



## PAPER BRIGADE WITH EDITOR BECCA KANTOR

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union college's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus, and your host.

Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, where we're gonna discuss Paper Brigade with its editor, Becca Kantor. Becca Kantor is the Editorial Director of Jewish Book Council, and its annual print literary journal Paper Brigade, the topic of our discussion today. She received a BA from English, from the University of Pennsylvania and an MA in creative writing from the University of East Anglia in Norwich England. Becca was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to spend a year in Estonia writing and studying the country's Jewish history. Becca Kantor, thank you for joining us at the College Commons.

Becca Kantor: Oh, thank you so much for having me Josh.

JH: I really look forward to discussing Paper Brigade with you. It's build as the Jewish Book Council's annual print literary journal, and it certainly is that, but it's also so much more, in fact, it's kind of a collage of memoir, graphic novel, original art, photography, short stories, literary excerpts, essays, even interviews and even more... It's just amazing, it's beautiful to hold and to behold, and just opening it up at random is a delight. So first off, congratulations on a wonderful publication, and secondly, I'd like to ask you to introduce us to it by talking about its name, Paper Brigade.

BK: Our name is taken from a group of writer and intellectuals in the Vilna Ghetto who risked their lives to save thousands of books and documents from the Nazis, they became known sort of colloquially as the Paper Brigade and their actions and the value that they place on Jewish literature is a real inspiration for us.

JH: So I'd like to talk about one section, which is called Meet the Reader, where readers weigh in and you have a picture of the reader and their comments, and they offer such great concise

comments. You've got a great readership, tell me a little bit about that section, and let's have our audience weigh in as Meet the Readers too for future editions.

BK: Oh, thank you so much, I'm really glad that you picked up on that, the readers that you see here are actually called from our Instagram account. This year, they're all actually authors themselves as well, we've asked them to, in most cases, speak to a book that's influenced them, or that they feel that other readers should know about that maybe they don't already know about, and just saying a few sentences, why the book is really meaningful to them, how it's influenced them, why other people should read it and why it's important today. So that first is a great way of... In the midst of the longer pieces, the articles, the interviews, the essays, the short fiction, to have these other little snippets of different books that maybe don't fit into some of the longer pieces, but they're also definitely noteworthy, and we wanna include them in a different way.

JH: Well, I encourage our audience to weigh in on the Instagram account and to enjoy the fellow readers comments, which are really, really a blast. I wanna talk about some of the actual content in the most recent edition of Paper Brigade, which just came out for the year 2022, and there's a lot to talk about, but I wanna start with Tunnels by Rutu Modan, which is a graphic novel, and it's introduced as the story of Nili Broshi, who is an archaeologist who has organized a dig to search for the Ark of the Covenant, and her brother, a shifty antiquities collector, a Palestinian smuggler, whom she has known for many years, and even the red heifer, whose ashes are traditionally required to sanctify the ark, and there's even academic politics, it's a total mishmash and a crazy story with not altogether sympathetic characters, but there's so many layers of culture and politics and the protagonists are so flawed. I wanted you to talk a little bit more about Tunnels and its baggage and what attracted you to it as an editor.

BK: One thing that I'll say to start off is, is that you mentioned in your intro that Paper Brigade is a journal that really emphasizes the visual aspects of books as well as the words inside them, and to me that's really important, and often gets overlooked, the fact that books aren't just about the literature inside them, but they're also physical objects, their visual objects, and it's important to really celebrate the visual arts and illustrators as well as fine artists who have books as well. So it's always really a pleasure for us to feature excerpts of visual arts books, and recently, I've just been seeing actually this blossoming, this plethora of graphic novels that address Jewish themes in some way. In this issue actually, in addition to Tunnels, we have another excerpt of a graphic novel called Whistle by E. Lockhart, and we have an article about four different graphic novels that actually address the Jewish body in various ways, whether that's body dysmorphia, that's body, the illness, its disability, sexuality, race.

BK: So there's so many different interesting things that artists are doing with that graphic novel form right now, and also I think it's just... It's a really interesting marriage of the two parts of books, the visual and the textual, and for me, Tunnels is just really fascinating in the sense that the content is so interesting itself and also the visuals are so interesting. This issue plays focus on exploring history and re-examining history, re-examining the accepted narratives that we've

all been sort of taught about history, and I think that Tunnels does that too, to an extent. It's also really interesting to think about it in a personal history way, we recently published an interview with Rutu, where she talks of family secrets as well, and how each member of a family might have a sort of different version of that family history. So that's also interesting to think about, not just in terms of a country's history, but also in terms of... This is really a story about a family and their different sort of inter-relationships.

JH: I wanna pick up on the theme of politics and note with real gratitude that you don't shy away from politics. In a selection from Oren Gazit's *The First Ending*, then the second, the author depicts an anti-democratic dystopian Israel, and I think it's bracing to see real Israeli artists and authors fully engaging in the political spectrum of Israel's complexity, and even more so for you to bring that to English-speaking readers, and even more so to do it in a bilingual way where you have the English and the Hebrew facing each other on opposite pages. So I wanna talk to you about the editorial will to go wading into pretty serious Israeli politics.

BK: Yeah, that's a great question. And I think that as you pointed out, there's several different views and visions of Israel throughout *Paper Brigade*, especially this issue actually. We also have the translation from Russian, Linor Goralik's two Vignette's from biblical view, translated by Dalia Wolfson. We have the excerpt of the graphic novel Rutu Modan. We have this one, which is the winner of the *Paper Brigade Award* for new Israeli fiction in honor of Jane Weitzman. So I really love, actually, as you pointed out, how you work together to give views into different facets of Israeli life and history and politics and literature, just different facets of that as well.

BK: And one thing I do wanna add just about that piece that I find so interesting is that there are really multiple layers to it. It addresses disability in a really interesting way too, and another familial relationship here too, a different thing you're seeing in *Tunnels*, and that's also something that comes up again in various aspects of the journal. So I think that politics is very important, but that also all three of these pieces, it's not just about politics, it's about all of the different facets of life, whether that's the family, the country, the history, and just different issues that come up in people's lives.

JH: I think it's a function of really compelling art when it can weave those things together and increase our capacity to connect with it. I also have a soft spot for history, being a historian myself, and it's one of the genres that you also include in *Paper Brigade*, and I wanna share with you one aspect of history that comes up that I really enjoyed in the fifth volume for 2022, and then I also wanna ask you, one of the historical pieces that most attracted you or got you thinking. This addition includes a brief essay on the back story to *Bambi*, which is really a parable about Jewish-Austrian existence in an anti-Semitic context of the early 20th century in which *Bambi* is the Jew and the hunter is the predatory Austrian society. It's quite stark. Tell us a little bit about that essay.

BK: Yeah, it's definitely very, very different to the wonderful Disney version that I grew up watching, and I think that this story is just something that's so fascinating, that intrigues so many

people because you just never expect something like this. But yeah, so the story was originally written by an Austrian-Jewish writer named Felix Salten before World War II, and it's really meant to be, as you said, a parable of life in Austria for Jewish people or other minorities that may try to think that they've assimilated into wider society, that they've been accepted. Felix Salten himself struggled with it. His whole life he grew up working class, and then really wanted to be accepted by the elites, and he did succeed for a really long time. He became a very successful, well-known, beloved author and had engagements with public life as well.

BK: But then with the Nazis he, really sort of fell out of favor, and Bambi was really meant to be a parable of all of that, of the ways that Jewish people being the deer, things that they can find a way to evade these hunters. Jack Zipes, the author of the piece talks that there's one other deer in the story who is wounded and tended to by the hunters actually, and he becomes their pet and he thinks that he's invisible and then he comes back to the forest, and then he's still hunted by them anyway. So it's just as you said this very stark, not at all uplifting vision, not at all what we're used to, and Disney really changed that, and I think probably in a way that Felix Salten would not be very happy with. But it's very interesting to reflect, I think again, with this idea of reflecting back on history and finding the real story behind maybe the story that we'd like to tell ourselves or that we like to think about, and really go into that more deeply.

BK: And also, I just wanna add that I think that Alenka Sottler's beautiful illustrations for this really add something as well. At the Paper Brigade launch, she actually did a studio visit where she showed two different versions of the illustrations that she had pondered over the time, and one of them, which I think she did not end up going with in the end, but it took it in a more allegorical way, where she actually showed deer on the streets of Vienna at the time that Salten was living there. There was a more almost like mouse like, Art Spiegelman version of the story. But in the end, she ended up going with more realistic portrayals of it. But I think that basically shows, I think another whole layer to this, where that the fact that this is a symbolic story, but it has such relevance to Felix Salten's time and our time now too.

JH: Pick up on one of the other historically themed pieces from this edition to share with our audience.

BK: There's so many, I guess I'll go with Laura Arnold Leibman's piece, which is really fascinating. It uses two miniatures, two portraits, to examine a family. And the two siblings in these portraits are Isaac and Sarah Brandon, siblings who were born in Barbados, and they were enslaved, they were Christian. And then they reinvented their lives to become considered white to be wealthy to be living in New York, and they converted to Judaism. So through the lens of these two miniatures, she shows how they ended up reinventing themselves, and also shows that the story is not maybe as straightforward as we think, we could see this, as just a story about passing. But actually, it's much more complicated. The disciplines were in various contexts quite open about their past their heritage, and that that had a different connotation in the world that they lived in early America, than you might expect, so really delving into this idea

of how history often offers a much richer, interesting and fuller and more complex reality than we expect looking back on it.

JH: Especially now, as we are re-examining our relationship with race, and the fact that they literally transited both parts of the continent and their status as black or Jewish and what those two things meant, showing that the categories themselves were in transition.

BK: Yes, absolutely. She actually makes a point there too, that even the idea of Judaism was undergoing a relabeling if you will, from being considered sort of more religious to more racial, and how that was also affecting the two siblings.

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JH: I wanna move to a memoir one of the genres represented in Paper Brigade, and a particularly brief and moving feature by Qian Julie Wang titled Hunger. Tell us a little bit about that incredible vignette.

BK: Yeah, I absolutely was so moved by this piece. And also by her memoir, which came out this summer, about her experience, having moved from northern China to New York City, when she was a young girl, and living in poverty as an undocumented immigrant for several years. And the memoir itself doesn't focus on the Jewish aspect of her story. So as an adult, she converted to Judaism. But this piece that she wrote for us talks about how in her first Yom Kippur fast she really had to confront these horrible memories of basically going hungry as a child, and how every day she would come to school, not having had any breakfast, and basically be counting down the minutes until she could get her free lunch. And it's very clear, the lunch itself is pretty unappetizing by the standards that we would think about it. But for her, it was just the one thing that she could look forward to throughout the day. And then as an adult, as she was starting the conversion process, really thinking to herself that she was extremely afraid to take the step of actually fasting on Yom Kippur because she was afraid of all these horrible memories that she had, as a kid of going hungry.

BK: She confronted those fears and realize that in a different context, where she didn't have to go hungry, she was making this choice to do it, that she felt that rather than feeling excluded,

feeling like she wasn't one of these so-called rich kids who could bring a delicious meal from home that rather together with a Jewish community that she was part of that she actually had a very positive experience, and then realized that she wanted to help other children who are still struggling with daily hunger. So it's a really powerful piece that she wrote for us. And also, I think that it's really important to highlight this experience by someone who has converted, it's a very specific experience. This is just one experience of the multitude of Jewish experiences that we really try to highlight in Paper Brigade, to bring to the fore these experiences that people might not necessarily expect or not necessarily associate with the Jewish experience but are actually really part of that rich fabric.

JH: Tell us one piece that you've included in this volume five, that will surprise our readership, our listenership, if they get around to picking up a copy.

BK: One I will say is A Jewish Traitor. This piece is very fascinating because it's about a 19th-century man named Simon Deutz. He was born Jewish, he converted to Christianity, this is in France, and he actually was a rabbi's son, but he really wanted to assimilate. And he became associated with the Duchess of Berry who was in the middle of kinda trying to wage a civil war to get the throne back for her son. And he at first was a loyal supporter of her, but then he ended up betraying her for a huge amount of money. And he really became sort of a poster child for a lot of anti-Semitic groups after that because he just... His actions seemed so reprehensible. Thus just became what many thought was a perfect example of a Jewish betrayer. And because of that, later on, a lot of historians have been really afraid to touch his story, but what the author shows in this piece, Maurice Samuels, is that again it's really important to look at the true story, not just be so afraid of the past that we can't delve into it.

BK: Because when you show this... Of course, this was one man, he's not representative of all Jews and when we look at his story. We're not reinforcing anti-Semitic stereotypes, but we are seeing how anti-Semitism really functions and how it works. Rather than doing something bad to look back on this story, it's actually really illuminating and it's helpful, especially at this current time.

JH: I agree that that's a particularly compelling story, and I was also surprised by it, and I welcomed that frank historical view point that the author brings to us to remind us why we need to know these stories. And I would add for context, that Deutz's case was understood in terms of the anti-Semitic backlash as a precursor to the Dreyfus case, which of course led to Herzl and Modern Zionism, so there's all kinds of super important context that opening up these stories brings to us.

BK: Yeah, exactly, and I think that one of the things that Maurice Samuels points out is that unlike Dreyfus' case, Deutz really was an unsympathetic character, so that was part of the reason why people were afraid to resurrect his story because he didn't seem like an exemplary type of person, but I think that's an important part of the nuance of the piece and his story is that

he doesn't have to be an exemplary person to be worthy of attention and to actually teach us this important lesson.

JH: So I wanna close out the interview with a question about golems, what's going on with all these golems in Paper Brigade?

BK: That is a great question, Josh. It is so fascinating to me how many of our artists and writers are looking back to Jewish mythology and reinventing it for a present day time. We have poems by Moriel Rothman-Zecher about the golem. We have an interview with Melissa Broder in which she talks about her new novel, Milk Fed that also has a golem mythology wound into it. We have a short story by Alexander Walden that talks about a real life golem. We also have a piece of magical realism by Helene Wecker, the author of "The Golem and the Jinni" and "The Hidden Palace". I find it absolutely fascinating how these readers are again, looking to the past and finding this very old mythology and completely reinventing it for modern times. Instead of the golem being this kind of hulking, violent, defender of the ghetto as he is in most cases, instead the golem can be a vehicle to explore something like sexuality or disability, or politics, as you pointed out earlier. There's just so many different ways in which authors are being so creative and really introducing and infusing our history with new meaning.

JH: Well, I wanna thank you, Becca Kantor, for taking the time, but most of all, I wanna thank you for Paper Brigade, it really is a great read, and I encourage everyone to get a copy. It's simply a pleasure. Thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

BK: Thank you again, Josh, this is really wonderful.

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