FINDING YOUR FAMILY (AND YOURSELF)

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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, in which we're going to have the pleasure of another conversation with author Jai Chakrabarti. Jai Chakrabarti is the author of the novel, a Play for the End of the World, which won the National Jewish Book Award for debut fiction, and was long listed for the PEN/Faulkner Award. His short fiction has appeared widely as well. It's been anthologized in the O Henry Prize stories, the best American short stories, has received a Pushcart prize and was performed on selected shorts by Symphony space. Today we're going to discuss his brand new short story anthology titled A Small Sacrifice for An Enormous Happiness. Jai Chakrabarti, thank you for joining us again on the College Comments Podcast.

Jai Chakrabarti: Thank you so much for having me back. It's a pleasure.

JH: Let's dive right in. I think it's no spoiler to reveal that the theme of family ties this book together as a centerpiece and also as a vehicle for all kinds of human experiences. I'd like to ask you to introduce us, if you would, to the first story, which is also the title story, A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness.

JC: Sure. This theme of family and this question of belonging runs through all of the stories in the collection. And with the title story in particular, it's about two gay men in 1980 India who have a secret relationship and one of them wants to have a child, and the other one is not so sure. And that sets off between them a kind of struggle and introduces this other person into their relationship a very important person. And that is of course, the would be mother of their potentially future child. And so it's really exploring the dynamics between these two lovers, but also this third body, if you will, referring to the Robert Bly poem that I love so much and how their relationship changes and evolves as they're posed with this very thorny question of what it means to have a child as two gay men in India at that time, and what it means to have a child in that context, in that unusual unorthodox relationship.

JH: I'd like to talk a little bit about the intersection of that unusual situation and the broader themes that are in fact very usual and very universal. One of the things I most enjoy about your writing is the way in which you preserve the particular experience of a specific time and place, and simultaneously, as I said, universalize them. Your stories open our imaginations to a wider world, and they also allow us to inhabit them. And I was struck by one sentence in particular that just captivated me and it illustrates my point. You write, "What mattered with the coincidences of love." On the one hand, we have a gay couple finding their way in 1980 Kolkata amidst very real risks and complexities. And on the other hand, you have this kind of bungling self-discovery of all lovers. What did you rely on to learn and capture the particular realities of 1970s, early 1980s India in sort of drawing up this story?

JC: So, I was born in 1979, so I don't have direct personal experience, but I do have family and friends who lived through that time. And one of the great joys of being a writer, I suppose, is that I get a chance to actually interview them, to ask them questions about what it was like in that time and place that I have an excuse that I'm working on a project. And so it was a way for me to get to know in the case of this story, some family and friends who had struggled through their identity and how they would communicate the fact that they were gay to the larger extended family. And so when I got a chance to talk with them about that time and place, that was really the genesis of how this story came to be and why I chose to set it in 1980 as opposed to 2021 or something. Because to me, their story was important, it was vital, it was worth telling. And I feel that the longer I listen to somebody, the longer I spend time with them, the more empathy I develop. And so that's what I hope I was able to communicate with these characters.

JH: I'd like to pick up on another theme of the creative process that I'm drawing on an interview that you had with LitHub, in which you spoke about the influence of oral storytelling, and it seems as if that has been part of your inspiration, both because of what you just said about talking to your family, but also in the interview you say, "I'm deeply influenced by oral storytelling. My great-uncle showed me what it was like to foster community through storytelling, and I distinctly remember the cadence and rhythm of his lines as he brought all the children of the house together and transported them into his imagined worlds. This is all to say I value the sound of sentences when they're read aloud."

JH: When I think of writers who also go out of their way to capture the sound of language from the written page as it were, I think of people like Salman Rushdie, Frank McCourt and Jonathan Safran Foer, and in some ways their relationships to great oral storytelling traditions of their own, who influenced you in this regard, aside from your uncle that is, in terms of paying such close attention to the sound of that which is at the end of the day written down?

JC: Thank you for that. And what lovely examples to bring up, Rushdie and Frank McCourt, and I would also bring to that list a long line of poets, folks like Stanley Kunitz, Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds and of course Indian poets who wrote in regional languages like Rabindranath to include just one person. But so many examples in the world of poetry because that was a primary form of oral communication for such a long part of our human history. We didn't have books to write things down, and we needed to be able to tell stories and poems were really great ways to package up those stories and to have a captive audience. And so I think rhythm is

so important for how we enter into a story, how we stay hooked. So when I think about characters, I often think about what is the rhythm of this character? I am generally writing in third person, so I'm not oftentimes writing directly in the character's voice, at least in the finished manuscript.

JC: But I do think about even in the third person, well, what's the music here? And I think each of us has a different sense of our own music. I think if you listen to people long enough, I think you'll hear that, oh, their melody's a little bit different from another person's melody. And I was reflecting on the work of Bernard Malamud the other day and how Malamud has this incredible dialogue in his stories, especially in the Magic Barrel. And oftentimes the dialogue is from immigrants coming into this country for whom English is not a first language. So maybe Yiddish or Polish would be their first language. And there's such musicality in that dialogue, and there's a real kind of consistent rhythm. So I think that's something that was also an influence for me, is just thinking about the rhythm and music in dialogue and how that relates to characterization.

JH: It's also one of the most communicative aspects of culture in which you're leading us toward in your comments about Bernard Malamud, when we want to imitate our grandparents or when we want to capture the old country, wherever that country may be, it can be stereotyped and troped, but it's often very real, those rhythms and that musicality, it's very potent.

JC: It is very potent. And I think yeah, sure there are all these memes of the Jewish grandmother or the Indian grandmother, but I think there's also quite a lot of love there for that sound and the way in which that sound connects us back to our childhood and memories of languages that maybe we don't have the same level of access to, but yearn for in some way. So yeah, I think that dialogue and the rhythm and sound are important ways to bring us into a story.

JH: For our Jewish listeners, one of the stories is Mendel's Wall, which captures some of those cadences in the written word as well. So it's really a joy to read among the many other stories here. I'd like to pick up on this very brief point you just made in passing now, that sometimes we're attracted to the cadences of languages, that in and of themselves we may not have access to, the old country languages that we know of and we know about and maybe know some phrases or words, but don't properly speak. And I want to take this in the direction of what it means to be a straddler of worlds, to live in two universes. As appears in your book here, it's particularly the United States and India, or perhaps Hinduism and Judaism. Tell us a bit about your own life. What about your personal experience is about straddling worlds, and what about it has inspired you?

JC: I think that the way in which I, as a writer, think about coming to a story is this question of what is the perspective that I can bring given the sum of my human experiences? And so I was born in India, spent my early childhood there, and then moved with my parents to America when I was nine, but moved back to India for three months every year until college. So really had quite a bicultural and bilingual upbringing. And then when I was 23, through love and eventually marriage, encountered the world of Judaism through my wife, the poet Elana Bell. And that was such a deeply enriching part of my life to grow up in one culture, but then through love, through

this new community to find acceptance and belonging in a completely different space. What a gift that has been for me.

JC: And so I feel that I have been straddling two worlds, perhaps even more than two when I think about other dimensions, thinking about race, for example, in addition to religion, but also so many other ways in which we think about identity. And each of those moments in which I'm straddling between those worlds are also moments for me to reflect and learn. And the way in which I reflect and learn primarily is by writing stories or novels. So for me, that's the way in which I can try and process the world around me and figure out what is happening inside and what is happening outside and why am I feeling the sway? So that's oftentimes why I sit down and write a story.

JH: In the story called Lilavati's Fire. A middle-aged Indian couple have raised their child into adulthood in the United States, and their marriage has aged with them. And Aparna, the wife and mother has learned that, "Marriage was about keeping your honesty at a distance. It was not lying exactly. With a love as old as theirs, the truth simply counted less and less." And as the story develops, their now adult son worries about his parents' marriage and he proposes couple's counseling to his mom. And so his mom, Aparna, she dismisses the idea as a mere symptom of her son's Americanization. She says, "Wake up Bettha, this is not our way." Do you think that there's something about American culture that resists deep truths of aging and marriage and tries instead to fix or repair them? Or is that just a caricature of American ingenuity?

JC: It's such a big question and I don't know is the honest answer, but I think like in that moment where Aparna is resisting couple's counseling, I think she's resisting modern American convention of how we might come closer when relationships are falling apart, and we can debate and discuss how successful that approach is. I don't think she has necessarily though a better mechanism. So I don't think she has better answers than what is afforded her in the moment in which she lives. And I think the reason why it's particularly challenging for her and for her husband are because they are outside of the community in which they both grew up. So up until really my father and mother's generation, folks lived in extended families in India, like that was the main setup. You would have your uncles, aunts, cousins oftentimes just living all under the same roof.

JC: And so there's a lot of disadvantages that come for that, for sure, but you also have a lot of support mechanisms built in. And so I think a lot of these characters, including Aparna, are struggling with the fact that they are now outside of this extended family setup where they could have talked to one of any number of aunts or uncles, and there's a kind of loneliness because they don't know who to talk to and who they can go to for that kind of counsel and solace. I've felt at times the same way. My wife and I, we lived in New York City for much of our adult lives, and our parents live far away. They live in California and in North Carolina and so we had to kind of cultivate our own chosen family with the poets and writers and misfits that we came to know in New York City. So I think each of us have to find ways to cross over this very challenging nuclear family setup that we now find ourselves in and figure out, well, how do we find solace from each other and how do we find those shoulders that we can lean on?

JH: There's a flip side as well, which comes out also in Mendel's Wall, as it were coincidentally about the lack of privacy in having all of those resources close by. There's kind of a leakage of all the internal things that comes out and that creates challenges of its own. As you said, there are no easy answers. There's no silver bullet to the core human condition. I suppose we're stuck with it.

JC: Yeah and throughout these stories I was trying to show the opposites as it were. So I think Mendel's Wall, they have the benefit of this beautiful, strong community, but then the trade-offs, as you say, are lack of privacy and difficult to move outside of that community. And then in a couple of stories in the collection, the A Mother's Work and Searching for Elijah, those two are also I think of as a pair where you have different responses to this question of orthodoxy. So I was trying to explore these themes that kind of recur throughout the collection and show different ways in which they might be manifested but I love that connection you're making to Mendel's Wall and how yes, that community that Aparna I think would've really benefited from in the case of Mendel or rather his wife, Leia is quite restrictive.

JH: The story called Lost Things describes the grief of a mother, Mrs. Gupta, who lost her 3-year-old child, and it's also about the imprint of that grief on a boy who would later tackle and encounter his own loss and that of his wife, who suffers a couple of multiple miscarriages. And you describe the impression that Mr. Gupta had left on the boy when he was young, before emerging as an adult and encountering his own challenges. You describe that grief in the following way, this is from the boy's perspective, "I am certain that this was the first time I had heard a grown person scream, at least in the way of impolite grief, in that prehensile way."

JH: I wanna pick up on your adjective prehensile, it completely threw me and caused me to think a lot about empathy, the way that a human being has the capacity to express grief to the point where it actually grabs another person, the way something prehensile, as you call it, can do it. It grabs the soul of a person who, in and of themselves, that person is not experiencing grief necessarily in that moment. Explore with me a little bit the artistic and the human power of that kind of capacity for empathy and the adoption of one another's pain.

JC: What a beautiful question, and I feel almost as if the question is more beautiful than anything I can offer here. But I will share that this piece, Lost Things, is perhaps closest to autofiction, very close to my experience. And my wife, Elana, and I we struggled to conceive like many couples do these days, and during that process of going back and forth to the fertility clinic and multiple miscarriages, there was this memory that started to take hold of me, and it was this childhood memory that I had of, in fact, a woman in my neighborhood in Kolkata who would run out to her balcony every afternoon and would scream, as I described in that piece, and it was so affecting.

JC: I was a child when I experienced this, and I wanted to know the story, I wanted to know the why. And I also felt something deep whenever it happened, like it moved me, it changed me, and I recognized that feeling many years later. So I think there's ways in which memories and emotions sometimes get trapped in us, and then there's, later on, a completely separate trigger

that brings it up, which in the case of the story or my own experience, was that fertility journey. So that's kind of how I think about it and the back story of it as well.

JH: That's very moving. All of these stories are very moving, and one of them that touched me was called Lessons with Father, in which an adult daughter stewards her father's death by learning his art of painting. The story is a beautiful and poignant rendition of parent-child reconciliation, but I wanna ask another literary question. As the father, the dying father teaches his daughter painting, in the lesson that you capture in the short story, the father tries to cajole his daughter into capturing the quality of light, which of course, that is the artist's task, the representative artist's task.

JH: She's a musician, and she quite marvelously considers the question synesthetically. She answers the question, in her mind, about light the following way. She says, "There was the wind, there were the baby's cries. At one point, the mother had brushed her own hair, and it seemed like black gold." Is your writing fundamentally an exercise in synesthesia? Do you see yourself as translating one experience and its sensory context into another? This gets back to some of the orality we were talking about. Or from colors to words and sounds, or from events and dialogues into emotions? It's one of the rich qualities of your writing, and I wonder how much of it is real in your mind to you.

JC: Synesthesia does come up for me quite often in my images. I appreciate you recognizing that. I struggle between two spectrums. One is trying to represent the world as it is, as Immanuel Kant talked about it, the Ding an sich, the thing as it is, and then trying to suggest this world as it could be, the hidden world. And so when I think about images, especially images that move toward ending a story, they tend to start to go a little bit away from the world as it is, toward the world as it could be. And so I think, in those images, like you pointed out, the black gold and the way in which the light is transforming, that is kind of in-between those worlds. You know what I mean? And I am interested in that experience of the mystical without it being a story that moves into magical realism, and of course, I love that genre, but in my own writing, what I'm trying to pursue is that movement into the mystical without fully jumping into a story in which we are transported magically away.

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JH: Going back to the first story, when one of the protagonists, the man in the gay couple who most fervently wants a child, encounters the third character, as you described her. The woman who would presumably carry the child. And she proves to be stronger and to occupy more space in reality than he has attributed to her 'cause he doesn't really know her. He wants to talk about the prospect of her carrying the child for the gay couple, and his name is Nikhil Babu, and she queries of him. She says, "Whose happiness are you after, Nikhil Babu? She said, 'Yours and yours only?' He found himself grinding his teeth, the great pain of modernity, a single woman addressing him without the slightest difference."

JH: I love this because it captures and puts into such great narrative, harsh light, the contradictions that we all bear. On the one hand, in many ways, Nikhil, one of our protagonists, is a path breaker and a defier of social conventions and categories and traditions, and on the other hand, he's gnashing his teeth at the prospect of a woman somehow doing the same for her part, which is actually just pursuing her own logical interests in all of this. Tell us a little bit about that engagement with contradictions and tensions internally.

JC: This is an important part of characterization for me, which is that there are ways in which we might empathize with characters and appreciate their struggles and tensions. So in the case of Nikhil, as you mentioned, to appreciate the fact that he is pursuing this forbidden love, my heart goes out to him for that and I want him to experience that love. And then on the other hand, he is someone who looks down on people of a different class. And I love that sense of contradiction of both rooting for someone to fall in love while also thinking that they are not in the right, because of their views on class or whatever it may be, and I think that's just true to life.

JC: I think that, for most people, there are ways in which they are noble, extraordinary, and there are ways in which they are struggling with their biases, struggling with their misconceptions or whatever it may be, and yet we hold them, hopefully, in some cases, we hold them dear in our hearts. I notice that's certainly the case for me and with some family members with whom I don't have a full set of affinities, whether it's politically or in whatever other ways, and yet I still love them. It's that idea of contradiction, of holding all of these contradictions, and yet you can still love a person despite those contradictions. And I think that's even more important in this moment, in this day, when we are in some ways farther and farther apart seemingly, to strive for that.

JH: You said that's one of the most autofictional stories, was the story Lost Things, but maybe you could tell us what the second most self-revealing story in this collection is.

JC: So it is atypical for me to write a piece that's that autobiographical or could even serve as autofiction, but throughout these stories, there are many, many strands of my own life. For example, in encounters with Jewish ritual or culture, questions of conversion, for instance, questions of bringing up a child. The difficulties of raising a child, and kind of everything that appears in the story is I feel like I have some reference point to in my own life. Even if I haven't directly encountered it, I feel that I have been influenced by so many of the themes and moments and character tensions that these stories span. But I think in general, in writing, there

is this need to approach it from the perspective of the personal, and again, as I mentioned earlier, to ask this question of, "Well, what can I, with my own set of experiences, bring to this story?" So that's a question I ask myself often in whatever piece I'm in.

JH: Well, thank you for bringing the stories to us. It's an engrossing and touching set of stories. It's really been a pleasure.

JC: Thank you so much.

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