DISCOVERING ISRAEL IN THE SHADOW OF THE EICHMANN TRIAL

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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, your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and I'm pleased to welcome to the conversation Roslyn Bernstein. Roslyn Bernstein is Professor Emerita in the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions at Baruch College of the City University of New York. At Baruch College, she received the college's distinguished awards for teaching and service. And in the meanwhile authored several books and reported on culture and contemporary art for the New York Times, the Village Voice and New York Magazine, among others. Her debut novel and the topic of our conversation is The Girl Who Counted Numbers, which came out in 2022 from Amsterdam Publishers. Roslyn Bernstein, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Roslyn Bernstein: It's a pleasure, happy to be here.

JH: Let's open with an introduction, tell us the premise of The Girl Who Counted Numbers.

RB: The Girl Who Counted Numbers, is not your typical Holocaust novel. First of all, it takes place in 1961, the year of the Adolf Eichmann trial, and that actually was the first year that I was in Israel. Now, while I arrived late in the year after the trial, the whole place was permeated with what had gone on at the trial. People were still talking about it, survivors were still talking about it. The cafes were filled with survivors and immigrants, and the reason I say my book is not the typical Holocaust book is about what happened in 1961 and how the survivors were at that time, so many years later, still dealing with, still expressing and still finally getting a chance to articulate what they had experienced so many years earlier. The Nuremberg Trials in the 50s, I would describe them as trials of officials, the less emphasis on the testimony of the survivors, but the Eichmann trials was all about the survivors, what was astonishing was that you really got to hear first person testimony of what had happened in the camps.

RB: The protagonist of my book is a 17-year-old American girl from New York City, her name happens to be Susan. The girl is and is not me in some ways. The book is about Susan being sent by her father, a lawyer in America, to Israel to see if she can find out what happened to his older brother. That family left Seidel in Poland in 1920 and when they left, they all left except for

this older brother who refused to come. After that, the rest of the family made their way in America in New York. The father became a lawyer, they lost contact with this older brother. They wrote letters. They wrote to Yad Vashem, they wrote to all of the places you could write to, and there was no record of this man, Yakov Reich. Her father says, "Okay, I couldn't do it, you be the sleuth, I'd like you to go to Israel. I'd like you to see if you can find out what happened to my brother. Did he survive the Holocaust or what happened?" By the time this young girl arrives in Israel, she already speaks not fluent, but speaks Hebrew and understands Hebrew and therefore is able to eavesdrop on the conversations that are going on, talking about the trial.

JH: Susan, our protagonist, is a bookish young woman and a good kid. So I love your simple statement that captured her temperament. You say, "Rebellion is difficult", because Susan's first impulse is to resist her father's pressure to go to Israel, but ultimately she gives in. What does it mean, both to resist and at the same time fundamentally buy into the deeper assumptions of our parents and is there a distinctively Jewish twist on this tension?

RB: She wants to be as independent as possible, she's an excellent student, she's a little feisty, a little daring, but I think there is a distinctively Jewish twist. The first language she studied and school was Hebrew. She studied Hebrew in the morning and English in the afternoon. So I think, what does it mean to rebel against your parents? It means to show your independence but it also means to show your love. She was not abandoning being a Jew, but she wasn't sure she was a Zionist, she wasn't sure who she was, and her father had passion for Judaism, so she wanted to get closer to it. But she was afraid that it would take away her independence, her freedom, so both things were true.

JH: Let's pick up on this theme that you mentioned about her father, because a key strain of Susan's father's personality is his twinned devotion to Judaism and Americanism. You write, "Her father's Lincoln speeches were almost as frequent as his Holocaust lectures." Many of us were raised with this sensibility, and we still feel it. I wonder if you as a cultural observer and a journalist, think that this particular sensibility has persisted in the Jewish community or not, or changed.

RB: Well, I don't know about the youngest Jewish community now, but I would say of my parent's generation and the next generation after that, I think it did. Lincoln was a great figure to the Jews, he was for independence, he was for freedom, he was for values, and the Jews adopted him for his ability to speak his mind and for his integrity. I don't know about 20-year-olds today, who are into TikTok and whatever, but I would say it lasted a long time and maybe still is there.

JH: Moving to Israel now, one of the tropes of diaspora Jewish Zionism is coming to terms with Israel's warts. And Susan's encounter with the real Israel starts with non-Ashkenazi Jews in her Ulpan, her intensive Hebrew class, meanwhile, as you indicated, the drama of justice is ruling in the background with the Eichmann trial, which fits into our idealized version of Israel's rule as the Jewish state. Tell us a little bit about this story and the clash between the ideal Israel and the flawed Israel.

RB: That's a very important part of the book. As important as looking for her uncle, there was a clash, and the clash was particularly hot and heated during that year, the year of the Eichmann trial, when one after another survivor got up there to tell about their horror stories. And also the Ashkenazi Jews, the German Jews were financially better off, they had somewhat better jobs, they had certainly better housing. The Tunisians and Moroccans who lived in neighborhoods like Shmuel HaNavi and other neighborhoods, they lived in concrete slabs, half the buildings weren't even finished. I was there in '61, they were very poor. Most of the immigrants worked construction work, the women cleaned houses, but that wasn't exactly the life they had led at home, so there was a lot of tension. And it's very interesting that definitely on my mind when I wrote this was that it was 1961. Think about America in 1961, civil rights issues, black and white, and the issue of class and race, and so I felt that acutely when I was in Israel, I lived in a little pension in Rehavia, which was very upscaled. Moroccans who went to the old pond, they barely lived in buildings that you would call finished, and they struggled and part of the tension was this, they almost resented the trial, but they didn't. That's the resolution here.

RB: I must say I've been in Israel a lot, I have a daughter and seven grandchildren who live there, and to be honest with you, there's a lot of that tension in Israel, particularly now with the tension over the changing of the judicial system, there's a lot of tension in Israel, much of that tension I picked up in 1961, it was already there and intense.

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JH: The College Commons podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclass for HUC alumni, with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out at huc.edu/hucconnect. Now, back to our interview. You picked up on this issue of suffering and the different colors of suffering. And the title of your book refers to the way in which Susan and I think by extension all of us, we really can't help but to tally our suffering miracle, most emblematically in the way that we refer to 6 million murdered Jews in the Holocaust. But it's true in general and I wonder if you believe that we are doomed in some ways, not just as Jews, but all people as human beings to account for our victimization with measurable enumerable units despite the intangible, and I guess ultimately, unfathomable nature of suffering itself. And if that's the case, does the tallying imply concomitantly comparison of suffering as is intimated in your book? And then if it implies the comparison of suffering, is that intrinsically invidious?

RB: When I was thinking of naming the book, I was thinking about a habit I have, and that is that I can't tell you why Josh, but even when I was a little child, when I would be walking down a street, I would count the cracks in the sidewalk or if I went to a theater before the curtain came down, I would count the number of performers on the stage. This was sort of something OCD in me understanding who was involved, how many were involved, what it meant. You asked a really good question, I mean, the question is, are we doomed if we're always counting the numbers? And if everything is comparative, it seems that every news story that we hear today begins with a numeric 45 people were shot, 85 people were murdered. Somehow, the number,

the quantity makes it real for people, think of the number. How can Jews ever walk back from the number 6 million? It's hard, it's very hard. But I do believe that over time, people come to see it, not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of values and ways of learning to live with one another. So I'm hopeful that ultimately it's going to be an understanding rather than an accounting and some kind of reconciliation. I'm still hopeful, although all my friends say I'm an optimist.

JH: And searching for her uncle. One of the first solid leads that comes to Susan comes from a professor in Israel who encourages her to keep up the search. He says, "Find out what happened to your uncle. He said, it's a mitzvah" Susan wonders in the next paragraph what he meant by that. What do you think?

RB: I think that understanding your history is a mitzvah. I think knowing where you came from, knowing people's fate is a blessing because it enables you to move forward with greater understanding, with more compassion. And what do we mean by the word mitzvah? Something that will only be for good. Now, it could be that what she finds out is for bad, but in the finding, in the process of learning, in the process of knowing, I think it's good, secrets can eat away at people's hearts. In fact, that's one of the themes in the book. These people in the cafe, these survivors, they're finally whispering secrets, their camp secrets to one another, it's freeing them, and so I think it's a Mitzvah.

JH: I'd like to close the interview by circling back to you as an individual. And although the book is not strictly speaking, autobiographical, the story is nevertheless inspired by your own first trip to Israel, 1961. What event or experience in your lived story lay at the core of the emotional or thematic resonance of the girl who counted numbers?

RB: The cafes and the whispering of the survivors, that would be first. And also, I discovered that I seemed to be closer to Judaism than I thought I was. I wasn't gonna be a Zionist, but I was closest to Judaism, very close to Judaism, very passionate about it, and very passionate to this day about what it is to be a Jew and what values I must have. And my politics may not be the same as all other Jews, but I think that year deeply imprinted upon me how much I was a Jew.

JH: Roslyn Bernstein, thank you so much for sharing yourself and your story. And congratulations on The Girl Who Counted Numbers. Thank you for the conversation.

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RB: I enjoyed it very much.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect.

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