

LAURA LEIBMAN: JEWISH HISTORY RENEWED IN THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where I look forward to having you join us in a conversation with Professor Laura Leibman. Laura Leibman is a professor of English and Humanities at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Her 2012 book, "Messianism, Secrecy and Mysticism," won a Jordan Schnitzer Book Award and a National Jewish Book Award. And her recent book, "The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects," won no less than three 2020 National Jewish Book Awards. Her work focuses on religion and the daily lives of women and children in early America, and uses everyday objects to help bring their stories back to life. Her forthcoming, "Once We Were Slaves," is about an early multiracial Jewish family who began their lives enslaved in the Caribbean and became some of the wealthiest Jews in New York. Laura Leibman, thank you so much for joining us on the Commons podcast.

Laura Leibman: Thank you for having me.

JH: The book that we're gonna discuss today, your recent one, "The Art of the Jewish Family" proposes an approach to learning history. I'd like to ask you to lay out for us this particular approach to the historian's work, although the way you did it, and this is the highest compliment I can muster, I'm tempted to call it the historian's art. Tell us how you approached it.

[chuckle]

LL: Part of what I'm interested in in "The Art of the Jewish Family" is thinking about how do we write the history of people who are pretty much forgotten by normal historical record. So, I'm looking at how do we go back and find resources on the very people who are considered not important enough to include in the written records or in archives. So, one of the approaches that I take in this book is really thinking about turning to objects to fill some of those gaps. I'm interested in things that are pretty much everyday kinds of objects, so I'm not as much

interested in Kiddush cups as maybe tea cups, and what they can tell us about those women's daily lives, and how women who maybe weren't considered important actually were very influential for helping establish Jewish communities in early America.

JH: So without spoiling all the details, would you list for us the five objects that you discuss and highlight as windows into the Jewish family in your book?

LL: The five objects that I look at in the book range from women who were sometimes very poor to women who were quite wealthy. The first object that I look at is a little bit more like a text, but I read it like it's an object, and it's a begging letter. It's a letter by a woman whose husband did not do particularly well in business, and she's fallen on hard times, and like many of the widows in the congregation has to write these yearly letters begging the congregation, asking for more money so that she can do basic things, like pay her rent and even have wood to keep herself warm during the winter. And those letters are actually pretty rare, but are also a weird window into women's lives.

LL: The second object that I look at is by a woman who had more financial resources, and it's a set of six silver cups that were made by a Jewish silversmith, Myer Myers, and were given to his niece to commemorate her wedding. And those cups, I look at how they're passed down through the family. And the cups, in many ways, are a way of getting at how the generations wanted to commemorate what their family was about.

LL: The third object that I look at is one that I return to in my book that's just coming out, "Once We Were Slaves" and that is an ivory miniature, made of Sarah Brandon Moses, a woman who was born enslaved on the island of Barbados, and ended up very wealthy by the time she died about 30 years later.

LL: The fourth object that I look at is by a woman who had access to more education than some of the other women that I look at. And she's somebody who was able to keep a record of her life through what you might think of as being like Facebook for the 19th century, it's something called a commonplace book, and it's really a place where friends can share pictures or ideas or quotations that matter to them, and that they keep them close to their hearts and as a way of remembering their friendship networks.

LL: And the fifth and final object that I look at is a family silhouette. Silhouettes are kind of the poor man's portraiture of this time period. They're something that you can get fairly cheaply. And I'm really interested in this particular portrait because it's of the first Ashkenazi, major Ashkenazi rabbi in New York, and his wife and their entire family. And what we see is suddenly the wives are taking on this much more major role than we would have associated with Jewish families afore with rabbinical families. So suddenly she's become the centerpiece of what it means to have an Orthodox or a new Orthodox Jewish household in New York, starting in the 1840s.

JH: I know you're not allowed to do this, but you have to tell us which of these is your favorite.

LL: The miniatures are just so charming, and you get a real sense of the woman's personality, so definitely the miniature would be way high up on my list. And they're just small and adorable. Second, I would say, would be the commonplace book, in part just because it's so interesting to think about what were women reading and what did women think was important to share with each other. So I love that community aspect of the commonplace book.

JH: In your introduction, you state something that I found really evocative. I'd like to quote it and then have you elaborate a bit on it. You say, "While we know who owned each of the five objects, we are missing critical facts for each of them. Rather than obscuring these holes in the record, I've chosen to highlight those absences and consider their significance." Would you share with us one insight that you distilled out of such an absence?

LL: Yeah. For me, the silence that was left in the records ended up being so important that normally, when we think about museum collections and objects, we want the most pristine whole object possible. And going back to my earlier tea cup example, one of the tea cups that I look at is this tea cup that depicts Jodensavanne, the Jewish Savanna, on the front. But when you turn it around, it's actually missing the handle. And I... For me, that missing handle is really evocative of how much information we're missing, not just about the tea cup, but almost everything related to women. So for the tea cups, those kinds of tea cups were part of sequences of tea cups, where there'd be a scene of one thing and then a whole bunch of other scenes on different teacups. And we don't know what the rest of the set was, right? So we're missing this basic information about... Was it a whole bunch of Jewish sites? Was it a whole bunch of different sites in Suriname, just one of them happened to be Jewish? We don't even know who owned that particular tea cup. So, for me, that missing information really speaks to the heart of what's going on with looking at people, and in this case women, who were deemed not worthy of being part of the historical record by the people creating archives. So for every single little thing that I look at, there's always some piece that's being silenced about that woman's past.

LL: And so I really am trying to be very careful in the book of thinking about why, where we have something in the record, why did it enter into there, and why were other things missing about particular people's lives? And how might we be thoughtful about what it means to not perpetuate those losses, to try and think about when something's missing, what created those gaps in our knowledge as opposed to just assuming that there was nothing there in the life to begin with.

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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 ask you to muse a bit, if you would, on how these objects capture the intersection between being a woman in 18th and 19th century America, and social class?

LL: Class definitely runs a lot through the book, in part because I'm really interested in how class gives you access to education during this time period, how education is not the default mode for women, particularly for poorer women, that if there was only one person who could be educated in the household, they weren't gonna choose the daughter because they felt that the boy's education was more important for the family's future success. So that really sort of then echoes throughout the entire wealth of material that we have about women from this time period, particularly Jewish women, that if I'm being denied an education, how am I going to create the kinds of documents that I'd expect for a literate person to have created, let alone create them well enough and become important enough in the eyes of society that something would be preserved. So really class just ends up being crucial for what happens. That said, I'm also really interested in how class is really unstable for the women during this time period that if you look at the poor roles, there's no state-sponsored welfare, it's really based on, "I'm a Jew, so I go to the Jewish synagogue to get my welfare."

LL: I'm a Christian and I go to either the Protestant or Catholic or Methodist, whatever congregation I belong to. They're in charge of making sure that I can get by. So when you look at the poor roles for the Jewish community, it's so many of the people on there are women, and yet not all of those women began their lives in poverty. So the first woman may begin with a begging letter, she actually is doing okay. It's just that the laws of inheritance make her incredibly impoverished after her husband dies without a will. And that really is a large part of the reason why you get these women dominating the poor roles in congregations throughout early America, that it's not that they're bad in business, it's that they're not educated to be able to succeed in business a lot of the times. It's not that they don't know how to manage money, it's that the laws are built so that they do not inherit money. So that then creates this system in which women who previously had their own households to run, suddenly later in life end up being incredibly poor and incredibly dependent on their congregations, and really cut out of the social systems of class that they were once accustomed to.

LL: So I'm really interested in that sort of fluctuation that happens over the course of women's lives, sometimes in a happy sense with Sarah Brandon Moses who becomes... Starts off very poor and becomes wealthy, but in other cases, like Hannah Lousada, where she starts off doing okay and then ends up just incredibly poor and constantly having to ask for just the most basic of necessities.

JH: Much of the Jewish experience writ large over the centuries is about migration and movement of populations and avoiding persecution, and there's a lot of movement in some of your objects as well, or they tell the story of a lot of movement, and we've already talked a little bit about crossing the Caribbean to the United States. I wonder if you would tell us about a story that comes out of your work that captures geographic mobility and travel, I'm thinking in particular of the coconut Kiddush cup, just because it's really cool.

LL: When I started working on Jews in early America, I just sort of assumed people would live in one place, and that is just utterly not the case. The Jews are incredibly mobile, they can have relatives in other ports and very deliberately so, so that they can have trading partners, and they tend to like objects which they can bring along with them as they move from port to port, or those are the things that survive. So you do end up having these objects which, like the coconut Kiddush cups, which are made in London, that are made from objects, coconuts, which are actually from the Caribbean itself, and interestingly enough, coconuts you can... Based on their shape, you can tell which part of the world they're from, they've done these great genetic studies of coconuts. So you really get the sense in which they're using these materials that resonate with their experiences in one port to depict their life in another port. So I was in the Caribbean, but now I'm going to think about what it means to be in London. And basically also just because the Caribbean ends up being the source of great wealth, coconuts have this wonderful resonance for people living in Europe, and end up being very classy, so there's the sort of coconut cup revival, of which Jews partake during the early part of the 19th century, late part of the 18th century.

JH: This idea of geographic mobility and the idea of social mobility in either direction both come up in your forthcoming book, "Once We Were Slaves", which is very tantalizing, I wonder if you can tell us in brief the story of this family that was born enslaved and rose to riches.

LL: Basically, it's a story of these two siblings, Sarah Brandon Moses, and Isaac Ropus Brandon, who were born enslaved to a Sephardic family in Bridgetown Barbados, their father is one of the wealthiest Jews on the island, and their mother is enslaved not to him, but to another Sephardic family in Bridgetown. And through a series of events that happen a couple of years after Sarah is born, the pair of siblings not only end up getting manumitted, getting freed through the help of their father, but end up inheriting some money and a house on their mother's side through their Anglican grandfather. They're born in Barbados around the time when Sarah is 12 and her brother is 18, they decide that they don't wanna live at the margins of a Jewish community anymore, and their mother is not halachically Jewish, so they decide to travel to nearby Suriname and in Suriname they officially become members of the Nachal, the Portuguese Jewish community, which means they're not just Jews, but in the eyes of American colonies, they're fancy Jews, they're really high class Jews, and they don't spend very much time in Suriname, for a variety of reasons I get into in the book.

LL: But they end up leaving, and Isaac comes back to Barbados where he gets involved in several of the civil rights movements, and his sister, Sarah ends up going to London where she goes to an elite Sephardic boarding school, and that's where her miniature that I talked about in *The Art of the Jewish Family* is created. It's when she's in school in London. When she's a London, she meets at the Bevis Marks synagogue, another Jew who's not from London but from New York, and his name is Joshua Moses, and he is an Ashkenazi Jew, and so he is, in the eyes of Bevis Marks, not as good as her.

LL: So she is quite the catch, she's not only charming and beautiful, but she also comes with a 10,000 pound dowry, which is an enormous amount of money for this time period, and they get

married and they come back to New York. They decide not to stay in London and they settle near to Hugh's family. And Hugh's family is also quite important though, some of the wealthiest Jews in New York. They end up having 10 children, nine of whom survive to adulthood, and unfortunately Sarah dies quite young, she dies about the time that she's 30, right after giving birth to her second set of twins. So really the latter part of the book is thinking about after her brother Isaac comes over to the United States, he is a big business partners with her husband, but what happens to that next generation? To that generation that's not born enslaved, but carries this legacy from the family from earlier with them, and how their lives play out.

LL: Part of what ended up being fascinating for me was the next generation is also so transcontinental, that Sarah's sons end up working in Canton in China and have sort of interesting travails there. One of them gets involved in an attempted coup in Nicaragua. They're involved in the Mexican-American war and the civil wars. They go to the gold fields and try to get rich in California, they're just all over the place. I think it really gets at that misconception that we often have, that people in earlier time periods just stayed in one place forever and ever and ever, and that's just not part of the Jewish-American story.

JH: I'd like to close out the interview by asking you to draw back the veil a little bit and reveal the historians craft. Historians spend so much time in archives and in museums looking at sources, only a tiny, tiny, tiny fraction of which become useful for the research question that we may be asking when one comes across a compelling, powerful, relevant source item in your case or text, it feels like an Indiana Jones moment of discovery, and it's extremely satisfying and fun, so I want you to tell us the story of landing one such discovery to share with our listeners the glory of historianship.

LL: There are couple of examples that are sort of related to Sarah and her brother that I think are moments where I'm like, wha! One of them happened of finally figuring out that the woman who's in the ivory miniature, who we knew was his sister named Sarah, is the same woman who we know from the early records of Barbados had been born enslaved and had been manumitted, and that happened going through the archives in London for a congregation Bevis Marks. And I had for years been trying to just definitively prove that it's not a different sister named Sarah, because with Sephardic Jews in particular, they're often naming people again and again and again the same name, so you don't wanna ever assume that just because somebody has the same name in a family that they're the same person. They're often a relative. So that was like one of those eureka moments where after four years of trying to prove it was the same person, I finally found a mention in her marriage contract that she was a convert, and so that that should have clarified that she isn't somebody who, as had previously been asserted, had been born to somebody whose mother had been halachically Jewish.

LL: Another moment like that was really when a sequence of both wills and deeds related to her mother's family, her mother, which under several different names, so sometimes she goes under Esther Gill, sometimes she's Sarah Esther Lopes, sometimes she's Sarah Esther Gill, and again you're sort of like, are those the same person? It seems like it's the same person. Finally, when I found the will of her Anglican Father, the one that left the house to the family, he said, "My

beloved daughter", and then he lists all of her names. She would go by this name and this name and this name, like, oh, thank you so much. You know, [chuckle] like, "Bless you for having noticed that she goes by all these different names and that you wanna clarify it".

LL: So there are those moments where you're so grateful, and that was so important for understanding their history because her sister-in-law is Anne Jordan Gill who's one of the first national heroes of Barbados, so it really was one of those moments where it became quite clear that their enslaved part of their family and their Afro-Barbadian part of their family are in Island's history in some ways way more important than their Jewish side of their family, and that really opened up huge avenues for understanding what was the situation that they were experiencing in Barbados and how the kinds of activism and struggles for civil rights that her brother Isaac was undergoing were reflected in these larger movements within the family as struggling per civil rights for Afro-Barbadians. So for me, that was like, "Bless you" to the grandfather who mentions the names, but then also just is one of those things where suddenly it's like the dominoes fall, that suddenly you can make all these other connections based on that affirmation.

JH: The research is fascinating. I encourage everyone to dive into these amazing stories of American Jews, American meaning in the continent of the Americas, "The Art of the Jewish Family" by Laura Leibman, which won three National Jewish Book Awards. And to you, Laura, thank you so much for joining us and for sharing your incredible research and for the work itself in illuminating these corners of Jewish history, it's really been a pleasure to talk to you.

LL: Thank you so much for taking the time to have the conversation.

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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