RABBI ZOË KLEIN:
BRAND NEW STORIES FROM A THOUSAND YEARS AGO

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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.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and a conversation I'm really looking forward to with Rabbi Zoe Klein. Rabbi Klein serves Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, she pursued the rabbinate out of a passion for ancient texts, mythology, liturgy and poetry. So it's altogether appropriate that she should also be an author, she penned the novel "Drawing in the Dust" in 2009, which was published in five countries, and "The Goblins of Knottingham: A History of Challah" in 2017, as well as today's topic, her collection of short stories titled "Candle, Feather, Wooden Spoon" which came out in 2023 with CCAR Press. Her poems and prayers are used in houses of prayer around the world, and I'm proud to call her a friend and an alumna of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Zoe Klein, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Zoe Klein: It's great to be here. Thank you.

JH: Let's start off by talking about the title, "Candle, Feather, Wooden Spoon." Where'd you get it from?

ZK: Well, I've always loved that ritual, and I love that it's a ritual that not everybody knows about. It's a subtle initiation into the Holiday of Freedom. And so it's this beautiful moment where children traditionally look for the Chametz that their parents have hidden around the house, they search out the dark corners with a candle, and when they find a piece, they sweep that little piece with a feather onto a wooden spoon. And ultimately the Chametz they find, the candle, the feather, the wooden spoon are all put into a paper bag and the whole of them are burned as a final offering to say that the house is now ready for Passover. And in many ways, whenever I've studied Torah, when I teach Torah, when I'm in Chavruta in study pairs, I always feel like I'm

searching the text in a similar way. I'm looking for gems, looking for pearls, looking for insights and it really is a treasure hunt.

JH: I love the idea of a treasure hunt for our story, and I love your meandering questions about the creative process behind Midrash, which is clearly an important source of inspiration for you. What is Midrash and why does the Jewish imagination need it now so urgently?

ZK: That's a great question. Midrash is born out of the spaces in between the unwritten narratives, the silences in the text. One of the examples of Midrash that I like to use is that the musical Wicked is a Midrash on the Wizard of Oz. So Wicked asked the question, "What's the origin story of the Wicked Witch of the West?" And then we have a whole other story that is born out of that. And your question as to why Midrash is important now, we're in a period of time where we're learning how to pay attention to other people's stories, and we're learning to stop just projecting our own beliefs and ideals on others, and rather taking a passenger seat and letting other people take the wheel and take us on their journey. We're learning how to be curious, how to truly live up to the Talmudic dictate that, one who is wise is one who listens to all people or who learns from all people. And in order to do that, we have to allow ourselves to follow other people's stories and to hear them and not project our own stories upon them.

JH: That's a great response to the question, and it echoes an opinion piece in the New York Times from May 31, 2023, it's called, "The Politics of Delusion Have Taken Hold", and it's by Thomas Edsall. And it's relevant because a lot of it has to do with the dysfunction in our political discourse today, being rooted in our failure to see people as they are and as they see themselves, not giving them the opportunity to really represent themselves and tell their own stories, as you're saying.

ZK: We tend to see each other as cartoons, and it's so easy to write policy for cartoons, but it's much more complicated when we get into the nuance of a life full of shadows and light and hills and valleys. And it's a really important moment for us in terms of making space for people to share their stories.

JH: Then here's some more Midrash. And I wanna share with you what I'm yearning for, I'm yearning for a Midrash that elaborates on the space in the text between the moment when Eve bites into the apple and becomes a fully evolved human being, but Adam hasn't yet bitten, and he's still basically a sort of semi-sentient mammal. And the choice that she faces to either elevate him to her level or to kind of let him drag his knuckles for a while, [chuckle] I always found that choice to be fascinating.

ZK: That's really interesting. There's actually a passage in the Zohar, which I love, which talks about how the Adam/Eve story is really the story of all of us at the moment when our soul, which is Eve, the Hebrew word for soul, Neshama, is feminine, meets our Guf, our body, and Adam is the body. And so each of us, pre-birth, goes through this period where the soul is filled with wisdom and then has to kind of adjust to wearing this clunkier body of ours. And so I love your question, your Midrashic question, about the soul's dilemma of how much to share with the fissured and fault-laden body and how much to keep to herself.

JH: Inspired by Abraham Joshua Heschel, who called Shabbat a palace in time, you weave that image into one of the stories titled, accordingly, "Time Palace." In it, you highlight how evanescent Shabbat is. I get Shabbat's preciousness, but what about Shabbat feels vulnerable?

ZK: That's a great question. When I first started studying the Ten Commandments, I remember my first thought was, "Gosh, most of these sound really obvious."

[laughter]

ZK: "Did we need 400 years of enslavement and God to realign all the strata of creation to bring about miracles, to bring our freedom and revelation at Sinai to learn not to kill each other?"

[laughter]

ZK: And so on the Ten Commandments, Shabbat, the commandment to take the seventh day as a day of rest, reflection, regrowth, introspection, that is to me a new idea, strange idea, an idea that is not obvious and a godly idea, something that comes from outside of us. And I think that we need it more than ever today because I think that we have bought into the imagination that we are all here to be productive and that we're here to serve a greater good, to create, to build, when perhaps another way to move through life is to just bear witness and to be gracious and grateful. There are different ways that we can be good in this world, that we can appreciate [chuckle] what it means to be alive and not measure everything by our productivity, "What do you do? What have you created? How do you measure your success?" To think about not being doers but bears and how we look at each other and judge each other and the inherent dignity of just being alive, just being born. I think that Shabbat re-educates us in that.

JH: It's also the case, I think you'd agree, that Jewish people tend to think of Shabbat as one of the unique gifts of Jewish civilization to the world. And I wanna sort of follow that theme in the story titled, Yofiel, in which you turn the idea of a secret on its head. The Jewish secret of Torah, our unique inheritance encoded in the Hebrew language, increases in value and beauty, not in proportion to the degree that it's secreted away, but rather in proportion to the degree that it's shared. And so I wanna ask you if Judaism offers a distinctive lesson for the current civic conversation about cultural appropriation. Might we view the cultural gem of a given group as actually gaining value when it's shared with others as opposed to viewing it as having been stolen? Or alternatively, should we in fact focus on the power imbalance, whereby a cultural gem from a less empowered group really is stolen, and when it's adopted by a more powerful group, sometimes heedlessly so?

ZK: Yeah, your question makes me think about the Rabbis of the Talmud saying that there are very few things that would cause you to go to Gehinnom, to go to hell. And one of the worst things you can do is taking someone's idea without acknowledgement. And so that's such an interesting thing, that would be one of the worst things you could possibly do. But in a way, it's about appropriation, it's about the stealing of people's ideas without attribution. And perhaps it's a really interesting message in terms of how we appreciate other cultures and how we embrace

and incorporate the gems discovered and the truths taught by other cultures into our own lives. And perhaps the key to it all is the attribution, is not the pretending that this is something that I dreamt up on my own or this is mine, but rather appreciating the long journeys and experiences that led to this discovery from another culture, how we express gratitude for those teachings. There's also this wonderful midrash about God's name and how every culture has a different name for God, and that ultimately God is essentially a mirror.

ZK: And if we were to all look into the mirror at the same time, we'd see all of our own faces together, and somehow all of our faces together make up what God is. All of the names of God together make up God's name. And so everyone has a little piece of God's name no matter what their beliefs are, however different they are from us. Our belief is always missing something without that other person's face or voice included. But just to absorb it is to erase them, the whole idea to actually preserve the face, the voice, and its origin.

JH: Speaking of this idea of our word for God, narrowing our ideas about God, you could sort of mirror that idea itself and think about how one names oneself as an illustration of one's values or identity. And in the story titled, "Jew", you echo an article you wrote for the Jewish journal called, "My Name is Jew and I Want My Name Back." In both pieces you reclaim the word Jew, but what interests me is your sense that it needs reclaiming in the first place. Does the word Jew need to be reclaimed from something, some misuse or some abuse?

ZK: That story, "Jew" begins with a student graffitiing the word Jew on the side of a business. And the idea that the name of one's people, that one's identification could also be used as a slur for the same people is the thing that is still troubling to me. That Jew can be spoken as a descriptive or it can be spoken as a curse. And in the story, the letters appear really frightening in the beginning, the J is like a hook, the E are like claw marks, and the W is like fangs. But over the course of the story, the J turns into a ladle, the E is more like a ladder, and the W is like the hands of the high priest giving a blessing. And I just love the idea of Jew being a word that sparks poetry and meaning and even heroism and triumph and longing and searching, that those would be the first adjectives that you would think of when you heard the word Jew. But I do think that when somebody says "Jew," or, "There is a Jew," you get a little feeling of discomfort, like that there's something wrong with saying that.

JH: Was the article, "My Name is Jew and I Want My Name Back" inspired or triggered by something specific?

ZK: The high school I went to was an Episcopalian high school, and so I went to chapel every day, sitting in the pews, looking at the cross, listening to the preacher and listening to hymns about Jesus, and really contemplating, "What is it that I believe? What am I doing here? Where do I belong?" And it was really valuable for me to be in a place of otherness, and experiencing a different faith, to really solidify what my own beliefs were. And I think that that led to the wrestling with the word Jew.

JH: I note that in the story you do something really beautiful, which is... I think most of us understand the other collective name for our people and our civilization, which is Israel. We

often cite the fact that Israel means God wrestler or wrestling with God. But in the story, you remind us that the other word we use to describe ourselves, of course, Jew or Jewish, means thankful and it's a lovely pair of identifiers to go through life with. So thank you for that.

ZK: Thank you so much.

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JH: In a beautiful story about a misunderstood nature loving woman, the protagonist finds power in remembering the special love she had for her grandma. And she remembers, for example, how much her grandmother liked eating sesame toast with butter and honey. The specificity of that memory charmed me, but it also made me wonder, and I have to ask, did your grandmother have a particular hankering for sesame toast with butter and honey?

ZK: Actually, no. [laughter] I think that... But I will say that I think that so much of the power of storytelling comes from details. Details are really what makes stories feel alive and real, they're the pixie dust that [chuckle] brings the stories to life, so all of those little tiny details are so important.

JH: Going back to the literary and ethical moral themes of the book, in one chapter, you retell the story of Jonah from the perspective of the whale as a vehicle to think about empathy. And in the story, the whale's grandfather shares the idea with the whale grandson, and he says, "Empathy is when you feel the feelings of another." And continuing in this vein, he adds, "A bad experience can be a great gift, because it helps you care more deeply for others." Are there times when that's not true, when empathy, in fact, diminishes sympathy? And if so, does it behoove us not only to distinguish between sympathy and empathy, but also to valorize them differently?

ZK: Well, I think that one of the hallmarks of true empathy is to be there for someone else without saying the word I. And without inserting our own story, we may draw power of connection and understanding because of our experiences, and that may fuel our ability to connect. But when we start making comparisons or inserting our own story in someone else's pain, then we move away from being active listeners and even potential healers. Healing is really about the art of being present and listening. And it's so interesting because people think that you have to have a small ego to give space to other people, but the truth is you have to have a very confident sense of self, so a larger ego and a sense of confidence to be able to sit

back and give someone space. It really comes from knowing oneself and being secure in oneself to be present for someone else without filling up the space.

JH: I wanna ask in closing about surprise. Authors often speak of their fiction or their characters as if they have a life of their own. So what story or character picked itself up by its bootstraps and surprised you as you wrote it?

ZK: The answer that comes to mind [chuckle] right away is the story "Shalom Bayit", because I had an original draft of that story. And the original draft was kind of romantic and old fashioned, it involved kings and queens and palaces and fiefdoms. [laughter] And it had a very romantic, classic type of storytelling. And then all of a sudden, there emerged Mateo and Isaac, these two strangers who fall in love with each other and they emerged as modern characters, they were so real that I feel like they hired me to write their stories.

[laughter]

ZK: I don't feel like I dreamed them up, I feel like they visited me to tell me their story. And that story, "Shalom Bayit", is about these two strangers who are hiking and they meet each other and they end up marrying and refusing to leave their chuppah, their marriage canopy as a protest. And they spark a national protest movement, their love does that. And I feel like I'm just reporting on their tale, on their courage and their bravery.

JH: Well, Rabbi Zoe Klein, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast and for your book with its texture, its beauty, its humor. It really was a pleasure.

ZK: Thank you. Thank you so much.

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