

## PEOPLE LOVE DEAD JEWS: PROVOCATIVE BOOK TITLE OR TROUBLING TRUTH?

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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.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and our conversation with author Dara Horn. Dara Horn is the award-winning author of five novels, and the essay collection, "People Love Dead Jews", the topic of our conversation today. She's the creator and host of the podcast, "Adventures With Dead Jews", and she was named one of Granta Magazine's Best Young American Novelist, and she is a three-time winner of the National Jewish Book Award, among other honors. Horn received her doctorate in Yiddish and Hebrew literature from Harvard University, and she has taught these subjects at Sarah Lawrence College, Yeshiva University, and Harvard. Welcome Dara Horn to the College Commons Podcast.

Dara Horn: Thanks so much for having me.

JH: I'd like to start with two cases that you describe early in your book. In your introduction, you describe a lesson you learned from a very unnerving interaction in your youth, in which another young person cited Hitler as a source for her understanding of Jewish people. You conclude that many see Jews as "people whose sole attribute was that they had been murdered, and whose murders served a clear purpose, which was to teach us something. Jews were people who, for moral and educational purposes, were supposed to be dead." Then in chapter One, you described the case of an employee at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam who was told to hide his kippah because the museum's goal was, "neutrality." You describe in other words, the way in which the Jewish experience is deemed valuable only insofar as it serves the needs of others. How much has the Jewish establishment itself promoted this problem in its efforts to universalize Jewish suffering, or at least the suffering of the Holocaust?

DH: Well, gosh, it's a big question. And one I'm actually looking into more now than I do in the book. My next project that I'm started just embarking on now is about American Holocaust education. But what is interesting about that is in this research that I'm just starting to do so I'm

not an expert on this, I'm discovering that it's a little bit less driven by the community than I might have thought. I'm looking at sort of the... Sort of moments when Holocaust education became very sort of central to the community. It really corresponds to that same emergence in a non-Jewish community.

DH: And here's what I mean by that, people often will trace it back to something like there was like a NBC's mini-series about the Holocaust in 1978, people trace it to Elie Wiesel. The reality is, Elie Wiesel didn't sell that many copies of his book when he first wrote it. A lot of people will trace it back to the attempted Nazi march in Skokie, Illinois in the 1970s, which means... So that was prompted by the Nazi party, by the Neo-Nazis, and that sort of forced the hand of a lot of survivors in this Jewish community in Skokie, Illinois, in a sense forced those people to come out of the woodwork in a way that they had been extremely reluctant to do before.

DH: Another thing that I've found in some of my research, and again, this isn't just my research, this is me reading work of other scholars, is you have a lot of, actually mostly non-Jewish public school teachers in the late 1970s, early '80s, who were starting to think about the way they look at education, and they're affected by something that's sort of becoming new at that period called Effective Learning, and they're looking for new ways of educating people, and a lot of them come to the story of the Holocaust as a way of introducing a kind of more emotional, like what we now call social-emotional learning into their curricula, but these are really mostly non-Jewish teachers.

DH: And so I thought that was very surprising because I think that in the community, we have this thing like, "Oh, this is on us. We built this Holocaust museums, and things like that." But the reality is that those came from pressure from the outside. And what I mean by pressure from the outside, quite frankly, is Holocaust denial. I think that the Jewish community in the process of trying to fight this battle against, honestly, Holocaust denial, came upon this idea that there was this universal interest, and it there was a universal way of sharing this subject, and that in a sense, the price of admission there was to universalize this subject.

DH: The reality is, that price of admission of sort of saying like, "Oh, we need to empathize with Jewish suffering of the past, because these were people that were just like you and me, people were doing that because they were responding to external pressure that was there from the non-Jewish world. I am only now myself starting to appreciate that more than I did in the past, as I look into sort of like what actually spurred the community to place this outward emphasis on Holocaust education.

JH: From the perspective of grappling and grasping anti-Semitism as a phenomenon, maybe the question is not the degree to which the Jewish community had to pay the price of admission by universalizing their suffering, but rather maybe the question is, how much more, if at all, do Jews have to do that in order to get their suffering recognized, than do other communities that have compelling and legitimate stories of profound suffering.

DH: Again, this is something I've learned more about since I published this book, than before I publish this book, and it's something I've learned about from my readers, my readers who are

not Jewish, who are in the Black community, I hear it from my readers who are in the Native American community. What I've heard in responses to this book from readers in many other minority communities is basically this dynamic that I'm describing in the book is extraordinarily familiar to them.

JH: Mm-hmm.

DH: But here's the piece where it becomes a little bit different, I think. When you go to the National Museum of African-American History, and you get to the end of their exhibit about American slavery, let's say, you don't then walk into another exhibit that's about human sex trafficking, and then walk into another exhibit about people in sweatshops, and then walk into another... Or watch some short film that talks about, "and slavery is still happening today, and here's what we should do against it." But what I've discovered is that is very much the norm in Holocaust education. And that to me is very interesting. And I may be wrong with this, but as far as I can tell, it's, the Holocaust, it seems to be the only historical atrocity that we're required in a sense to universalize it. What disturbs me about that, that process is that what you're doing in that process essentially is using Jews as a symbol.

JH: Right.

DH: And there's something dehumanizing about doing that. And the other thing I find troubling about it is, often the messaging tends to be about how, "This was wrong because Jews are just like everyone else." Right? And this is what we often find in a lot of anti-bigotry education, is this message that's like, "Oh, see this group of people over here that you might be prejudiced against, you shouldn't be prejudiced against those people because they're just like you and me, they're just like everyone else." To me, the problem with this approach is that Jews spent 3000 years not being like everyone else. And the other problem with it is that the Nazi project was not just about murdering six million Jews, it was about eradicating Jewish culture and Jewish civilization.

DH: And what disturbs me is that in a sense, we are participating in that project of erasure, when we are insisting that the way to get empathy from our neighbors is to claim that we are just like them. To me, this is... This isn't just a problem for the Jewish community. To me, this is a fatal flaw, sort of like the outer limit of living in a pluralistic society, is that there's this idea that you can only have empathy for someone who's just like you and me, or that you only can have empathy for someone once you discover these commonalities between you. To me, I think that we should be encouraging curiosity about differences, and yet instead we treat that as, differences as the problem, and the similarities as the thing that we're aspiring to. I mean, Well, the problem is that that's something that Jews have been fighting against for thousands years.

JH: Your book is organized by chapters that discuss groups over individual dead Jews, and one of them is about the dead Jews as it were of Harbin, China. And you write about the appropriation, I suppose, for lack of a better word, in a way rendered very positive and very celebratory if also fetishized of this Jewish history by the contemporary Chinese community in Harbin. And I wanna ask, is it possible that the caricatured historically incidental Chinese

fascination with the Jews, that you found in Harbin, differs fundamentally from the European Christian fascination, in which the Jewish story far from being historically incidental, actually impinges on the very DNA of European Christianity's own story?

DH: I wish I could say that it's different, in my opinion, it's really not. The chapter that you're referring to is about the history of the Jewish community, of a city in China called Harbin. This is a city that is in Northeastern China in a region traditionally called Manchuria, it's south of Siberia, north of North Korea, which is as awesome as it sounds. This city was largely built by Russian Jews through this bizarre historical circumstance where the... In 1896, the Russians got a concession from the Chinese government to build a branch line of the Trans-Siberian Railroad deeper into China, they needed to build a town in this very under-populated area.

DH: They chose the location for this town where there was nothing... It wasn't like there was a previous existing town there, and they needed Russian-speaking entrepreneurs to build this town for them, and they were like, "The problem is, Who the heck wants to move to Manchuria?" And at that point, the Russian regime says, "Hello, Jews, would you like to live without anti-Semitic restrictions, but not have to be a bottom feeder in a New York City sweatshop? Great, we have an option for you. You can move to Manchuria."

DH: And 20,000 Russian Jews moved to Manchuria and really built the entire infrastructure of the city. What then happens over the course of the early part of the 20th century is that they're successive regimes in Manchuria that make their lives more and more difficult, until the last Jewish family is evacuated by the Israeli government in 1962. Today, there is one Jew in Harbin... Harbin, like many Chinese cities that you may never have heard of, is actually larger than New York, it has 16 million people in it. 16 million people, one Jew. But what's interesting about this case is not that this is a place where Jews once lived and don't live there anymore, which unfortunately is not so unusual. What's interesting about this place is that about 15 years ago, the provincial government for this Chinese city decided to spend \$30 million, which in this area of the world is an enormous amount of money, they decided to spend \$30 million restoring Jewish heritage sites.

DH: They held a conference, which they called, "International Forum on... " wait for it, "Economic Co-operation between Harbin and the World's Jews." And then the mayor of Harbin gave a speech at this conference where he talked about how much we admire the Jews of the past, these esteemed Jews like JP Morgan, and Nelson Rockefeller, in case you're wondering, neither those people were Jewish, but you're starting to get the memo here, and if you didn't get the memo, he also then says, "The money of the world is in the pockets of the Jews, and this is the great testament to Jewish wisdom."

DH: I mean, this idea doesn't come from nowhere, but what is amazing about it here is that he's saying it out loud and it's not just him, there's enormous amount of documentation that this was their... This was their economic development plan, "We're gonna invest in restoring these Jewish heritage sites and then rich Jews will bring their magic Jewish money to Harbin. And that's why to me, it was an interesting story to tell in the book because there's less extreme, but equally disturbing versions of this that are happening in a lot of different places in the world.

JH: Did you not encounter among Chinese, and maybe many, many other people, as I often have, a raw culturally acceptable course essentialism, which is also socially acceptable in those societies, whereby you can simply say, "I don't know, Jews are just really good with money, and Italians, they're just good cooks, and that's just the way it is." For these cultures that are far, far removed from the Jews, yes the source of their determination that the Jews might be good with money, does come from these deep, deep streams of European Christian anti-semitism Protocols of the Elders of Zion, etcetera.

JH: However, fundamentally, their comfort with that kind of crude essentialization, negative and positive alike, is really just about their culture, and there's nothing intrinsically, what you and I might call at least colloquially, anti-Semitic, or anti-Jewish, as opposed to the actual roots of antisemitism as lived in contemporary societies in Christendom, whereby it really is about stuff that gets to the heart of who they themselves are as Christians, and coming to terms with the fact that that Christianity has to reckon with its Jewish connection.

DH: I know it's not intended to be passed, but I think there's something patronizing about giving people a pass for this kind of thing. It's not just that here they're celebrating this wonderful Russian Jewish community of the past, and, "Hurray, let's rebuild their cemetery, and rebuild their synagogues, and reconstruct these buildings so that they'll come and give us their magic Jewish money." The Chinese government is also persecuting Chinese Jews. There is a Chinese Jewish community that's been there for a 1000 years in a city called Kaifeng. This is a community that dates to the middle ages, if you go there now, you won't meet any Jews. And if you went there 10 years ago, you often will find people saying, they won't say they're Jews, they'll say they're descendants of Jews.

DH: It's not because, "Oh, [*Hewbrew*], we're not Jewish or something like that." The reason they're saying they're descendants of Jews is because it's illegal to be a Chinese Jew, just like we all are aware of what the Chinese government's doing with the Uyghurs. This culture has been absolutely cracked down upon and persecuted, they've gone completely underground, it's like a Marrano community, and I'm not gonna pretend that that's not happening. So this is sort of a larger problem with the Chinese Communist Party, and it's not that different from what you had in the Soviet Union in terms of oppressing religious minorities. I will tell you that I had a conversation about this with Abe Foxman, former head of the ADL.

DH: He and I had this conversation a while ago, and during this conversation, I was talking about what I saw in Harbin, and one of the things I talked about was the ridiculousness of some of these Jewish Museums that had been created in Harbin, and one example I gave was this one museum that was a former synagogue that they turned into a museum, and I'm just gonna give you one example of an exhibit in this museum where you walk into a small room and they have a life-sized plaster, sculpture of a man sitting at a desk in front of a typewriter, and there's a caption that says, "Real Jewish businessman in Harbin."

DH: And then you go to the next room and there's two life-sized plaster kids playing with blocks, and there's a caption, "Real Jewish children in Harbin." This is their museum. And so I

mentioned this in this conversation with Abe Foxman, and Abe Foxman as it happened, had also been to Harbin, because he had done some ADL delegation there years ago when they first opened this museum, and he said, "Yes, it's sketchy, And yes, there are some elements of it that are playing on these stereotypes, but isn't it better than nothing? Like how can you not be grateful for these people that they did this research, and they reconstructed these museums?"

DH: And I said to him, "Well, I don't know. Would you say to Native Americans, Look, we're honoring your culture. We made these cigar store Indians for you. And look, we named our sports team after you. Look how we're honoring your heritage. In that context, would we say like, "Well, I guess it's better than nothing." No, we would say, "This is offensive, and we can do better." And I think there's something self-effacing in Jewish culture, which comes from really centuries of strategy on the part of Jewish community to accommodate, which makes us bend over backwards to give this kind of stuff the benefit of the doubt.

JH: I agree with that last statement. I fear you've conflated me with the orientation with Abe Foxman, and there's not an iota of ease, or easing, or softening, in my interpretation of the Chinese phenomenon, whatsoever. There is difference, in quality, source, understanding, thereby how to tackle such things.

DH: Oh, sure, of course. Yeah, no, I'm sorry. And I'm also, I want to be clear, like Abe Foxman has done tremendous things for the Jewish community.

JH: Yeah, right, right, of course. No, and I...

DH: Yeah, I mean, he and I don't see eye to eye on everything, but I mean, yeah, I applaud his 40 years of work in this field. I mean, this is not, yes. But what is interesting to me is that there is something that's very deep in the Jewish community, so deep that we don't talk about it. We do have this urge to give people as many passes as possible and to give people the benefit of the doubt as much as we possibly can. And I've noticed this in publishing this book, that often the readers who have pushed back on some of my arguments in this book, it isn't because they necessarily disagree with me. It's because they don't want to say these things. And to me, that itself is really interesting.

JH: It is, and I've encountered it, and I know wherever you speak, I tend to be more hawkish on this, which is to say, if I'm right, then one would have to attend to the, we'll call it again, antisemitism of China or the Harbin case, for example, differently than one attends to European antisemitism.

DH: Well, I mean, it's much less important because, I mean, they don't have the people.

JH: My assessment is...

DH: Historical.

JH: Yeah, and the truth, it has nothing to do with how many are affected. It's the principle of the thing. I'm a medievalist and that's gotta color my way of looking at these things, but here's to not giving anyone a pass for being prejudiced and antisemitic or racist or any such thing.

DH: You know, people often comment on the title of my book. It's the nice way to say this is provocative, but the reality is my goal is to make people uncomfortable because one thing that I've noticed in 20 years of being a writer is that the uncomfortable moments are where the story is, because that's when you're about to learn something that you weren't either ready or willing to learn before. And I really hated writing this book. [laughter] And I mean, it's sort of, I didn't wanna write this book. I mean, I really avoided this topic for a long time until I realized that my avoidance of it was also part of the problem.

JH: You're a very skilled and artful author. I did not experience unease. I experienced that emotion when you read something and you identify it and you wanna jump into the book and tell the author, yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly. That's totally what I know. It was validating. It was very, very powerful for me to identify with it. So from the point of view of the perspective and the clarity and the articulation and the elegance that you bring to that perspective, I found it bracing.

DH: I will tell you that this, I feel like there's sort of a whole other book that has happened since the book came out, which is responses I've gotten from readers, which has sort of also kind of changed my perspective on all of these things yet again. I spoke before about non-Jewish readers from other minority communities who have sort of, identified with things in the book. I've been very, very heartened by the response from non-Jewish readers in general. What I've discovered is there are a whole lot of people with a lot of goodwill who really wanna be, what we now call good allies. And a lot of them kind of just maybe don't know how. So that's sort of, that's been very encouraging, but I have to tell you, to me, one of the more depressing things about publishing this book has been the responses from Jewish readers. And in a sense, and it is wonderful as a writer to have readers like you who appreciate my work. With this book, like I gotta be honest, like I kind of wish people appreciated it a little less. And what I mean by that is, I wrote this book as an intellectual exploration.

DH: This wasn't a book that I was writing because of personal events in my life. There's some things, but very little. It's really like this was a problem that I noticed in my research. It's a problem I noticed as a writer, as a scholar of literature. I was exploring those problems in this sort of intellectual context. What has been sort of really revelatory to me in a very upsetting way is the responses from Jewish readers. And when I say Jewish readers, I mean people really from all walks of life, like religious people, secular people, old people, young people, people in the United States, people in other countries. They all write me the same message, which is, "I have felt uncomfortable my whole life and I never understood why. Your book articulated this for me, thank you." And then they say, "I never told anyone this, but..." and then they tell me some horrible degrading stories, things that have happened in their own life. And sometimes they say, can you help?

JH: Wow.

DH: And to me, that has been just like really devastating because for me, this was an intellectual problem. For my readers, this is like an emotional problem. And this is something very personal. I had no idea what these people were going through. Like, did you know how many people are getting pennies thrown at them in 21st century America?

JH: If I count myself, at least one. I mean...

DH: Like, holy crap, you too? Like, I thought that was something that died in 1947.

JH: Yeah. No, no. I've had rocks thrown at me. I've had money thrown at my feet. And, yeah.

DH: That's like shocking to me.

JH: Yeah, I live in Los Angeles and all of this took place in Los Angeles to boot.

DH: I mean, and then people will say like, oh, how can I even complain about this? My great grandma survived Auschwitz. I'm like, is that the standard? I'm like, yay, we're great. We're not in a mass grave. I was like, it was just like really disturbing. And like, the problem is like, I feel like I've become like this receptacle for all this unarticulated pain. And what's amazing to me is it's unarticulated because we think of this community as like, oh, we're so navel-gazey, we're so obsessed with, oh, we love talking about antisemitism. It's not true, is what I've discovered. People like talking about antisemitism when it comes from people who don't vote like them. People like talking about it when it's violent. Short of that, people don't like to talk about it. And people don't like to talk about it because it's humiliating. And that to me is the most interesting thing about this is that the public sort of conversation about this is about the Holocaust or it's about violent incidents.

DH: And I mean, the reality is like through most of Jewish history, like antisemitism usually doesn't take the form of like mass murder. It usually takes the first form of humiliation and ostracism. And that's something that like people are not willing to talk about, or just, I don't know, I don't even sort of know what to do with this. I mean, on the plus side, I also have gotten like long letters from people who are like, I'm a recovering antisemite.

JH: Oh, wow.

DH: So that's nice.

JH: Yeah, that's gotta be an experience unto itself. It sounds like you framed this book as something you would hope as being unsettling. It sounds like it's been unsettling to you, but it has actually provided some comfort for us who read it.

DH: I didn't realize the scale of the problem.

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JH: You write of a dawning realization of the "mania for dead Jews as something perverse, and all the more so when it wears its goodwill on its sleeve." The goodwill to which you refer seems to identify the relationship between antisemitism, that is the hatred of Jews, and Philosemitism, that is the love of Jews, as two sides of the same coin. Am I reading you correctly or not? What do you make of that?

DH: You know, when I talk about the mania for dead Jews, that's different, that's maybe slightly different than Philosemitism, 'cause that's more of the, like, pious narration that's built into, you know, let's say something like what I call, you know, what the tourist industry calls Jewish heritage sites, let's say, right, which is, in the book, I very kind of obnoxiously say, like, Jewish heritage sites, it's such a, you know, it's a brilliant marketing term, 'cause, like, it sounds so much nicer than property seized from dead or expelled Jews, right? Like, who wants to go to that? Jewish heritage sites sound so benign. So, you know, Philosemitism is something a little different because that's something where you're dealing with living Jewish communities, right? I mean, or presumably. I'm talking more about, like, the way that, in a sense, people tell stories about dead Jews that make them feel better about themselves, and that living Jews are often required to erase themselves in order for those stories to be told. And, you know, the example that I opened the book with is this example that you mentioned at the start of our conversation about this incident that happened at the Anne Frank House where this, you know, young Jewish man who was working there had to hide his kippah under a baseball hat.

DH: And, oh, and another example that I give in the book from that same museum in Amsterdam is, you know, they've got 15 languages for their audio guide, you know, and it's got that display with the flags where it says English and there's a British flag and it says Francais and there's a French flag until you get to Hebrew, no flag. I mean, so the museum has corrected this since then. This is from a few years ago. But, you know, I mean, what I realized in looking at these incidents at this particular museum is like, you know, these are PR mishaps, but they're not mistakes.

JH: Right, no, definitely, that would not be a mistake whatsoever, of course.

DH: Yeah, they're not mistakes, right? Yeah, and, you know, it's like they, you know, they're like, you know, won't wanna disturb anyone visiting this museum with like actual living Jews who are doing gross things like, I don't know, practicing Judaism or, you know, living in Israel where half

the world's Jews live. Like, you know, that's gross, right? We like, you know, the nice Jews, like the dead ones.

JH: Which often happen to be in the past where you can't query them as much. I actually think that philosemitism is, in fact, insofar as you described the love of dead Jews as conveniently adopting a Jewish story now past to fit your own self-image, I actually think philosemitism is exactly that.

DH: I was interviewed for this book on some Christian TV station, you know, where they started the interview with, you know, telling me about how I was one of God's chosen and this kind of thing. Honestly, like, you know, I'm okay with that, like, sure. You know, that's, you know, like I didn't think that there was anything, you know, I think a lot of Jews are very suspicious of those kinds of beliefs. Like at least in this case, these people have like their own religious reasons for being interested in Jewish history and they're not the same reasons that I have. And, you know, I feel sort of similarly maybe about something like Holocaust education, the way it's often presented. It's like, you know, is it a bad thing to like learn about the problems with tyrannical regimes? Like, no, that's not a bad thing. Like, I don't know. I mean, I'm not like sort of saying like all these things are horrible or something like that or all of these things are like, you know, these antisemitic enterprises. Like I'm not making that argument at all. I think that there's a lot of, I think there's a lot of room for non-Jewish communities to like understand Jewish history in their own ways. But like, I do think that there is often a self-serving element in that and that's what I'm examining in the book.

JH: Well, thank you for the conversation and all of the incredible themes and difficult questions that you've raised. It's really been, if the word pleasure is appropriate, it's been a pleasure. Thank you, Dara Horn.

DH: It's the most fun you can have with dead Jews.

[laughter]

JH: On that note, thank you, Dara Horn.

DH: No, thanks for having me.

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