STILL WORK TO DO: SEXUAL ABUSE IN JEWISH INSTITUTIONS

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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.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with Stephen Mills. Stephen Mills is the author of Chosen: A Memoir of Stolen Boyhood, which was a winner of the National Jewish Book Award and the topic of our conversation today. He's also the co-author of Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees, which was a Los Angeles Times Best Book of the Year. Since 1982, he's advised and written in the fields of human rights and environmental protection. He also serves as an ambassador for Child USA, a leading non-profit think tank, fighting for the civil rights of children. Stephen Mills, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Stephen Mills: Thank you for having me.

JH: Your story at root follows the arc of surviving abuse, from predation to reckoning or battling for reckoning. But before we follow that arc, I'd like to ask you about how you chose to frame this entire story for us. The first part of your story begins, and each section ends with some aspect of the death of your father and your re-encounter with his memory. Where does your father fit in all of this?

SM: Yeah. I'm so glad you asked that because fewer people than I expected want to discuss the role of my family and my father in this book, and I just think it's so central, so I'm glad you picked up on it. My father, who was a World War II veteran, died just before I turned five years old. He had multiple sclerosis, and so from the time I was born, he was in a steep decline. Just as I was learning to talk at age 18 months, two years, he could no longer talk. We had a very physically close attached relationship. I spent most of my days with him and was just deeply bonded with him. And it was a real physical bond of affection and closeness. So that loss was a terrible one. And as it happened, the perpetrator who sexually abused me when I turned 13, preyed on boys who were either fatherless or came from troubled families and needed strong father figures.

SM: One of the enormous psychological impacts of the abuse was this tremendous confusion around father and what that meant, and this man stepping into the role of father who of course, while on the outside offering me just incredible attention and care and almost acted as a therapist all the while sexually assaulting me, of course, was clearly manipulating the loss I had suffered as a child and my need for someone to fill that vacuum. So it took me until my early mid-30s when I'd been in therapy for a few years to really unravel what had happened and the ways in which in my psyche, these two father figures were sort of battling it out. I was carrying a tremendous burden of guilt and shame over what was happening to me. And so, that took me until adulthood to really sort out and to forgive myself for what had happened and to fully embrace again the legacy of my father that he had left me.

JH: The story evolves and you organize it on three major stages of predation, flight and reckoning. I'd like to focus on one very particular detail under the section of predation. Among the harrowing parts of your story, I must say that one vignette has stuck with me and has troubled me ever since I read it. Prior to making physically sexual advances, he'd already begun to make verbal sexual advances, but the person who abused you, Dan Farinella, commits a minor betrayal by squeezing your hand too tightly in a handshake, tightly enough to make you begin to cry. What, as you see it, was behind that perverse and kind of bizarre act of preliminary cruelty?

SM: It is bizarre, or at least it seems bizarre to us. But the more that you look at the behavior of these types of child sex predators, it is quite common. He was a sort of combination of thug and best friend of kids, which of course seems like a rather strange combination, but there is a perverse logic to it. He always let kids know who was in charge. He was physically intimidating. He would, as in that scene, not hesitate to inflict pain and did it on a regular basis to kids, you know, as young as 10 years old. It was all done under the guise of horseplay and good fun. And every boy in that camp knew don't shake the director's hand because he was gonna squeeze it till you cried, or at least screamed uncle. And yet I fell for the ploy and did it anyway.

SM: And I have been told many similar stories by male survivors of sexual abuse, of camp counselors, sports coaches, teachers becoming emotionally close and crossing boundaries before anything became physical, also physically intimidating and sending a message that physically they had complete control over the kid. And in my case, of course, it instilled not only that lesson that he was way stronger than me, but it also instilled a really deep fear. And of course that becomes so important at the first moment of sexual assault because at that moment the lizard brain knows, this guy has got my life in his hands. He's so much bigger than me. I mean, he was twice my size. He was a really large person and carried himself that way and had already shown me. So the short answer to the question is that scene, and whether he did this stuff consciously or unconsciously, it was a complete setup for this sexual assault, knowing full well that at that moment I could do nothing but freeze or shut down and go completely passive because he had power of life and death over my body.

JH: It's boggling your mind by being good cop and bad cop all at once in order to get what he wanted.

SM: Yes, absolutely.

JH: I'd like to speak a little bit with you about two contexts. One is the sociocultural one and one is the chronological one. So much of the story takes place in what feels like conditions specific to the era, that is the late 1960s and 70s. And it feels like the conditions for predation have changed in the intervening years, even if the core brokenness of humanity has not. As you see it, what has changed and what hasn't changed and does it matter?

SM: A lot of things have changed, and yet this is still an enormous problem. If anything, rates of child sex abuse have been increasing the last few years, especially during COVID and in it's wake. So, we've got this really an epidemic of child sexual abuse on our hands. I mean, according to all scientific studies and surveys, I was abused in the years 1968 to 1970. At that time, it was absolutely clear that sexual abuse of a child was morally wrong. It was illegal. I'm sure that he understood it was morally wrong and illegal, otherwise he wouldn't have lied to my mother with the pretext of why he was taking me up to camp. He understood that it was absolutely wrong, and the people who worked in the camp and the various camps for him knew that it was wrong. There was a lot less, however, understood about, for example, red flag behaviors.

SM: I mean, that's something that has changed a lot over the decades. So today it is much better understood that, for example, sexual abuse of children in say youth program type activities, rarely comes out of the blue. That almost always there are grooming behaviors by the adult in which he or she is testing boundaries of a child and pushing boundaries with undue emotional closeness, with physical touch, with gift giving which seems inappropriate. These are all red flags, again, depending on the sort of rules and protocols of any given camp and institution. But in general today, these are well understood within youth programs to be warning signs. And you know, the good news about that is if youth serving organizations have really clear protocols in place, you'll know when a boundary is violated. You can't know a violation unless you know what the boundaries are.

SM: So if organizations have been good at laying out what those boundaries are and what a boundary violation looks like, then they're much better prepared to intervene or for employees to report a boundary violation before any abuse actually happens. The bad news is that such organizations with those types of not just protocols in place but enforcing them are very, very few. We keep seeing over and over and over again across the board in institutions including Jewish institutions and Jewish summer camps, failure after failure, even at some camps or youth programs where they have preventative protocols in place. Because at the end of the day, it is really up to one courageous individual or group of courageous individuals to be willing to blow the whistle. And so the culture has to have really changed that people know, look, if I see something suspicious, not only am I gonna report it, but I know that I'm going to be thanked and rewarded for blowing the whistle. I'm not gonna be punished, I'm not gonna be ostracized, I'm not gonna lose my job. A fear of all these things is very real. And it turns out that it's much harder to make these cultural changes than it is to actually just print a list of policies in black and white and put it up on the bulletin board.

JH: Which leads me to the second context, which is that of Jewish camp. And in the narrative of the book, you clearly experienced these assaults in the context of Jewish camp, but more than that, you also very consciously contextualize it retrospectively in the retelling of those events. The Judaism and the camp are both important to you. What do we need to know about the violation of that particular kind of religious, cultural, and organizational trust in relation to child abuse? How does that trust both exacerbate the problem and also offer hope for addressing it and maybe preventing it?

SM: Yeah. Well, I think the cultural context is hugely important. You know, this was the late 1960s. I was bar mitzvahed in March, 1968, and I can so clearly remember everything was about social justice. You know, including Hebrew school. There wasn't just learning my Torah portion and Haftarah. We were studying civil rights and marching for civil rights, and that was the social political backdrop for reformed Jews at that time. And what's very, I think, important to know about that and this issue of sexual abuse of kids in general is that these perpetrators are really master manipulators. They know how to infiltrate a culture and an institution, and camouflage themselves with whatever ideology it is that they know is going to attract people. They are really the ultimate con artists in that they know what adults in the community crave more than anything else. And Dan Farinella understood that what Jewish parents and Jewish administrators in 1968 craved more than anything else, was a social worker who would talk and teach kids about social justice, about racial integration, about all of these, make the world a better place type of ethos that was blossoming at the time in reformed synagogues.

SM: So he had completely won over the reformed Jewish camping community at the time. These were not URJ, you know, union reformed Jewish camps. You know, the camp I went to was a UJA Federation camp, but that's the world we're in of reformed Jews and that camping world. And so he's a perfect example, and you can see similar type situations, both, you know, in the Boy Scouts and the Catholic church and the Baptist community, these types of predators, they are brilliant at their ability to adapt to a specific institution and win over, essentially groom every adult in the community before they ever go near a child. And so that's the first thing. You know, in terms of the betrayal, I know for me, and I think for many, many, many survivors, the betrayal by the institution hurts more and longer than the sexual abuse itself. That for me, of course, is wrapped up in the ethos I was just describing.

SM: You know, organizations like UGA Federation and the YMHA of the Bronx Riverdale, these are the organizations I grew up with that my parents donated to, that they really just looked up to as the embodiment of Jewish values in the 1960s. So, the fact that they were harboring a child sex predator and that they were at the front end of this chain of silence and complicity that let him move from camp to camp to camp over almost 30 years, that's bad enough, right? But on top of that, here we are 50 years later and these institutions are still in denial mode. Instead of living out the values that, you know, they were supposedly advertising at the time of truth and justice and aiding the victim. You know, all of that seems to have gone out the window. So for victims, it's easier for me to understand the criminal compulsion of an individual like Dan Farinella. I just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time to cross paths with a sex criminal. But when it comes to the institutions that employed him, that is much tougher for me to grasp that all these decades later when so many of these cases have come out and so many

pending now, the fact that they're still trying to push this away and shun victims instead of supporting us and looking for the truth, that's really, really painful.

JH: With your permission, I'd like to follow that topic of resistance.

SM: Sure.

JH: It is understandably a major theme in your story, this institutional resistance to pursuing reckoning and justice on behalf of victims. And I think it's fair to say that there are some reasons for this resistance that we might expect, such as fear of liability perhaps, or general human reluctance to face the ugliness and the pain and any number of other reasons that we might consider intuitive, even if we find them dangerous and problematic and something that we have to reverse. But I wonder if in all of the pain, this experience has also given you some insight into this resistance that perhaps others might not have. Do you find that there may be other less intuitive, perhaps more insidious sources of resistance that your experience has forced you to contend with?

SM: Well, I think you covered a few of them, but I think it's important to understand that every expert in this field of child protection, including those in the Jewish community, has said loud and clear that a fear of liability is the absolute wrong approach for an institution to be pursuing. And the reason is very simple. That approach only serves to further cover up and conceal the behavior of sexual predators. And so it is completely opposite and undermines the interest of children today for an institution, for their go-to move to be to call on the lawyer and try to minimize reputational damage and financial risk. Because it sends a message to victims that, number one, we don't believe you, and if you come forward, we're not gonna support you. And that is what perpetuates this terrible situation where predators can even be caught and yet still be passed on to other institutions or not face justice, and victims are left to suffer a lifetime of aftershocks. And this is, unfortunately, the rule, not the exception. And obviously across the board, I think the Jewish community is a little bit late to the party, as it were, in facing this situation that has of course, plagued our community for decades and decades but have only now, in all denominations of Judaism over the last few years, begun to reckon with it.

SM: And I think if there is no moral compass guiding these decisions, it's been really, to me, a revelation that institutions supposedly guided by moral vision and principles rooted in our tradition of Jewish history and Torah, that that all seems to go out the window when there are reports of sexual abuse. And suddenly, everything's handed over to the lawyers and getting at the truth of what happened, not just to aid the victim, but you can't prevent something recurring in the future if you don't know what happened in historic cases. And so this avoidance of investigating the truth is a terrible handicap, it leaves and puts more kids at risk. And layered on top of that, I just think there's a terrible discomfort with this issue to begin with. Look, in the course of over the decades, I tried to stop Dan Farinella at two separate Jewish summer camps. When I was in my 20s and I learned that he was abusing boys at Camp Henry Horner in Illinois, and then again in the 1980s, when he was employed by the Pittsburgh JCC running their Emma Kaufmann camp. I did my very best to stop him and quickly discovered that there were employees who absolutely knew what he was up to, or to put the best light on it, were deeply

suspicious based on everything they heard. And certainly once I told them of my experience, they knew because all the pieces fit together.

SM: And yet the discomfort with challenging power and speaking truth about someone in the community who has been presented as sort of God's gift to the community. Who wants to say, this guy who's been revered as the greatest social worker who turned around our camp, who is willing to say, this guy's a charlatan, he's sexually abusing children in your community. That is a difficult thing to do and then when it happens, the trepidation inside these institutions about what the reputational damage might be is such that they'd rather do anything. Including, as we know in the case of Dan Farinella at his last job in Pittsburgh, he did not immediately leave that position even after I handed over statements from past victims and witnesses. And they knew that they had a child predator employed as the head of their youth programs, he stayed there for several more months, which is really kind of mind boggling. But that's the nature of the fear and discomfort and the complete abandonment of moral principle and responsibility to the parents and the community. It was never dealt with in any kind of straightforward, responsible way.

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JH: I'd like to move the conversation to another part of your story, particularly about that juncture, that part of the arc that you call flight. It's the middle part between predation and reckoning. And as I read you, you present it, as you call it, namely flight, which implies escape and avoidance. Is flight a necessary prior step to reckoning?

SM: I don't know of any survivor of child sexual abuse who didn't experience some version of that. And it is one of the most common phenomena that we hold of those of us who suffer childhood sexual abuse is almost a need to erase ourselves in some way. And to understand that, you really have to go back to the abuse itself, because at the moment of sexual assault, that is so shocking. And for me, it so destroyed the reality as I knew it, I was in a state of shock. As I describe in the book, it was for me a near-death experience. I left my body and I think partly because of the physical fear we talked about before, but just also because as a child, you have no language, no experience, no concept that an adult could or would or want to use you sexually. So when it happens, the nervous system does what nature programs it to do, which is to shut down the front brain and kind of fight for its life. And I just had this huge rush of adrenaline and sort of was vaulted out of my body and watched the whole thing from above. And this of course is the beginning of what we now call dissociation, which is the feeling of being out of the body. And once you're out of the body, it ain't easy getting back in, I can tell you that. And what's important to know about that is we are really wired to survive.

SM: So the Monday morning after I was sexually abused at age 13, I had to go back to school, I had to go back to seventh grade. My body got me through that and it got me through it by compartmentalizing what had happened to me, by basically holding down the experience in my body and not letting my conscious mind be aware of it. If anything, my conscious mind was just a voice saying, that didn't happen, that didn't happen, that didn't happen. And that went on for years. And so there comes a point for most survivors where the fact that it did happen becomes too big to ignore. For me, that moment happened when I discovered that Dan Farinella was sexually abusing boys, that evidence in my face was too much for my psyche to ignore, and it unleashed just an avalanche of terror and shame and guilt that I had been bottling up for a decade at that point. And that really sent my life spiraling out of control because I had no tools to deal with that and I was not in therapy yet, I had not told a soul until that summer where I discovered what he was doing. I disclosed to my best friend at the time, which was very helpful, but it didn't give me a roadmap for how to come to terms with what had happened. And so this flight and the unraveling experience is quite common, although everyone experiences it in different ways.

SM: I just did a podcast with Sarah Klein, who was the first known victim of Larry Nassar. And Sarah became a victim's rights attorney. She is not just a fantastic human being but an amazing attorney for victims rights. And she said on that podcast that her version of that was hiding in her room for seven years. So we all have different ways of hiding from the world, as it were, or trying to erase ourselves through the world. And really for all survivors, but for men, it's very common to try to numb the pain with drugs, with alcohol, attempted suicide 10 times higher than in the general population. And if we survive all those things, a male survivor, maybe in his 30s, on average, will finally give up and reach out for help. But it takes a long time, and we're called survivors for a reason, a lot of us don't make it.

JH: Did writing the book change you or your self-understanding, or perhaps your understanding of these experiences in ways for which you weren't prepared?

SM: Yeah, absolutely. I'm laughing because unprepared is probably an understatement. I'd been, of course, reflecting on this and been in therapy, all sorts of modalities of therapy for decades around this, and trying to write the book since my 30s, which is when I went to the FBI about Dan Farinella. But really was unable to and it wasn't until my 60s that I felt that I could really take it on. And I was unprepared, I think, number one, as well as I understood the material, I was just amazed at how much of the story wasn't surfaced until I actually started writing it. They were just incredible connections that got made in my mind and in the writing that just happened through the writing itself. The sequences of events and the psychological undercurrents of the story, some of which had to do with the attachment to my father and the mourning of my father and the exploitation of that by this very, very manipulative social worker. And also gave me a much deeper, maybe for the first time, understanding, although my mother and I, who as the book charts, a very, very fraught relationship in the wake of my sexual abuse and in my adulthood. We did really grow close in her last years, but writing the book gave me a much deeper appreciation for what she had been through around this and the ways in which she was conned and victimized.

SM: Parents are conned and victimized. The second thing I would say about realization in the writing process with the publication of the book, a sudden, completely unexpected sense of liberation. That as much as I knew, I'd been carrying this around largely privately except for a handful of friends and family. This was something that I had been forced to from age 13, conceal from the world, I had still just greatly underestimated what it would feel like to have it be public. And I had a lot of fear about that in the lead-up to publication about why I was doing it, what it would mean, but in the event itself, it was a tremendous sense of unburdening and release and liberation. That at long last the shame was back where it belonged with the perpetrator, with his employers and not with me. Back in 1987, a few other Farinella victims and me, we were still in this mindset that, "Well, he's such a great social worker, and yeah, he did this horrible thing to us." Mind you we were in our 30s then, but this is how deeply he penetrated our psyches. We were like, "Well, we don't really want him to go to jail. Can he have treatment or something?" I said this to an FBI agent in New York in 1986, and he looked at me like I was out of my mind.

SM: Then he said, "Stephen, he's a criminal, you're a victim, end of story. Everything else is just a full sense of guilt that you were somehow complicit, you weren't, you were a child." And that took a long time to let go of, so that's part of what got released with the book.

JH: Well, for the liberation and the relief that the book has given you, I'm very glad, and for the education and the human insight that it's given us, I'm very grateful. And thank you additionally for taking the time to talk to us on the College Commons podcast, it's been a real pleasure to get to know you.

SM: It's been a pleasure for me. Thank you, Josh.

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