

**ASHLEY GOLDBERG: AIRING OUR DIRTY LAUNDRY IN PUBLIC**

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our Acclaimed Author series, A partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our interview with author Ashley Goldberg. Ashley Goldberg is a writer from Melbourne, Australia. His stories have appeared in New Australian Fiction 2021, Chiron Review and Award-winning Australian Writing among others. His debut novel, "Abomination" was published by Penguin Random House Australia in 2022 and won the debut fiction prize at the National Jewish Book Awards. Ashley, welcome to the College Commons Podcast, congratulations on your National Jewish Book Award, and thank you for joining us.

Ashley Goldberg: Thank you, Josh, and thanks for having me.

JH: "Abomination" your first novel describes the aftermath of a sexual abuse case in an orthodox school years after the fact, and the story follows two characters who had attended the school during the period of the abuse. Their names are Yonatan, who stayed in the Orthodox fold into adulthood, and Ezra, whose parents took him out of the Orthodox School immediately after the original scandal broke when they were still kids. Am I reading too much into it, to hear echoes of Chaim Potok The Chosen, and for what it's worth, I did notice that you gave a shout-out to Philip Roth as well.

AG: Yeah. You're definitely not reading too much into it. There is a very strong influence there, obviously with the two young men and their two different paths. One more religious than the other, not just The Chosen, as well The Promise was a huge influence. And with Ezra's storyline and the more secular elements, there's some Roth there. I'm a big Roth fan, other strong influences, Nathan Englander, Michael Kaban, Isaac Bashevis Singer even. There's a lot of Jewish literature that has led me to where I am, but certainly the strongest, most direct influence where the narrative came from the two different perspectives was Chaim Potok The Chosen.

JH: One of the themes that emerges early in the story is that of cover up, of covering up the sexual abuse. And we know in the Western world, given all kinds of major, widely known issues that have come up, that communities often cover up crimes. Even those perpetrated against the community itself. And presumably those who cover up such things are motivated by any number of things, by institutional interests, by shame, or by misplaced piety perhaps. In "Abomination" you raised the specter additionally of the specific fear of the Orthodox community. That is to say the fear that a tiny counter-cultural minority with a history of victimization must not air its dirty laundry at all costs. What do you make of such motivations to cover up crimes and more importantly, do these possible motives for coverup even matter?

AG: Unfortunately, these instances of which it's a fictional depiction within the book, but these are based upon a number of instances that have occurred here in Australia and they're not limited, to the Jewish community and to the ultra-orthodox communities here in Australia. I did a lot of research into the 2013, Royal Commission that we had into institutional responses to child sexual abuse. It is something which is pervasive and recurrent and even more unfortunately since the publication of the book and since the Royal Commission and its recommendations, there have been a number of instances from Jewish institutions that I am personally familiar with as well. And I don't think it's necessarily a product of a religious community or a religious institution, even though that's where it's depicted in "Abomination" and what the Royal Commission focused on.

AG: I do think it is a product of the insular space. I do think it's a product of these small communities in which there are a number of individuals in power. And for time and time again throughout human history, we just seem to see individuals in those positions. Whether or not it's because the position itself draws individuals like that or whether or not it is innate to the kind of structure, but unfortunately they abuse that power. And then it seems, as you said, there's a tendency to want to hold onto that by whatever means necessary. So I don't think it's a particular reflection of necessarily ultra-orthodox communities or religious communities at all. I do think it's a reflection of small communities with that kind of hierarchical power structure in which certain individuals control too much.

JH: In 2021, Israel extradited, a woman named Malka Leifer, a school teacher accused of sexual assault at an Australian Orthodox school who had indeed fled to Israel, not unlike the antagonist in "Abomination". It sounds like her case was among the cases that may have sparked some of your ideas. Was her case relevant to your bringing in the issue of Israel as a kind of complicating factor on the political scene in "Abomination"?

AG: Yeah, it absolutely was Malka Leifer's case is one of the many in which Rabbi Hirsch is an amalgamation of those individuals. But at the time of writing, "Abomination", Malka Leifer hadn't even been extradited yet, but everything was available in terms of when she fled the country and the ongoing efforts of now that she's been charged, her victims, their efforts to get her extradited, including what was perceived to be certain political parties in the Israeli government and their efforts to stop her extradition. So it absolutely influenced it in terms of what information was available to me when researching the book in 2018 or so.

JH: It was an interesting political twist to an otherwise deeply personal set of stories, which really were quite moving. And I'd like to focus on one scene in particular in which you describe the intimate moment of the wedding night between Yonatan, the protagonist who remained Orthodox and his new bride, Rivka. You wrote the scene with a real dextrous combination of religious naivete and unabashed sensuality. Was there a message you were trying to convey in this scene, perhaps a presumptive stereotype you were hoping to fend off or correct? Or were you simply illustrating the sometimes counterintuitive possibility of deep sincere piety with frank sensuality?

AG: Yeah. It was a combination of both. There's certainly a playful focus on how naive both characters are in terms of their sexual education, which I do think in accordance with the research I've done, that seemed to be a product of certain limited ultra orthodox communities in their sexual education. I did buy a number of religious textbooks and read their advice and introductions in terms of the wedding night and how a bride and groom should perform. That was very educational. And in terms of the sensuality and the intimacy of their particular relationship, I do think that any two individuals in any context could have that kind of relationship. And I do think we see that with Tan Rivka, that despite the fact that their marriage, is a product of it being arranged, they do have a loving relationship.

JH: I noticed that when you use culturally specific language to convey the flavor of Orthodox Jewish life, peppering the text with Yiddish and Hebrew religious terminology, you italicize those terms, effectively signaling them as foreign words. Was there a stylistic conversation that you had with your editor as to the choice to italicize these words and do you think there's a different message if you don't italicize them?

AG: Yeah, there was a conversation. We made the decision to keep them italicized because there were so many, and in addition to that, we weren't providing a glossary. I have received a lot of emails from non-Jewish readers, even some Jewish readers, that they felt like a glossary would be helpful. But my publisher at the time did stress they didn't want a glossary. I at the time, didn't want one either. I felt that the terms were understandable, in the context of the book, but because there was such a significant response in terms of readers asking for a glossary, were we to go in a reprint, I'm not actually sure what decision I would make now.

JH: "Abomination" takes place at the intersection of Orthodox and non-orthodox communities in Australia, as we've discussed in the friendship of Yonatan and Ezra, who straddle that boundary. And indeed they sort of bounce off each other as foils across that intersection. I wonder where you personally fit in that nexus.

AG: I was raised modern Orthodox, and then I went to a Jewish day school, went to shore. My parents didn't have a Jewish education, so they really wanted myself and my brother to have one, particularly after they both experienced anti-Semitism growing up here in Melbourne. Well my mom is originally from Argentina, but her father was a Holocaust survivor. They also experienced anti-semitism there, and that's why they came to Australia. And I suppose I was raised with more orthodox than reformed Judaism being modern orthodox, but not quite ultra orthodox in terms of Yonatan's background.

AG: But then once I graduated from high school and reached university, I left everything behind. And not long after I moved to Canberra, our capital and worked for our federal government, and there are certainly not many Jewish people in Canberra at all. It's interesting growing up in Melbourne though because we have this very unique blend of communities, they reform Judaism and modern Orthodox Judaism and Ultra-orthodox. This is just, everyone's around one another. People seem to interact. There are smaller ultra orthodox communities that do keep to themselves more than some other ones that are here in Melbourne. But overall, there is a unique blending of individuals.

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 masterclasses 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](http://huc.edu/hucconnect). Now back to our interview.

JH: In the course of the story, you hit on many familiar and compelling themes of Jewish life, just as some examples you touch on parenthood, faith, hypocrisy, forgiveness, communal fidelity, marital fidelity and navigating modernity in the non-Jewish world. And as we've spoken about, even Israel and some of the politics of diaspora Israel relations, I was moved most of all by your plumbing, the depths of our internal contradictions in almost all of these dimensions. I wonder, has your readership appeared to resonate with one or two such themes in particular?

AG: Yeah. Absolutely, they have from some individuals actually, from other individuals. There has been a little bit of blowback from some members of the Jewish community in terms of focusing on some of the negative aspects, particularly instances of abuse. A bit of a conversation in terms of why I felt the need to highlight those instances. And I did feel very strongly the need to focus on them, and highlight them so that they're recalled and so that we can prevent such things from happening again. When I wrote the book, in terms of the contradictions, I did feel that it was something I really wanted to focus on. And I was a little concerned when it was finished that it focused on them too greatly and that perhaps I had written an angry book and I wasn't sure what kind of response I was gonna receive from the community I was brought up in and the broader Jewish community as a whole.

AG: But some individuals, particularly Jewish readers, responded and said they found the book quite loving in a way, which was so interesting to me because it wasn't something that I set out to do. And my own relationship with Judaism is certainly complicated. And I think I obviously, while writing the book, was expressing some of my relationship with Judaism, its contradictions, all of its complications, morality, and immorality and everything like that.

AG: And then I think I've also learned more about my relationship with Judaism, or at least I'm still discovering my relationship with it since it's been written. And with the response from readers when they say what I got most outta the book was the relationship between Rivka and Yonatan. There were people saying they felt like it was all about Ezra and his complicated relationship and what morals he had and why he had them. So yeah, it was just really

interesting how I think when you write a book in general, it's one thing when you write it and then once it's finished it becomes something else.

JH: For what it's worth, it didn't come across to me as angry. I think I read into it, or indeed it was already there. A lot of the loving quality. I can see that it does sound like some responses from the Jewish community were a little bit of life imitating art in regretting that you had aired some dirty laundry, even if it was fictitious. At any point did you find yourself self-censoring out of fear that there would be blow back against your parents or family?

AG: I think anything I did, I went back and put in, for instance, at the end there with some of the details of abuse which is an amalgamation of some of the actual case reports. Writing it, I was hesitant, but I thought it was important to include them. And while I'm no longer a part of the community I was brought up in, my parents are still active and they haven't received any kind of negative impacts as a result of the book, so I'm glad for that.

JH: Would you be willing to weigh in on which theme is the one that most deeply resonated with you, perhaps after you were done writing and maybe surprise you because it necessarily wasn't what you set out to write about?

AG: Yeah, I think potentially it could be the idea of community as a whole, which is something I've thought a lot about, but as someone who at a young age decided to leave and subsequently when you're going outta your own at university into the world and forming connections with people is difficult. I think any adult knows that. And as Yonatan says in the book, he has had this whole world right there presented to him in terms of community and family and something he could connect to. Well, Ezra goes out on his own and struggles, and obviously you can't go back in time, but it's interesting to think about what life would be like having that community and embracing it now despite all of its foibles.

JH: Well, Ashley Goldberg, thank you very much for taking the time and for sharing this discussion with us about "Abomination" and congratulations again on your recognition.

AG: Thanks for having me Josh.

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](http://huc.edu/hucconnect).

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