THE POETRY OF POETRY IN TRANSLATION

(Begin audio)

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.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and a conversation with Rabbi Dr. Heim Rechnitzer and Claire Rechnitzer. Rabbi Dr. Heim Rechnitzer is a professor of Jewish thought at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and a poet. His research focuses on political theology, Israeli theology and Jewish education, on which he's written numerous publications including his recent Ars Prophetica-Theology in the Poetry of Twentieth-Century Israeli Poets: Avrahm Halfi, Shin Shlom, Amir Gilboa, and T. Carmi, and a collection of poetry in the topic of today's conversation titled Pictures/Reproductions. We are also joined by the translator of Pictures/Reproductions, and Dr. Rechnitzer's wife, Claire Rechnitzer, who is a freelance content writer, part-time library services associate, passionate Alexander Technique teacher, and as the translator of poetry, a poet herself. Welcome Heim and Claire and thank you for joining us on the College Comments podcast.

Heim Rechnitzer: Thank you for having us.

JH: Claire, I'd like to begin with you, because in your introduction, you point out that the fact that you're married to Heim has shaped your collaboration in material ways. You write of translating Heim's Hebrew poetry thus. As with edible dishes, there are occasionally notes and spices that I can't quite make out until chef divulges them to me. I'm lucky that I get to savor Heim's poems while they are, so to speak, hot, and that I get to ask questions whenever I suspect there's a reference that I know I'm missing. So I want to ask you, Claire, if you agree in this collaborative process that translation constitutes a whole new composition of its own, a collaborative one to be sure, but a new one.

Claire Rechnitzer: Yes and no. For the people who can read both languages, I think they get the best of both worlds. The English does stand independently, but it's not new. It's translation.

JH: So this response, Heim, leads me to you, because the title and pagination of Pictures/Reproductions seems to have bilingualism embedded in the work itself. And you introduce your volume by comparing languages to rooms, with translation being the door between them. And you add that you find yourself both here and there at the same time. In other words, it seems like you might be intimating that, on some level, you wrote in Hebrew, but

with English back of mind and perhaps even with Claire as your translator to boot. Is that the case?

HR: I think yes, I did it. My intentions were, at the outset, to write a bilingual book. I write in Hebrew, but the work on translation was, for me, another layer of creation and negotiation with Claire as a representative of English. And that's why I felt that the appropriate name will be Reproductions as well from various reasons. One, we actually reproduce the poem making it become a new baby in English, although it originated in Hebrew, but it's not one-to-one translation mechanically like dictionary wise. So I think yes, I felt that I'm writing with my ears towards the possibilities of translation. However, I was fully aware of places that will not be able to be translated, and nevertheless, I did write in Hebrew things that I knew that will be lost in translation. So it's not that I immediately adopted my Hebrew poem to the English possibilities.

JH: I'd like to ask you to recite for us the introductory poem of the book called Hakadama in Hebrew and Introduction in English, and then we'll talk about it after you read it.

[foreign language]

JH: Claire, would you read the English for us?

CR: Sure. Introduction. To the reader that finally calls, then come swiftly. I come, the silence will arrive or not without coming, and there are no show and no sound in my ears trickles from the cochlea down to the throat where an ostrich stands and her neck thickens slowly as she descends, slowly, scratching from inside. I hear that the day will not come as I am here, here truly, standing with all my singing swallowed.

JH: This poem struck me because it captures so beautifully what to me is one of the most powerful qualities of poetry, which is its ability to embody contradiction. And I'm thinking of the beginning where it starts with suf suf, meaning it begins with the words of ending, and then it ends with the recitation of poetry that never actually gets voiced. So I'd like each of you to ruminate, if you would, for a moment on this quality of poetry to exhibit, but in some ways to actually be a contradiction in and of itself.

HR: I think that it really starts with sort of two moves. One is, please listen to me or please read me, and please call me as [Hebrew], the reader that finally calls, and I will come immediately. But that kind of wishful prayer, I would say, is almost bound to be disappointed or at least I express my fear that it will not happen. And I think that that as introduction is really a call, maybe this time we will not miss each other, but we must be aware that most likely we will be missing each other, the reader and the writer.

JH: Claire.

CR: So I think that poetry affords the opportunity to not say what we mean but say what we think is beautiful. Does that make any sense?

HR: Yeah. Well, aesthetics is integrated into it.

JH: Yeah, it's counterintuitive almost for the purpose of language itself, when we think of languages, communicating intention, and I guess it's why poetry is poetry, because it can communicate beauty without necessarily, as you said, Claire, communicating what we actually want to communicate.

HR: It is a struggle, although I have ways to write, almost forcing myself, even prior to any thought. So it is sort of a dance with the possibilities in language and in the beauty of language and my need to express something very genuine, very real that comes even before words are saying it. So I would say that aesthetics and the behavior of the language is not coming second to the meaning, but it's integrated into the meaning because I think that way. I cannot think first and then write the poem. I think and write as I use the language and the language making me who I am.

JH: I'd like to go back to the work of composition and translation because both of you in your introductory words, cited the poem titled She Was Called 'Dis as a poem that captures particularly well the hard choices that poetry imposes on the translator. Share with us a line or two or a few words from that poem that demanded notable and flexible and creative translation.

JH: Yeah, thank you for actually directing us there, because some of the poems in this one as well, I sort of invent words and that was a challenge also in the English, because the words that are sort of invented are answering to aesthetics and rhythm and sound. I will read that, about Khemda, which that's the name of the character that the poem is about.

[foreign language]

CR: But I called her Dessi and Dizzy and Daisy and Doozy until my stomach started grumbling too much.

JH: Doozy is a good one. So, another example of the sound and the aesthetic, sometimes dovetailing with meaning and intention, but also, am I wrong in interpreting an unmoored freedom of aesthetic for its own sake?

CR: So I can say that I often feel that Heim gives me more credit than I deserve, because sometimes I feel like it's not necessarily creativity, it's necessity. There's no other way we're getting this across. It's kind of like a concession that I make for like, gosh, we can't do this. But alright, here we go.

HR: Actually, I remember, as we were working on this poem and others, sort of a struggle when I tried to express how I came about to write this very word or sequence of words and then Clare sort of took it in and then produced something that I couldn't even imagine. And it was at the same time an expression of what I had in mind but completely new. And I think that this line, the difference between the English and the Hebrew, expresses what I imagine also in reproduction in the sense that the English had to be close to the source in certain kind of ways. Not always in

the meaning, but sometimes in the sound, sometimes in the play between the words that will echo the play between the words in Hebrew. So, I do give Claire a lot of credit. I couldn't have done it without her. And I think that her listening to me also reading it and understanding may be where these words are coming from, who in me is saying this, allowed her to project it, reproduce it, and give it to me again in English.

[music]

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/huc-connect. Now, back to our interview.

[music]

JH: There's a pair of poems that appear to have been inspired by COVID, titled The Days of Plague and Under the Shadow of Pandemic. Not only the themes and the titles, but they're also placed sequentially next to one another. Days of Plague seems to me like a lament, and despite its title, Under the Shadow of Pandemic actually appears almost to celebrate a uniquely pandemic moment. So I'd like to elicit from you a little bit about the possibility that there is joy in the shadow of COVID.

HR: Yeah, I think that I surprised myself. It starts with a [Hebrew], which would be fatigue is spinning a ball, and I think that something in COVID, it was so new to us as an experience of being isolated, yet craving for contact and discovering ourselves, I think, afresh by not being able to jump straight into communication and play with other people. And so I think, at the same time that it's lamentation, so to speak, it's also a celebration of the ability to look again, because everything is empty, because I cannot go out. It's almost like a forced meditation, I would say. I don't want to sound as if I celebrate COVID, but there were qualities that could be discovered under that, and I hope to catch this in a sense of certainly kind of a play that I felt that is also accompanying our isolation. That's my reflection on that.

JH: I appreciate it. I found it, in the first part of Under the Shadow of the Pandemic, where you write, "Finally going outside to sit on the patio, watching the bubbles rise in my soda, in the shade of the garden table." There's something heightened in the joy of such a simple thing as sitting out in the patio where you're then going to say hi to neighbors and whatnot, heightened by virtue of it being denied for so long. And the bubbles are a nice touch. I'd like to ask both of you about the poem, or it's really a diptych, I guess, of two poems. Two Songs for the Motherland. And particularly, I want to ask both of you about these poems. Given the fact that you, Heim, refer to language as a place and English as your host language, while you, Claire, in your introduction, refer to Hebrew as your second language. What does motherland in this poem mean to each of you?

HR: For me, it is sort of not first love, but constant love, but also constant frustration. And now it's also far, after almost 20 years of living outside of Israel, each time that I come, my eyes are looking for the beautiful places, for the interesting places, trying to jump over things that I know that are not pleasant, even ugly. And I think that I never left Israel in that sense. I write my own poetry in Hebrew, and it's also the way I experienced my life in Israel, was through names that I could give places, that I thought something when I was there. And sometimes I remember the very thought that I had the first time that I was on the street in Jerusalem. It's not just nostalgia. It's almost like a portal to live in there again. And I think that by not living daily in Israel, I can sort of jump straight to those words, places. If I think about the windmill in Jerusalem, it's not just a place. It's also the words that I thought when I was there in an evening where I would say my soul was open to an experience. And I can sort of almost live it again as I say the words or the name of the place or something like that. I can decide to jump and maybe transcend time in that sense. It's not just the place that I was born, but most of my life I lived there, but also the place that I love, but also constantly disappointed of. So it's complicated.

JH: Claire, what does motherland in that poem mean to you?

CR: In terms of language, with English speakers in the United States, the fact that I grew up in Israel and I'm a Hebrew speaker is either a part of my identity that they know absolutely nothing about, or if they do recognize it, then it marks me as a foreigner. But I never have that experience speaking in Hebrew. Depending on who you talk to, there are sometimes people that will pick up on an accent, but most people don't when I'm speaking Hebrew. But even if they know that I'm Olafa the Shiva when I was quite young, it's never an issue. Everybody is, so you can be both much easier.

JH: It sounds like the United States, for all of its rhetoric of a melting pot, is in some ways less so than Israel, the way you're describing it, Claire.

CR: Totally. Yeah.

JH: I'd like to end the interview with a question that has become customary for me. Share with us one surprise that this project left you with, one delight or one unexpected challenge, something that changed you maybe out of the blue or out of lechfield.

HR: I think that for me, this surprise is doubling, if not more than that, Heim's audience, which is a delightful thing to have. Not that we haven't translated some of his other stuff before, but this was directly open to a much bigger audience, and seeing people read it and reflect on it, whether they're bilingual or only read one or the other, is pretty cool.

JH: Heim?

HR: Yeah. So, I actually cherished the time that I spent with Claire. I think it was the first time...

CR: Never again.

HR: Not easy. And she's saying never again, but we prepare more.

JH: You're already on the next book that's coming out. That's probably...

HR: Yeah. But I think that the delight was double. Claire had to really close read what I wrote and ask questions that sometimes were hard for me to answer and forced me to be very exact. But I think that I could show my innermost baby that I have inside. And at that moment, I felt that we are doing it together in a sense that those poems that I created are now in the world. And it was really with Claire and I couldn't have done it with anyone else. So, although Claire thinks that it was hard, it was hard. But I have pictures of moments where we translated a certain line or certain poem, and it is now a place, we just spoke about places, it's a place that I can go back. And also for me, that was a discovery process of suddenly hearing my poems through a different language with the very loving hands that were helping it to live in English. And I could take some kind of a distance from the poems that in Hebrew I couldn't. So I think like a joy of a parent that can see from afar the kids playing in a playground and you don't need to interfere. You just let them be. That kind of feeling I had, and I really cherish that.

JH: That's a great ending. So we thank you for the book, Temonot/Refrodoctions, Pictures/Reproductions by Heim Rechnitzer and translated by Claire Rechnitzer. Its imprint is Carmel from Jerusalem, and it's a really wonderful read. You can take it at your time, meander and ruminate about all of the things we've talked about. Thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast and sharing your thoughts and experiences.

HR: Thank you for having us.

CR: Thanks for having us.

[music]

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/huc-connect.

[music]

(End of audio)