

Growing Up is Tough Business

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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 with Mari Lowe. Mari Lowe is the daughter of a rabbi, and she is a middle school teacher at an Orthodox Jewish school. She transports us into her community by means of her books. Her debut middle grade novel, *Aviva Vs. The Dybbuk*, was named the best book of the year by NPR and Kirkus. Her second novel, the topic of our conversation, *The Dubious Pranks of Shaindy Goodman*, won the National Jewish Book Award in the category of middle grade literature. Mari Lowe, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Mari Lowe: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

JH: Part of the magic of *Shaindy Goodman*, is the location of familiar dynamics in an unfamiliar setting, unfamiliar at least to most people, including to most Jews. Begin by setting the scene for us, if you would, in Bais Yaakov and the community of the protagonist, Shaindy Goodman.

ML: It's so homogeneously, Bais Yaakov orthodox Jews, they live in this solely orthodox community where people are also having 5 to 10 children each. There are so many kids, and it is so hard to stand out there. And at the same time, they're all very much, kind of, living a very... I don't wanna say old fashioned, but a life without a lot of the, kind of, modern exposure that most kids have today. These kids are not on the internet, these kids do not have phones, they don't have social media. They're getting their entertainment mostly outside. Sometimes they'll talk on their house phones with each other. Everything is really coming from their own Jewish community, and the really orthodox Jewish community, and it's all just a massive bubble. I grew up in a bubble, but not to that degree, but there are thousands of kids today, who live in that bubble; and very happily. And I really wanted to explore that.

JH: The story, *The Dubious Pranks of Shaindy Goodman*, follow Shaindy Goodman in a particular chapter in our life, in sixth grade, in a coming of age story about the difficulties of Middle School, of finding yourself, of being tested socially, etcetera. What did you hope to add to the genre of coming-of-age literature, aside from the orthodox context?

ML: As a middle school teacher myself, I see a lot of girls acting like monsters to each other. Absolute monsters. And sixth grade is the peak of that monster hood. Because these are kids who, kind of, come out of this very black-and-white lack of nuanced thinking when they're little, and they become a little more powerful at this age. They learn how to hurt people a little more effectively and a little more viciously, and they haven't quite yet learned the moral code. They haven't quite yet learned empathy, and they're slowly developing it. And as 12, 13, 14, these are good years for them to really develop that empathy. But they're not quite there yet, and they're all over the place. They're hormonal, they're a mess, and they rip into each other.

ML: And I found, personally, and also just sort of witnessing my own students, that often when you have girls like Shaindy, who are really off to the side, and really, kind of, watching everyone else in these really strong personalities, they don't get a lot of agency to, sort of, figure out who they are themselves. They, kind of, stand on the sidelines, and they, sort of, watch it all happen to everyone else. And I really wanted to explore a character getting to have that coming of age, where she, sort of, goes through something. She, kind of, gets her moment in the sun. She realizes that she's being horrible. And she, kind of, then takes back her own agency to be a better person; not just to win, not just to come out on top or even find her stride socially or emotionally, but to, sort of, realize, "I wanna make the right decisions. I wanna do the right thing. And I wanna do that because it's the right thing, not because other people will like me because of it, not because my parents will approve of it, but because for me, because this will empower me."

JH: You develop many of the themes, I think, that are pretty universal growing up, and particularly in middle school. Like, insecurity, FOMO, growing into your own skin, and of course, regret and amends and ardent. These are human themes, and we all experience them throughout our lives, but which of these themes, do you think, most stubbornly follows us into adulthood?

ML: That's an interesting question. I think that one of the really big ones is, it is really, really hard to take a step back and admit when we did something wrong and when we were wrong, when we've been wronged. I think it's so, so easy when we've been wronged to say, "Okay, that's it. We're going nuclear. This is the end. I don't owe that person anything." And one of the things I really wanted to explore in Shaindy was, when someone has done something really horrible to you, and then you do something horrible back to them, are you even? Is that the end? And I think that she, kind of, grapples with that a little bit. And then, she does something kind of bad, so someone else does something really bad. So then the question is, do you just, kind of, continue this cycle of just hatred, and vengeance, and back and forth, and back and forth, forever? Even just sometimes saying, "Okay. Well, I was justified, 'cause that person is horrible", it really takes a lot of effort to take that step back and say whether or not they were horrible, I also did something wrong and I really, kind of, owe it to them, and really, to myself, to be able to move past this with them.

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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 Master classes 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.

JH: Most Jews in the world don't live the orthodox experience that the book describes. In relation to adolescent girls, what do you think that the world can learn from the orthodox experience, and especially, the intensely communal orthodoxy of the book?

ML: I think there is something really, really beautiful about community in particular. I mean, I really love my community. I have my criticisms, I think everyone does. And I always, kind of, wince when I say that, because I feel like I shouldn't have to, kind of, preface singing praises with, "I have my criticisms." And I think that's maybe a mark of how critical the world is of us. But at the same time, I think that it is incredible to live in a community where when someone is struggling, everyone steps in. I know someone who is going through something rough, and there are literally groups that were made immediately to come and help her with everything, from driving her kids to school, to making sure she has meals every sabbath, to making sure that she can make rent. It's always like that. There are always people watching people, making sure that people are taking care of each other. And that's something that's really close to my heart, that we really, kind of, look out for each other. So the thing with the Orthodox Jewish community is, because we don't drive on sabbath, we all have to live really close together, and we all tend to know each other. We go to the same schools, we go to the same [0:08:30.6] _____ schools.

ML: It's just... It's this force, constant community, constantly around other people who you get to know. And in this day and age, when it's so hard to, kind of, have these face-to-face, constant connections, I think that just being constantly connected is fantastic. I also have to say, there's really something to be said for un-plugging kids. And the Orthodox community is really good at un-plugging their kids, mostly.

JH: Conversely, what do you think Orthodoxy has yet to appreciate or learn from the less traditional Jewish experience?

ML: I really respect the embrace of diversity in the non-orthodox Jewish experience, that I think we struggle a little more with. I think there's like a strong push for homogeneity within the Orthodox Jewish community, and like a strong resistance to anything else. It can be politically, it can be racially, it can even be religiously. I think that there are some branches of orthodox Judaism that are better about this than others. But I guess because we're so communal and tight-knit, there's this, kind of, fear of the other and of the outside, and really of, kind of, concerning ourselves with the other and the outside. Like, I respect so much what Reform Judaism has done, in general, for the world. The push for tikkun olam, I really, really respect, and I think it's incredible. I think that we can learn a lot from that. There's a lot to learn, really, from everyone, but specifically from all the other branches of Judaism and all the other ways that we learn to practice it and connect to it, because I don't think that it's nearly as uniform as

orthodox Jews think it should be. And I think that there's so much beauty and so much to offer if we just, kind of, look outside of there. Also, I think that more women in leadership positions... But, shhh.

[chuckle]

JH: Here's to the shared heritage of all Jews, the wisdom that you embodied in your response, which is, "Who is the wise person? The one who learns from everybody." So, here's to that.

ML: Very much so.

JH: Whom do you personally identify most with in the book?

ML: This is such a loaded question because whenever they ask me this, I say Gayil, and she's the villain [chuckle] but I think that there is a little bit of each of the main characters in me. And I really had to, kind of, dig deep within myself and think about the times I felt the worst. Like, I remember there was a time, in maybe seventh grade, once in camp, when I was being bullied and I didn't have any friends. I went alone, and I was in summer camp for a month, and I was a Shaindy then, I think. And then there were times where I was, kind of, the leader of my pack, and maybe I was a little bit petty, and I felt more like a Gayil. And we are a spectrum of many emotions, and many different, kind of, levels of wisdom, and stupidity, and pettiness, and rising above. And I think that if you took all the characters from the book and mashed them all together, you'd probably get me.

JH: [chuckle] Fair enough. I wanna probe a little bit. You talked about girls at this age, as you experience them, can be really, really horrible to each other. And I think we get that. But the reason I wanna probe is because the descriptions in the book itself, more than once, as I recall, talk about the fact that there's no real, explicit, or overt bullying at the school because it's too frowned upon, and that there's a requirement to be a certain degree of nice and respectful, that even though the book tells the story of an exception to all of that, it nevertheless does seem to try to communicate that there are communal standards which are genuinely different than what most of us expect or experienced, in terms of bullying, and respect, and niceness. Help me reconcile your very frank characterization of the horrible-ness on the one hand, and these repeated descriptions in the book on the other.

ML: So there are two different answers to this; one of them is a really simple one, and one of them is a more complicated one. The really simple answer is that I teach in a community school with six classes from various neighborhoods, and I have some Bais Yaakov classes, and some classes that are not really Bais Yaakov classes, and they do actually treat their classmates differently. So that is factual. But I will say also, from my own experience from going to Bais Yaakov, and really being friends with girls from either end, and, kind of, being from either end, all the very yeshivas girls always really liked me, and thought I was one of them because I really liked Torah and Mitzvot. But they didn't know that I also really liked Anime. So I was, kind of, on both ends there. But I will say that there are expectations. And they're very strong expectations, and it's very zero tolerance, and when there's bullying, it's taken care of very quickly. And it's so

alien for me to understand the idea of it not being dealt with. Like, I don't know what the contrast is, because when I read or watch things with bullying, it always feels exaggerated to me, like, "Is this, kind of... Like that level of real bullying really happen?" I'm not sure, 'cause I've never really seen it.

ML: I will say that there is bullying that goes on, but it's a very specific type. It's not usually physical, and it's often very subtle things. It's often things like ignoring a girl. Sometimes it'll be snide comments. But often it's more in body language, it's more in subtleties, and sometimes, it's even in a, kind of, religious way. I've seen this actually a few times, where we've had girls explain to other girls that they're just not as religious as them. So like, "Oh, I can't go to your house because I know you watch movies", things like that, where it's framed as, "I am too religious to spend time with you. And I'm telling you this for your own good." I once remember I had a couple of friends sitting with me in a classroom in high school, and they were chatting about something or the other, and this other girl came in who was a little more intense than my friends. And my friends were probably talking about American Idol or something, and I remember the girl had started praying and stormed out in the middle because she did not like that they were talking about this in the same classroom.

ML: And so later on, I went and apologized to her, and she turned to me and said, "Oh no, don't be sorry to me. I'm sorry for them." It's almost like a certain condescension that you would get, and it would be turned toward certain girls. Now, it wasn't always about religion; sometimes it was just about what you were wearing, or how you looked, or how you spoke. Sometimes it's just girls giggling behind your back. But it's a different kind of bullying, it's not the kind that you can really go out and prove, necessarily. And in the case of Shaindy in this book, it's very frustrating to her because she knows she's not being "bullied", bullied. She knows these girls are acting in all the appropriate ways. But they're also completely ignoring her. They don't invite her anywhere. They don't think of her for anything. And this is a constant frustration. Girls are just left out, girls are just ignored, girls are overlooked. Girls will sit there and talk about their plans for the weekends in front of another girl and not invite her along. 'cause girls can still be mean even if it's not explicitly bullying. And I think that that sort of differentiation, and that sort of gray area, is really where a lot of this sort of subtle bullying lives.

JH: What surprised you about writing the book?

ML: I think what really surprised me about it was when I started the book, I thought very much that the book would be so much about the first half of it, which is really like the pranks and the sort of the build up to the big reveal. I saw that as being almost the entire book. And I got to that point, and it was the half-way point. And I suddenly realized that, no, the entire journey moving forward, this is what the book is going to be. And it's funny, like, I think it's been classified as literary-fiction. I, kind of, thought of it as a thriller when I started it. I didn't think of it as literary at all. And then, I kind of realized that, no, this is a book about forgiveness. This is a book about what we've done and what we do to each other, and how we move on from that. And it just became a much more introspective book than I expected it to be when I set out to write it. And I'm glad I did.

JH: Me too. Me too. Mari Lowe, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you.

ML: Thank you, I really enjoyed it.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcast. 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.

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