KEITH THOMAS: HORROR AND THE TORAH

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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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JH: Welcome to this edition of The College Commons Podcast, where we're gonna be taking a deep dive into a new movie by Keith Thomas. Keith Thomas worked in clinical research at several Western teaching hospitals, before embarking on a career as a novelist and screenwriter. He has published The Clarity in 2018 and Dahlia Black in 2019, both with Simon & Schuster, and developed numerous book, film, and TV projects with creators like James Patterson. He lives in Denver, and The Vigil, the topic of our conversation today is his feature debut. Keith Thomas, thank you for coming to the College Commons Podcast.

Keith Thomas: Thank you for having me. Pleasure to be here.

JH: The Vigil is about a man who is providing an overnight watch to a deceased member of his former Orthodox Jewish community. In the course of that night, he finds himself opposite a malevolent entity as he watches over the body, in the home of the body and his widow. In other interviews and your writing about The Vigil, you speak of trying to get a universal experiences, specifically the experience of the dark night of the soul, which was certainly evoked in this movie. Do you find that in addition to night time, being at someone else's house also triggers that experience?

KT: Yes, I do. It's interesting, in some ways, our homes, we've built around us, we've assembled all these things that have meaning to us or that provide comfort. And even though everyone's house presumably provides the same sort of thing, it's all the stuff we like, it's all the stuff we need and use as memories or some sort of this emotional attachment, when we're in someone else's house and amongst all their memories and their things, it's a little uncanny. So yes, it's definitely a sort of scenario where if you had to spend time at someone's house alone, particularly at night in an uncomfortable sort of situation that, that amplifies the unease.

JH: Yeah. I'm thinking of childhood and your first sleepovers, and also as a parent, my kid's first sleepover.

KT: Yeah, sure.

JH: Less universally speaking and more specifically Jewish, the movie's title The Vigil, it comes from mitzvah, a good deed, so to speak, even though mitzvah literally means commandment, a good deed that Jews are called upon to do, which is specifically to guard the body of the deceased until burial. In Hebrew, a person who keeps vigil is called a shomer, or as our Yiddish speaking protagonist Yakov calls it, a shoimer. Have you ever been a shomer, keeping an overnight vigil?

KT: I have not personally, though I have a number of friends and family members who have. For the film, I relied on their experience to some extent, talking to them, though these, they were sitting the vigil as it were, for family members and friends, the people they knew, and they were of course in shifts, and not there that long. But for the film, I read interviews with and spoke to folks from the Hasidic community who had worked as paid shomers. So I kind of got some insight into how they did what they did and how it was supposed to go. Obviously, in my film, our lead Yakov is not the best shomer in terms of what [chuckle] he's doing at this house that night. [chuckle]

JH: He's got other things going on, or maybe he's just the right shomer, as we'll learn at the ending. [chuckle]

KT: That's true.

JH: I have to say though, that being a shomer, I encourage all of our listeners if they have the opportunity to undertake this mitzvah. It's deeply connecting. In the background of our protagonist's story, Yakov has left the hyper-insular world of ultra-orthodoxy, and it's very fresh. He still needs a support group like Footsteps to help manage secular life. And he's also not well in his own skin. I'm sure you know that there's a burgeoning genre out there of autobiographies that describe this phenomenon of leaving ultra-orthodox communities, and moving through the poignancy of missing those communities, and at the same time needing for whatever reason to flee them. And in fact, you supply the reason for Yakov's departure as well. Do you call on these stories for inspiration or information?

KT: Yes, quite in-depth. In terms of when I was writing the screenplay, I relied a lot on interviews and documentaries and YouTube videos, talking to ex-Hasidic folks. And then once I teamed up with my producers and we really started in on the production, he became much more very personally involved in conversations with ex-Hasidic folks. And for example, in the film, in the opening minutes, we are at what is equivalent to a Footsteps meeting, a meeting of folks who have left the community, or in the process of leaving the community, and they're trying to adjust to the secular world.

KT: And in this sequence, outside of our primary character, actor Dave Davis, everyone else at that table is either a part of Footsteps, or came through the program, or somehow involved in it. They're all ex-Hasidic. And so a lot of their own stories or the stories A, that they're telling at that table but B, went on to influence a lot of the Yakov character's back story. We really drilled down into the look and feel in terms of they became the consultants on the film, both for the Yiddish, but also for the production design in the house. We... Everything make it as authentic as possible.

JH: You mentioned in some of your notes and other interviews that the Orthodox or the Ultra-Orthodox community were in the wings while you were filming on location, but also participated in various degrees in the production. And I'm wondering if there was any friction or hurt feeling, or even just acknowledgement of the fact that there's a tension there of telling a story and frankly validating the flight from the Ultra-Orthodox community as you're working with people who are still Ultra-Orthodox.

KT: I knew the story I wanted to tell, and it was a very personal story in terms of our main character, and where he was going, where he had been and, as we said earlier, I wanted it to have these sort of universal themes so you didn't have to be Jewish to understand what he was going through. I didn't want to demonize the Hasidic community. I also didn't wanna paint their pictures too rosy in terms of...

JH: Romanticizing.

KT: Their lifestyle, yeah, romanticizing it. It's tough walking that middle road of how do you tell the story from this perspective without going one way or the other. In terms of the community interaction, they were very curious. Obviously, when we were shooting in the house, which is the majority of the film, they weren't present. But when we were on the street, in Williamsburg or Borough Park, they came out even if it was two or three in the morning. And they really wanna know what's going on. My producers, my LA-based producers, are modern Orthodox Jews, obviously Menashe Lustig, who's in the film, still lives in the Hasidic community. Another executive producer is a rabbi who comes from that community, so we had a lot of folks we could send out in terms of put them on the end of the block and say, "Hey, this is what we're doing. This is why we're making this film. This is what it is about." There was a little friction at the start in terms... It was less about why are you making this movie. They didn't actually care, a Hasidic horror movie, whatever, they could care less.

KT: But it was about, why are you here? Why are you filming on this block? And so, I think, when we got to the point where we had several monitors up for crew to see what was going on, and in terms of technical stuff, we let them have the monitors, and so you'd look over at the tent, it's very cold when they're filming, and you'd see them kinda all huddled in there, all these men in the middle of the night. Once they watched what we were filming, I think their curiosity faded and they were like, "Okay, we can go home."

JH: [chuckle] Interesting. And I wanna give you a shout out for achieving the balance that you described you wanted to achieve, which was neither romanticizing nor vilifying, but rather humanizing the Hasidic experience to the degree that that was the back story, it wasn't central to the story. I thought you did a good job of that, and I actively thought that while I was watching, so kudos to you for that.

KT: Thank you.

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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 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 up and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: I wanna move from the sociology and the religious culture behind the people in the movie to the monster, the horror story that the movie is really about. And it turns out that you are a graduate of our institution Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion. And as a requirement for graduation, you wrote a thesis, and it turns out, as I learned in talking to you, that your thesis was about monsters in Torah. So there's no way we could get through this interview without asking you about monsters in Torah.

KT: Yes. Growing up, horror was something I was always fascinated by. Fiction, originally short fiction, and the novels, and then film, and I don't know, it just kind of sunk. I suppose it's apropos to say it sunk its claws into me, and so it was just always there in the background. And when it came time for my thesis, [chuckle] that kind of bubbled up and I thought, "Hey, if I could write about the Nephilim and Leviathan, and find a way into the these stories and why they exist and explore those, that would be a lot of fun." And of course, part of that, to a certain extent, I was very specific in the thesis in terms of which exact things I was looking at, but the shedim, the demons were another piece of that. And so a lot of that study in preparation for that germinated in a way to create The Vigil and the entity at the center of this. I relied a lot upon that research, even though it was years earlier, in terms of creating the sort of the track that I wanted to use to get to this thing.

JH: Yeah, the story unfolds in relation to this ancient awareness of demons. It's engaging, it's really great, and there's another layer though. It's not a spoiler to reveal the fact that the source of the demon that haunts Yakov is from the Holocaust. Talk to us a little bit about what it meant for you, and how you wanted to develop a story that draws on the one hand, on ancient demonology as you just described, but also aims to get at the emotional crux of what the Holocaust means, which is such a modern story.

KT: Yeah, that was important. And from the very initial stages of the script, I knew once I had created Yakov, that trauma was gonna be central to that, and trauma and guilt and all the after effects and PTSD and those sorts of things, were very personal and meaningful for me and something I really wanted to explore. And so... I knew that it was going to involve this demonic entity, but in Judaism, we don't have this concept of the devil and hell sending out demons to take people's souls, so I needed to find a framework that would provide a sort of genesis for a demon, or at least a way that a demon could exist in the world, in this world, that made sense almost in a... From a theological perspective. And if you're gonna talk about trauma, and you're gonna talk about pain, and you're gonna talk about Jewish communities, the Holocaust is of course central to it, but I also wanted to go back a bit further in terms of pogroms and stuff my own family had suffered. And so the mazik, the demon in the film, became the embodiment of that.

KT: Now, that being said, saying you're gonna talk about the Holocaust, writing that in the script said, I've got a scene set during the Holocaust is one thing, but actually making it is another. And when meeting with my producers and discussing it, it was very challenging, in fact, that was the hardest part of the film to make. I definitely have found, just in my own viewing, that attempts to encapsulate the Holocaust in a film, are very, very tricky. It's very easy to cheapen it, it's very, very easy to exploit it or lose... It's almost [chuckle] like a Martin Buber sort of concept of once you start analyzing it and you're not reacting emotionally, once you're thinking about it, it loses the power, especially with this film. I did not have the budget to fly to Europe and set things in a certain way, so for me, it came down to relying on a sort of vision for this that... Hearken back to the film, Son of Saul, which I thought did a very good job of showing a very personal perspective on the Holocaust, in that the camera in that film is essentially set upon the shoulders of one individual, and we are experiencing what he experiences as he experiences it, 'cause it's real-time thing.

KT: So I went with that sort of idea. It also conceptually made sense in terms of the film, the trauma that Yakov suffers takes about 20 seconds, in his life, it's about 20 seconds, but it has haunted him forever. The ripple effects of it. And the same for our Holocaust sequence, it is very, very short. And it is very elliptical, it is very vague in terms of, necessarily, what is happening, but I think the power of it and how that one moment in the midst of a sea of horror has resonated with this individual, with his family, to his neighborhood, to his community, and I was very interested in looking at how those ripple effects, not only affect all these people who are in play in this film, but the community as a whole, and the people as a whole.

JH: Yeah, no, you did bring it to a very fine narrative point. Now, I wanna speak cinematic graphically, I don't know if that's a word, but we're gonna create new adverbs here. Is it my imagination or did you draw on the cadences of superhero shots for the

preparatory scene to the climax? The cadence and the steps of preparation, the visual idiom of mustering a superpower, even the music, am I making this up or did you find some inspiration?

KT: When I first wrote it, and essentially what is happening as Yakov was putting on "Spiritual armor," taking some stuff a little bit out of context, but putting it into that context for himself. I spoke to several Rabbis and we discussed this scene at length in terms of how do we play this? And what do we do? In a lot of movies and in the horror genre, there's this sort of... The point, it's always kind of towards the beginning of the third act, where the hero will dawn whatever armor it is and go forward. And for example, there's a film, The Evil Dead, where there's a sequence where it is a lot of these kind of insert shots as he's preparing for battle with a chainsaw against [chuckle] these demons in this house, and so I knew about... Of course, very well aware of that shot, and it uses a lot of dolly effects in terms of the camera gliding in, and I purposely pulled back a bit [chuckle] from going over the top on it. But I wanted my cake and eat it too, in terms of referencing, that sort of thing, and having it have that power and then obviously the swell of the music that's going on, but at the same time, keep it... Keep it kind of emotional and keep it tied to, no pun intended, but tied to the history and what's happening in the sequence.

KT: The tefillin in that scene, in fact, is... Belonged to the grandfather of one of the producers, so there [chuckle] are a lot of interesting layers going on that are happening there and it was a lot of fun to shoot. It was funny when we shot it, it was very emotional, a lot of folks were quite emotional with that sequence, and then they got even more emotional seeing it cut with that score laid on top of it, which kinda has this heroic thing that it's imbuing.

JH: Before you leave us, tell us about your COVID experience as a creative person. Have you drawn on isolation to find inspiration? Have you found themes that you can tell you're taking notes on for future productions?

KT: Yeah, for a lot of us involved in the film industry, when everything ground to a very sudden halt, there was, definitely for myself and a lot of folks I know, there was this kind of desperate moment of, what happens next? Can we go back to how it was? Essentially, our work stopped, and it stopped for quite a while, and there's still, of course, many, many people in the industry who are struggling significantly as things are very slow to get up and running. After the shock wore off and after this kind of, you know, trying to reassess what we're doing, and certainly for me, like what future directions where it really provided an opportunity to do a lot of work that I think we don't normally get the opportunity to do, and that is really rewrite stuff in depth and explore new opportunities and open up maybe abandoned projects and start looking at those in depth.

KT: I've said this to folks in the industry when we've talked about this, but I'm very hopeful that we're gonna see a resurgence in really well-crafted, well-written things

emerging from the COVID crisis, because everyone had the time to actually do that third draft, to actually go back and look at these things and spend more time that they didn't before. I certainly had that experience, the first few months were incredibly difficult, but towards the end, I ended up having many more very productive conversations in terms of future projects, and it gave me the time, the little bubble to put in the extra work that we don't normally get. It's gonna be interesting to see if there's kind of another uptick in the contained horror movie genre, because everyone was stuck in a house. [chuckle] We might see a lot of these stories, or at least if we don't see those stories, we'll see a lot of, maybe people reacting more to them saying, "Oh, that's familiar."

JH: Well, Keith Thomas, thank you so much for joining us on the Commons Podcast. It was really great to talk to you. And for listeners, The Vigil is out and you can get it as video on demand now.

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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.

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