



THE NETANYAHUS: AN ALLEGORY OF THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE

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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's scribal campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to the college Commons podcast and our episode with author Joshua Cohen. Joshua Cohen has published six novels, short fiction and non-fiction to greater claim. Called a major American writer by the New York Times, maybe America's greatest living writer by the Washington Post, and an extraordinary prose stylist by The New Yorker, Cohen was awarded Israel's 2013 Matanel prize for Jewish writers, and in 2017 was named one of Granta's best young American novelists. Our topic for discussion today, Cohen's novel, *The Netanyahus* won the 2021 National Jewish Book Award. Joshua Cohen, thank you so much for joining us on the college Commons podcast.

Joshua Cohen: Thank you for having me.

JH: Let's begin with the story behind the story, such as has been reported about the book, *The Netanyahus*. It seems that a real encounter regarding another real encounter is what inspired you, that is to say you met the late great Harold Bloom, and he shared with you his hosting of Benzion Netanyahu, the father of Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and military hero, not to say martyr, Jonathan Netanyahu, tell us about what your time with Harold Bloom meant to you and what his account of Benzion Netanyahu inspired in you.

JC: It's very difficult to talk about Harold Bloom in the past tense. He was such a vital person, such a brilliant and seeking and curious mind, maybe as an example of that, is that into his 80s, he decided that he wanted to hang out with me. He was still reading younger people, is what I'm trying to say, and he was reading them with all of the sympathy that he had read people who I consider masters. And so that was enormously flattering, it was terrifying also, because Harold also could be a terrifying figure in his judgments, in his kind of feats of memory and his feats of association. He was a formidable mind, and one thing he liked about me was that I wasn't from

the university. I wasn't from Yale, but I also just wasn't from the academic world, and I think he wanted to speak to a working writer because he was considering writing memoirs.

JC: He ended up writing a memoir towards the end of his life. It was a memoir of his interest in poetry and his experience of poetry, but he wanted to write a memoir in the very kind of basic sense... I mean though nothing Harold did was truly basic, but in the sense of, "This was my life, this is what happened to me." And in the course of it, while he's recounting all of these stories with all of these famous names hanging out with Darida, spending time with Paul Demmond, spending time with Grisham Shalom in the middle of this, CNN is on in the background. And Bibi comes up and he says, "Oh, I met that guy." And I said, "Huh?" And I was thinking, did you meet him, I don't know, in the 90s when Bibi was the Israel Ambassador at the UN? Was this some Upper West Side cocktail party or something?

JC: But he said, "No, no. I met him when he was like 10 years old, when I hosted his father. When I was asked as sorta the only Jew in the faculty to bring around this other Jew, this professor of medieval history." And I was interested in this, Harold told his version, the anecdote, Gene came into the room and contradicted him and gave her own version. They went back and forth, and I think that Harold... He didn't really understand why I was so interested in this. He was saying, "This was not the most important thing that ever happened to me." But I really saw in this anecdote, something allegorical, but I wasn't going to write it because I figured it was Harold's to write and it would make its way into a memoir, but then Harold died and there was no memoir, and so I felt free to put it out there.

JH: Moving on to Harold Bloom's inspiration for you which you really quite movingly described, tell us about Benzion Netanyahu's trigger for you. What was the valance of this figure in Harold Bloom's life that so captured your imagination.

JC: Well I mean I think for Harold, he was an annoying house guest. At the time, the name Netanyahu didn't mean anything. It was at least for the people around Harold, hard to spell. And so I think it maybe tickled him that these people who were so annoying and rambunctious in his home became annoying and rambunctious on the world stage, but I don't think he investigated deeply into Benzion Netanyahu's work. And I think he was maybe offended to be asked to really act as a chaperone and to maybe judge the man's character, but the idea of being Harold in the English department, what would you know about medieval history? He wasn't really asked to give an opinion and he didn't develop one.

JC: I don't think, about his work. I spent a lot of time reading Benzion Netanyahu, reading his origins of the inquisition in 15th century Spain, which is his master work, which is an almost 1000 page book with a sorta revisionist history of the Inquisitions, of the Iberian inquisitions, of the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions that essentially stated and this is a very kind of limited, reduced Wikipedia version of it, but that these inquisitions which were reginal inquisitions, meaning there were inquisitions led by a king or by a monarchy and not by a Pope and not by the church, that these inquisitions were really responsible for defining Judaism as a race as

opposed to a religion. The idea being that when someone converted to Catholicism under duress, the idea was that wasn't enough, there was still the Jewish-ness inherited in the blood.

JC: And that was really an obsession of Benzion Netanyahu's. And it allowed him to really connect then the inquisitions to the race theories of Nazism and provide a kind of cyclical history of Jewish persecution, oppression, and death, really as a justificatory framework for the existence of the state of Israel, which is a state that largely rejected him.

JC: The answer as to why Benzion Netanyahu was in the United States, what were the Netanyahus doing in the United States, is really the history of Benzion Netanyahu's involvement on the "wrong side." And again, everyone can debate that characterization of Israeli history. He was a revisionist with a big R. He was a sort of a secretary to or involved Jabotinsky and involved with "revisionist Zionism" that believed Jews could not wait around for the great powers to grant them a state. They had to go and take it.

JC: And he was a kind of a rabble-rousing polemicist and an editorial contributor to a lot of revisionist newspapers in Mandatory Palestine, and essentially made himself persona non grata there because of his vociferous political views and because he also helped to stage a bombing at the university where he was being educated. And that meant that once you commit an act of soft terror, let's say, against your own university, you can't expect them to really hire you, and that really caused him to go out on the road and to pass himself along on the American academic circuit.

JC: And he actually first got a job in the United States representing the revisionist movement in the United States and going around raising money for it. But after Jabotinsky's death, which happened soon after he arrived in the United States, he went and finished his PhD at Dropsie College, via seminary, and then taught at University of Denver for a while, and then ended up at Cornell where he was a professor until 1976, until Yoni died in Entebbe, at which point he moved back to Israel.

JC: In many ways his return to Israel, though under these horrific circumstances, these tragic circumstances, it was very much the beginning of a period that might be classified almost in Freudian terms as a return of the repressed and a re-welcoming back of the revisionist ideology into Israeli political life. But certainly a victory was won by his son who in many ways incarnated the revisionist ideology in his terms in his nearly 15 years as Prime Minister.

JH: You picked up on some of the allegorical approaches to understanding Benzion's career in relation to Zionism in Israel. Let's pull it back to Bloom's orientation as an American Jew here and follow one of the potential allegorical threads, the existence in diaspora, the Jewish existence in diaspora, emerges as a major theme of your book, and it weaves across the timeline as you have just indicated.

JH: And indeed many of our listeners know of the phenomenon of Marranos, one of the terms that is used to describe Jews forcibly converted during the Spanish persecutions of the 14th and 15th centuries. And most of our listeners will also know of accounts over the course of history of conversos or Marrano's attempts to retain or return to Judaism over the centuries in a kind of phenomenon that I call the Marrano romance.

JH: The real Netanyahu fiercely argued that this attempt at return is overstated or even false. It's not just that he argued about the race component of the persecutions in the first place, as you laid out for us, but he also argued that Jews had, in significant measure, been yearning to join majority society in some functional way, even though they were perversely both approached and avoided by the institutions of Spanish Catholicism. So Netanyahu represents a very complicated Jewish understanding of being in the world. Elaborate on that in relation to the imagined encounter between Benzion Netanyahu and Harold Bloom.

JC: A lot of Benzion's work really revolves around this distinction between the anusim and the meshumadim. The idea of a anusim being a legal category of Jews who were forced to convert, forced against their will, at sword point, or at threat of torture, whereas meshumadim are people who are... The word means self-destroyed, self-destructed, people who voluntarily leave. In fact in Benzion Netanyahu's interpretation were relieved to become something else because of the opportunities that that offered them in business and education, in just not getting killed. And it was Benzion Netanyahu's answer was that these people who embraced this other identity were essentially denied it a few generations later by a church that says, "Uh-oh, stop right there, watch out, we still consider you Jews." And the idea that you could never leave that distinction. You can call yourself something, you can go to church, you can take Communion, you can do all of this, but you can never be something else.

JC: And in the book here the Bloom figure, who I don't call Harold Bloom, I call him Blum. He is someone of Harold's generation who really believes in American exceptionalism, where Jews go from being a chosen people to being able to choose. And the idea that this freedom to choose, it's a third category. You're not being forced to Americanize, whatever that would be.

JC: Nor is it you're put in such peril in your identity that you are dying to Americanize, in order to avoid oppression or being killed. It's that these two cultures can exist simultaneously, and not only that, but in many ways reinforce one another. And this is the liberal answer that Lamin, the book deals with. This idea that one can have these double identities in ways that aren't hidden and they're not in competition. And it's Benzion Netanyahu who shows up in the book and basically says, "Well, you're a fool. This might work for you, this might work for your children, but within a few generations, you two will be proven wrong. What makes you think that America is the historical exception to this cyclical history?" And this throws the character of Blum into a crisis, because there's the part of him that absolutely wants to resist this and does resist it and talks about the exceptionalism of democracy and of choice, and then there's a part of him that cannot deny a historical record and saying, "Why do I have this hubris that this particular set of

principles and civil liberties that seem often very tenuous and are certainly not evenly granted across the entire identity spectrum. Why do I think this is going to be any different?"

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JH: In the voice of Ruben Blum, he describes himself thus, "I came into the world with a skin that wasn't quite white. But as I grew up, it thickened." One could read this to mean that he developed a thick skin against the slings and arrows of outsider hood, or one could read it that his whiteness thickened. It became a larger part of his identity at a minimum outwardly but certainly if we think of Harold Blum, one could argue inwardly as well. Would you be willing to read this passage both ways for us, in relation to either the real or the fictional blum or Bloom?

JC: I think the real Harold is a different story. I think Harold was enormously entertained by the fact that he grew up speaking Yiddish in the Bronx and becomes the Sterling Professor of Literature at Yale. And an expert in English romantic poetry and Shakespeare. This to him, is a divine joke of existence. And I think he reviled in it and I think it was an animating principle of his life that he could, in a sense, have been so good, whatever that means. Good at what he did, that they had no choice but to accept him in his fullness. And he never tried to "Pass." It was impossible not to know that Harold Bloom was a Jew. I think that my fictionalization of Harold... I couldn't write Harold because if I wrote Harold people wouldn't believe it. So, he's such a large figure that he would take over the book in many ways. Harold was a genius, and in many ways, it's difficult to write a genius because they are so other-worldly. I think that my character of Ruben Blum is a much more quotidian mundane figure, he's not a Professor of literature, he's Professor of the History of taxation, specifically American taxation.

JC: But when you talk about that passage, I think that... Yes, I can actually read it both ways. I think one way is saying not just that my whiteness thickened in the sense that I could pass as white, and not just that I got tough enough that the so-called micro-aggressions and even the more macro aggressions, I could brush them off easy, I think I read that passage... Actually, it was that I didn't just have to be as good as someone, I had to be better. And I had to be so much better that I had to convince the people who didn't want me on the inside that they needed me or that they would be at a loss. And in order to become that person, you need to be thick of skin. Certainly Harold needed to be at Cornell and later Yale. And then I think you also need to be thick of skin in the sense of your whiteness needs to thicken because you need to have the temerity to speak about Shelly and Byron in Harold's case, and in this case of Ruben Blum of

the history of taxation's relationship with slavery, and with the Native American resettlements of Andrew Jackson, with authority as if you were there, or as if you were truly heir to that tradition. That's what I was thinking about beneath all of those double meanings of being able to both pass and shrug off.

JH: So let's follow up on this idea that you just described. In one scene, Blum and Netanyahu discuss Classic Western TV shows. The evoking notions of native versus settler, hero versus villain. What does this exchange around the American Classic Western TV show? What does it mean? What does it evoke for the American Jew and the Israeli Jew in your novel?

JC: Well, this book is set 1959, 1960 in that winter, and I was thinking about what was on TV then, and these Westerns where the red men were threatening and the white men go out to protect the virtue of the women who are homesteading the "unsettled West." And while I'm thinking about this, I'm reading through a lot of Benjamin Netanyahu's articles, and I think I quoted in the book. I believe he wrote it for *Jayaardan*, which is one of the revisionist periodical newspapers that he was an editor of and a writer for, and he makes an explicit comparison, he said... I think he calls them the Anglo-Saxons, "If the Anglo-Saxons had not essentially exterminated a lot of the native American population, and the ones that they didn't exterminate, move them out of the coastal population centers and essentially ghettoize them, that America would never have been founded and achieved the success that America had." It's a truth, you have to conquer a land and destroy people in order to make it in the image of that you want it. This is what happened. This is the founding of the United States and... But he is using it as a positive example for what Jewish settlers in Palestine, how they need to treat...

JC: We call the Arabs, not yet the Palestinians. And he's saying that this is a positive example, and so in my mind, if Benzion Netanyahu is having this idea at this time, and then the air waves, once he gets to the United States are full of rawhide, and these TV shows of manifest destiny. In a way, it was a window into a man who was thinking about American politics or thinking politically in an American spirit before he really ever lived here for a long time. And that to me was fascinating.

JH: What do you make of the fact that the allegory or the analogy to the story of the American conquest and removal of First Nations in the United States actually cuts across both sides of the Zionist narrative, in that. On the one hand, the Zionist pioneers were... That they were pioneers coming from the outside and indeed conquering, but on the other hand, the foundational logic underlying that return was indeed a return in which they would be better analogized to the First Nations.

JC: Absolutely. And it did not escape Benzion Netanyahu for half a second, that he was born in Warsaw, and he knew that history better than anyone, in fact, one of the interesting ideas about the radicalization of Benzion Netanyahu, was that he came to Palestine at a fairly young age. His father, Nathan Mileikowski was a sort of itinerant Rabbi fundraiser, kind of speaker, who kind of picked the family up from Poland, dropped them in Palestine and then went around the world

and was very much an absent Father. And Benzion Netanyahu really grows up in a Palestinian context in the Mandatory Palestine, and he begins studying European history, and right at the time where he's beginning to think, "Okay, maybe this is my discipline, maybe this is where my career lies." Suddenly, the Nascent Hebrew University is flooded with refugees from European universities who are among the greatest historians that Europe had. And so suddenly we would say in an American context, maybe he's competing with immigrants for jobs, and in a lot of ways these immigrants are being European educated and speaking multiple European languages are not just maybe prejudicially seen as better suited to the job, but actually are better suited to the job.

JC: And he develops, I think, this resentment. So I think he absolutely understood not just how these things cut across the Zionist narrative, but he also understood how it cut across his own career, and there was a part of him that said, "I should have been born in the land in Palestine." And there's another part of him that said, "I should have stayed longer in Europe." One thing to also really know about Benzion Netanyahu, is probably the greatest fact about him, is... Or the most salient fact to his personality is, during the most consequential decade of... I would say not just Modern Jewish History, but being slightly crazy, I would say All Jewish history, which is the 1940s and the '50s, Benzion Netanyahu is not being murdered in Europe, nor is he founding and establishing the state of Israel. He's in Manhattan, suburban, Long Island, and then suburban Pennsylvania. And so this is a man seething with resentment that he is in a sense excluded from history, he is excluded by coincidence, he is excluded by his own actions and failure to kinda get on, and this breeds in him a true anger. So I think that he's very much attuned to how displacements play a role in not just building of politics, but building a character, which I would say in his mind would probably proceed the politics.

JH: Do I hear you saying that both in his personality as a player in the stage of history and in his career in publications, Benzion Netanyahu, effectively embodies and illustrates precisely the anxiety of influence and the need for having missed the boat, that he has to then dislodge and revise and offer a counter story?

JC: Absolutely, because in many ways, I think that it's a weird sort of anxiety of him, so it's just a weird sort of belatedness, which is Harold's Bloom's word for feeling that one has been born too late or come too late, because he experiences belatedness in relation to his peers. I mean, he's sitting there and all of the labor Zionists who were his enemy that he... Who he reconsidered collaborators with the British and betrayers of the Jewish people. These are the people who are building the state, and he begins to understand the mistakes he's made, and he immediately tries to dissociate from them because I believe it's too painful.

JC: This is at least is my reading of him, when he begins writing a doctoral thesis on Bravanel and he talks about the political role of Viziers or court Jews in the medieval period in the medieval kingdoms, he is essentially talking about people whose loyalties are sort of split between the secular governance and their responsibilities to the Jewish people. And in a way, he's portraying the people who are the tax farmers for the nobility in the 15th century who were trying to

convince Ferdinand and Isabella to not kick out all the Jews or only kick out some of them, or only kick out certain Jews, and he's essentially comparing their predicament to labor Zionist who he sees as collaborating with the British, and he's finding his peer suffering by comparison. And in a way, this is a complete revision of the past and a use of the past to create an argument in the present. And so yeah, yeah, I think that he's very much feeling anxious because he had a sense that if only he had the opportunity to be a Bravanel figure, it would have turned out quite differently.

JH: Okay, let's round out this interview and dig into your authorial experience. What in the process... Either the process of imagining the story or the process of researching the story, surprised you? What delighted you or dismayed you?

JC: For me, a lot of the book. The research was really done to understand what I can distort, because I wasn't around in 1959, 1960, and I'm not interested in making a period piece, so I was mostly interested in writing something that looked like the '50s and '60s and felt and sounded like the '50s and '60s, but really was about today's political arguments. And so what I found surprising... Maybe a stupid thing to be surprised by, but maybe by the optimism, I think that I came of age at a time when there wasn't a lot of political optimism in the United States or in Israel. I think that I came at a time when there was never a larger rift between the United States and Israel, people of my generation in the United States where Jews tend to be completely opposite politically of Jews of my generation in Israel who came of age during the second Antifada, and so we're on opposite sides of a seesaw in a way.

JC: And I think what was surprising was to see the collective optimism of a certain period and to see how it was squandered, almost unconsciously, almost unaware, so it's almost like you woke up one day and all of your storehouses and granaries that were full of optimism were suddenly empty and nothing had been stored up for the future. [laughter] And that to me was kind of fascinating to see.

JC: The other thing was, frankly surprising was to find out how much I agreed with Benzion Netanyahu in a lot of ways. The man was an historian who was also sort of a talented fiction writer, let's say in his own writing of history, in my opinion, but truthfully, unfortunately... And maybe this is because of our lack of optimism, history has in many ways born him out. The story of American assimilation absolutely follows according to where he laid things out and not just that, but taking it outside of a Jewish context. He began to talk about tribalisms in the beginnings of Zionism, and one of his lines essentially, which I paraphrase in the book is that... And he's talking about Austro-Hungary, he's talking about the Austro-Hungary of his birth, and he's talking about, "Once you can't feel like a citizen of an empire, but that your identity is giving more dignity when you feel like you're a Bulgarian, or a Romanian, or a Slovenian, or a Czech, or a Slovak and not necessarily a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian empire, then your empire fractures and you will fall."

JC: And so what kind of inhaled on a national level, let's say, right before World War I and the fracturing of the Austro-Hungarian empire, now inheres I think in an identity level, and even in a personal level today, when we can't feel that... We can say that we're Americans without embarrassment.

JC: We start breaking at our hyphens or we get our primary dignity, let's say, as black, as gay, as this, as that, and that is when empire fails. This was Benzion Netanyahu critique of early 20th century Europe and his critique, or at least his explanation for the birth of Zionism, or what he would call Western Zionism, and it surprised me how absolutely applicable it is today, and yet, essentially what Benzion Netanyahu was asking for was a safe space. Israel is a safe space for Jews with a nuclear program. So then there was all of this call for an ethno nation state, which today we of course associate with the right wing, but all presented by Benzion Netanyahu in left wing terms. A place where one could be free to practice one's identity without blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And so to me, it's watching the left today use old language of the right, watching the right use old language of the left, and the constant cycling of revisions, and everyone's new definition of revisionism in every generation that was delightful to discover also disappointing and sort of inexhaustible.

JH: And therefore, giving us something to ponder what's around the curve. So pondering with you has been a real pleasure. Joshua Cohen, thank you so much for taking the time for sharing your insights, I look forward to future conversations.

JC: Thank you very much, I appreciate it.

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