enter that world. So it's definitely like a part of my life. I did find my way as a writer outside that world. So when I go back, it's definitely going back, but it's the core of my being, so it infuses everything I do.

**JH:** Well Yermiyahu, I wanna thank you for taking the time and the pleasure of your company and your poetry, it's really been a pleasure to get to know you and to talk about your great work.

**YT:** Well, thank you so much, Josh, I really appreciate the opportunity.

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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](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), or you can also stay tuned for future episodes.