

OUR IMAGINED JEWISH STORY: A JEWISH ODYSSEY IN TSARIST RUSSIA

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series brought to you by HUC Connect 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, scribal campus in Los Angeles and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with Yaniv Iczkovits. Iczkovits, born in 1975, is an award-winning author and screenwriter. Among his acclaimed publications, in August of 2020 Iczkovits published 'Nobody Leaves Palo Alto', which immediately became the number one best seller in Israel. His third novel, 'The Slaughterman's Daughter', was published by Keter in 2015 and has been translated into 15 languages worldwide. The book was awarded the Agnon Prize in honor of Israel's only nobel laureate for literature and it was the first time the prize has been granted in 10 years, and it was of course a finalist for the 2021 National Jewish Book Award. Iczkovits taught for eight years at the University of Tel Aviv and after receiving his doctorate, he went on to pursue post-doctoral studies at Columbia University where he adapted his doctoral dissertation into the book, 'Wittgenstein's ethical thought.' Yaniv Iczkovits, welcome to the College Commons podcast.

Yaniv Iczkovits: Thank you, thank you, Joshua. I'm thrilled to be here and thank you for inviting me.

JH: The Slaughterman's Daughter, the topic of our conversation today, is a wonderful and meandering tale of adventure and discovery in, of all places, Czarist Russia, and it evokes many themes and I'd like to ask you to introduce our listeners to two of those themes. The first is the historical setting, walk us into the historical context of Czarist persecution, Jewish immigration and other major themes that you think help us live in the book. And the second theme is the backdrop of genre, Yiddish names and idiosyncratic personalities remind us of the Yiddish greats, Shalom Aleichem and others. Talk to us about your inspiration from the Yiddish story.

YI: To start with the settings, the historical settings of the novel, I actually didn't mean to write about Czarist Russia or the Russian Empire. Actually, those two questions that you ask are in a sort of way interrelated because I was just following the steps of my favorite writers, who you

named, Shalom Aleichem and Mandalay and Paddy Chayefsky and I wanted to see the newspaper that they read. Because when we write contemporary fiction, we live in a certain culture, in a certain environment, so I was curious to see when Shalom Aleichem woke up in the morning, which kind of newspaper did he read and what was in them? And so I encountered a newspaper that was written in Hebrew, this time most Jewish people didn't speak Hebrew, they spoke Yiddish. But they knew some Hebrew, especially from synagogues and from the Bible and all those scripts, and there were two main newspapers in Hebrew at that time, one is Hamagid and the other one is Ha-Melitz. So I started to read Hamagid and I was quite intrigued by the stories and then eventually I reached the ad section and in the ad section next to, I don't know, an ad for a hotel or a band, there was this ad written by a Miserable Woman, this was the title of the ad, and she cried for the help of the community, of the Jewish community, to help her locate her husband who left her alone with her children and now she doesn't know where he went, and she's actually asking the help of the community.

YI: And I was shocked when I saw that, so I thought, okay, well, probably one woman wrote a letter and then I went to the next volume of the Hamagid newspaper and I saw two more ads like that by two other women and then I realized it was actually something that was going on in the Russian Empire towards the end of the 19th century, a lot of Jewish husbands just left their families, some went to the US, which they called the Golden Medina, some went to Palestine, the crazy ones obviously, and some went to Odessa and Kiev, these are cities that today are in the news. But they went to universities and they wanted to get out of the shtetl and they wanted to do other things in life than learn in the Shiva. So it was actually a huge thing back then. And immediately when I saw this ad I knew that I wanted to write a story about a woman that sets out into the wild east to find a husband who left her sister.

JH: The description you gave of your inspiration leads me to my next question, because the story as intimated by the title and the opening, this ad that you describe is in fact the opening of your book, is in many ways a story about women and womanhood. And though the title implies that there is only one Slaughterman's Daughter, the motivation behind the story actually relies on the fact that there are two of them.

YI: Right.

JH: So I'd like to ask you to set up the contrast between the two sisters and what that means for your story.

YI: Well, when I read this ad I started to think about these women back then going out there and telling everyone that they're miserable and that they are poor and that they need help. On the other hand, it's very a courageous act, 'cause we have a saying in Hebrew that you do the laundry inside the house, you don't put it outside.

JH: We have it in English too, you don't wash your dirty laundry in public, yeah.

YI: Exactly, exactly. And these women just went out there in the newspaper with their full name. So actually, this contrast was already apparent in the very act of publishing this ad, and I wanted to kind of split the identities of these two sisters where one is, yeah, she wants to be, she wants to locate her husband, she wants him back, she is willing to forgive him, she just wants her traditional family and her life back again and this other sister, which wants to help her sister on the one hand, but on the other hand, there's also an act of freedom here, she wants to execute her desire to be free, which was very hard for many women in the traditional Jewish world of the 19th century.

JH: The beginning story in the article that you put at the head of the book, it is not just about a certain act of freedom, it's a certain letting loose, and many of our listeners will be familiar with the phenomenon of the Agunah where the woman who was chained to an unproductive marriage with the husband, either absent or recalcitrant and the woman unable to get on with her life, sort of a divorce, and the two sisters are very different, one wanting to help the sister cut the relationship and get a divorce and the other sister, the one who's actually married, wanting to find a way to stay married.

YI: Actually a very interesting story I have about what you just said is that a few days after I encounter this ad in the newspaper in Hamagid, I went to Jerusalem and in one of the billboards in Jerusalem, I saw an ad of traditional orthodox Jewish woman, and I'm talking now about 2010 or something like that, crying for the help of the Jewish community in Jerusalem to help her locate her husband who left her, as you say, agunah. So immediately when I saw that I realized that although I'm going to write what we call historical fiction, it resonates with what's happening today. So it was very meaningful to me to see that these very same themes are also present nowadays and actually it's a big problem in Israel and in the Jewish world in general.

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JH: The College Commons podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. HUC Connect features four programs, webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion and redefining allyship. Community Connect, ready-made lesson plans for synagogue and community learning, the Master Class, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty exclusively for our alumni. Enroll soon because seats are limited. And of course, the college Commons Podcast, in-depth conversations with Judaism's leading thinkers. For more information about HUC Connect and all it has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect. And now, back to our program.

JH: Above and beyond the story, I wanna talk a little bit about language. Every language has idioms and terms that it captures better than any other language. I have a friend from Brazil who loves the English term, nose bleeds, to refer to the altitude of the upper most section of stadium seating as we all use very commonly, and Yiddish is famous for this expressive quality, and you pepper your story with Yiddish terms. So for fun, famously, the definition of Schlemiel and

Schlimazel is traditionally this; A schlemiel is somebody who spills his soup and the Schlimazel is the person the soup lands on. What's your definition of Schlemiel and Schlimazel?

YI: You know many people, when they read the book, they immediately ask me about the historical research and I had to dig in to a lot of historical documents, and most times what you get in academic works and historical books is not exactly what you need for fiction, because history is mostly about the big things and I was looking for the small stuff that the Schlimazel and Schlemiel and which kind of soup did they have for lunch and... So it was very complicated, I must admit. But on the other hand, the biggest challenge was the language, there were a lot of questions regarding how much Yiddish should be present in the book and what is the right texture for writing a book in the 21st century that goes back, not only in to the 19th century, but it also goes back to the Shtetls of the 19th century, but there are also Russian characters and generals and captains, and for example, when we are placed in the Shtetls then the language would echo more, the Yiddish writers, like Sholem Aleichem and all these greats.

YI: And when we're going to a Russian officer in the Orkana, which was the secret police, the KGB of the Russian empire, then the language will tend to be more in the spirit of the Russian novels. So if you're asking about the language, I think that this was the main challenge of finding the right mixture of present language and Yiddish and the Russian novels and obviously the Bible and stuff like that.

JH: Another theme is anti-Semitism, which you, I must say magisterially twist and bend around human complications such as Jewish self-hatred, persecution and self-discovery, and because of the wonderful texture you bring to the book, you do something largely foreign to our thinking about anti-Semitism, which is this; You imbue it with a dollop of self-awareness, so I'd like to read a quote to you and ask a question about it. The quote is the following: "There is no need to lecture Novak about how all humans are created in God's image. There's no need to tell him that a child can be shaped in any mold. You can raise them to think that sitting indoors and studying all day is normal, you can raise them to think that men walking around with side locks is normal. You can raise them to think that covering their heads at all times with either a hat or yarmulke is normal. Novak knows all this and more, and yet he thinks they should at least have the decency to blend in, to make even just a minimal attempt to integrate with the rest of society."

JH: "But precisely because he is aware of his instinctive dislike for Jews, Novak begins to wonder if he might have acted no better than a member of the rabble when he launched into his investigation without a shred of serious reflection." I'd like you to introduce us to our antagonist, Novak, whom I referred to, and tell us what's going on here.

YI: We talked about all these great Yiddish writers and the thing that most bothered me in their writings and vice versa, by the way, you can say the same about the great Russian novelist, is that when they come to describe their own people, it's always very sensitive and with many details and many complications, and you get the human state, as we like to say it. But when

they try to describe the other, when Sholem Aleichem or Paddy Chayefsky describe the Christians and when Dostoevsky describes the Jews, then it's always stereotyped and it's always less complicated, and what I wanted to do in this, in my book, is to create a Russian antagonist, whose name is Piotr Novak, and to make him a real person. And I actually researched a lot about what is anti-Semitism and what is it that we call anti-Semitism? Because growing up in Israel, I got the impression that the Jewish people in the shtetl were constantly persecuted.

YI: I had the feeling that if I was living in the shtetl, I would, on a daily basis, be cursed, and I don't know, people will throw stones and some house will be burned and actually it wasn't like that, it was much more complicated. Obviously, there were a lot of pogroms and anti-Semitism, but Jewish people lived with Christians and in most parts they had close relationships, I'm not speaking obviously about getting married or something like that, but they were neighbors and the Christians will go to the rabbi to get advice and the Jewish orchestra would play in Christian weddings. So it was much more complicated than I thought. And I wanted to build Novak as a typical Russian officer, which means that he was an anti-semite to a certain extent, like everyone were at this time, they were not raised on the ideals that we know today, and even the word racism was not fully integrated in their language.

YI: So it was anti-everything which wasn't Russian in fact. It was anti-Jewish, it was anti-Gypsy, it was anti-Polish, it was anti whatever. And what I wanted to do in my book is to let or allow Novak to know the Jewish community from within. There's a certain point in the book in which he has to dress up as a Jew and feel what it is to be Jewish. And I think that I was very excited to write it because I don't think it has been done before, and I really enjoy those parts because imagine what it is for someone to become something that he utterly dislikes. I don't think that we in life have a lot of opportunity to experience that, and this is the power and this is the fun that we have in fiction.

JH: Tell us a little bit about two characters and the emotional dynamics that come from having to have joined the czarist army as cantonists?

YI: Yeah. Well, this is a story that I was truly amazed to discover. Generally speaking, Nicholas I, he was called The Iron Tsar because he was very tough. He sent his officials to do some research about the Jews in the Russian empire and his officials came back to him and they told him, "Look, the Jews are only 15% of the population in the entire empire, but they feel as if there are 85% of the population, because they are everywhere." You go to the market, they will sell you the tomatoes, you wanna get a driver for the carriage, you'd find out he's a Jew, you wanna drink beer, so the owner of the tavern is Jewish, even though they are not allowed to be owners of taverns. And they also told him that the Jewish people are very important to the Russian economy, but the only problem with Jews is that they are not loyal to the empire, because they are selling wheat to the Russian army and then a few days afterwards they cross the border to the Ottoman Empire and they sell wheat to the Turks. So we have to make them Russians, we

have to make them loyal to the Russian empire, and what is the best way to make someone loyal to the empire?

YI: Of course, the army, I know it as an Israeli. You know that in Israel everyone has joined the army and we call this the army of the people, because it's a kind of experience that you have and you become integrated with your society, with your country, etcetera. So Nicholas I, The Iron Tsar, decided that he would order every Jewish community, every thousand people are required to give three heads for the Russian Army. And this is where it becomes truly interesting, because who would you choose out of your community to go to the army when you know that if they go to the army, they can no longer be Jewish? And for those people, it's equivalent to the fact that those three heads out of a thousand will actually be dead, because for Jewish Orthodox, if someone is not Jewish anymore, then he is more or less not alive in a sense. So every community was required to decide who is going to go, and obviously whoever had a chance, the rich ones, the ones who could provide false certificates, false documents, and at the end of the day, the poor and the orphans were sent to the army. When I'm talking about being sent to the army, I'm talking about going for around 30 years, maybe 40 years.

YI: And it's actually devastating because when they came back to the very same status that they departed from, some of the families refused to accept them back. And there are a lot of heart-breaking stories about this. And when I did some research and find out about it and I had to decide who is going to join Fanny, my protagonist, my hero in the journey, I wanted her companions to be from the outskirts of the Jewish community and not from the mainstream. I didn't want her to be with a rabbi or with a wealthy person, I want her to be joined with deserted people, with broken people, with people who suffered from all this situation that the Jewish community had to build in. So her journey with Jhijik is extremely meaningful and the way they're able to form a relationship with each other, which is not a romantic relationship, but it's a very close friendship at the end of the day. So I think that the book in Hebrew is called Tikkun, Tikkun in the English translation it will be something like rectify, redemption, repair, correction. So I think that one of the main questions of the book is whether the characters in the book were redeemed in some sense through this journey of Fanny.

JH: I'd like to ask a closing question, you've described your own process where you learned so much, and thank you for sharing it with us. The question I have is this, in the course of writing the story and researching it, what surprised you most or worried you most or saddened you the most as you figured out what to do with all of these things you were learning?

YI: Wow. That's a great question. Writing this book for me was a very personal and very emotional process of discovering myself as a Jew, as a person, as a human being. Because growing up in Israel, I don't know how it is in the US, but in Israel basically the story that we learn from the first grade is that the Jewish people and the Biblical period and then we were in exile for 2000 years, and in exile we suffered from all the things that everyone knows and the peak was obviously the Holocaust. And after the Holocaust, we were redeemed by the State of

Israel and now we have to forget our period in the exile and revive our Judaism in the state of Israel and be strong and be Israel.

YI: And this book took me to the land, to the real land of my ancestor of my grandfather and grandmother and their grandfather and grandmothers, and it took me to the details, to understand myself is not to understand the big story of Israel. No, it's to understand exactly what did my grandfather eat when he woke up in the morning and what were the intrigues inside the Jewish community? And what language did they speak and what were their thoughts about Israel and the Palestine? And for me, it was extremely emotional and personal because I actually felt as if I'm discovering myself. Suddenly, I looked at my family in a whole different perspective.

YI: I started to know more and more about where I come from, and it was extremely meaningful for me, and if you're asking what saddened me or what was the biggest revelation is that I think that starting this whole process and going through all these stations in Fanny's journey, I didn't mean that her journey would echo with a lot of things that are relevant for today, but it actually happened, it actually happened that in every place that she went and every encounter and every fight, something extremely resonant with what's going on today, at least in my country, and I'm talking about war and I'm talking about occupation and I'm talking about suffering and I'm talking about loyalty or how to make someone loyal to an ID or to a state. And all these issues are extremely relevant for my community and my society today. So I was actually a bit saddened to see that although we live probably in the best time for mankind, probably, it's the best period, but still there's a lot of work.

JH: Well, Yaniv Iczkovitz, thank you for taking us on that journey with you in this amazing book, *The Slaughter Man's Daughter* and for the pleasure of your conversation. It's been really great to get to know you and to talk with you. Thank you.

YI: My pleasure.

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