COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE # 33

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Transcripts formatted after those from Disability Visibility Project

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[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: This is Episode 33 of Commonplace, Conversations with Poets and Other People. I'm Rachel Zucker. I met with poet, writer, teacher, mother Sabrina Orah Mark in my apartment on April 10, 2017. Sabrina is the author of two full length collections, *The Babies* and *Tsim Tsum*. Perhaps because it was the morning of the first night of Passover, or perhaps because early on in the conversation, I discovered that Sabrina attended the same Jewish day school as I did, although we never went at the same time or for the same grades, Sabrina and I talk quite a bit about interacting with religious Jewish communities. We talk about how to talk to our kids about the story of Exodus, and how our different but overlapping experiences with Judaism affect our creative work.

You'll hear me say a few times during this conversation that talking about Judaism on the podcast makes me uncomfortable. I'm interested in this discomfort, and you'll hear me cringingly embrace and explore it. I don't really understand whether it's anxiety about alienating non-Jewish listeners, an inherited fear of being too

public about being Jewish, or a concern that talking about Judaism is a distraction from more pressing social and political issues. Probably all of these and more.

Sometimes, Sabrina and I fall into a shorthand with each other, even though this conversation is our first in-person meeting. I'm curious how this episode will sound to listeners who have little or no knowledge of Jewish practices, ideas, and culture. If you'd like something clarified or elaborated, tweet or email us at Commonplace.

I've decided not to explain all the stuff we talk about here in the introduction, but there's one thing that I feel compelled, somewhat defensively, to clarify. At one point, Sabrina says, “What was heartbreaking was how many Jews voted for Trump.” It's important to me that listeners understand that what we meant was that we were both upset and surprised that Jews voted for Trump at all. In fact, Trump got very little of the Jewish vote. Exit polls estimate that around 70 percent of Jews overall voted for Clinton. Liberal Jews voted overwhelmingly for Clinton, and about 50 percent of Orthodox Jews voted for Trump. Jews voted Democratic in this last election in larger percentage than any other religious group.

Each Commonplace conversation makes a beautiful venn diagram of intimacy. How well I know the person I'm speaking with, how well I know their work, the chemistry between us on that particular day, how deeply we go into whatever content we engage, all these things affect the level of intimacy in the conversation, and not always in the ways I would predict.

I adore Sabrina's work, and adore Sabrina, but this was the first time we'd ever sat and talked together in person. So this conversation has the peculiar and particular intimacy of two people being in a room face to face, two mothers stealing time to be together on a morning that they should be doing something else. Two Jewish, middle aged women in a kitchen talking about motherhood, poetry, teaching, literature, language, politics. I should have been cooking and cleaning. Sabrina should have been helping her mom. Two writers about to engage in a generations-old ritual of placing ourselves in the story of Exodus with our complex and beautiful families.

But we don't only talk about Passover. Far from it. We talk about race, Whiteness, safety, non-academic teaching, the prose poem, surrealism, fear, embarrassment, and so much more. This wide ranging conversation is one of my favorites. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I did, and that you'll buy Sabrina's books, which are extraordinary.

At one point, we talk about one of Sabrina's projects, a lecture called "The Poet as Collector." You can find a link to that lecture, and to the other books, authors, and texts that Sabrina and I discuss at Commonplace.today. Patrons will also have access to audio files of Sabrina reading two new fabulous pieces, "Clay" and "There's a Hole in the Bucket," as well as some great stuff from Sabrina about her crying room.

Commonplace patrons will be entered into our next raffle, which includes copies of Sabrina's books, *The Babies* and *Tsim Tsum*. Thank you so much Saturnalia Press, and there'll also be copies of two of Jane Lazarre's fabulous books *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness, Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*, and *The Communist and the Communist's Daughter: A Memoir.* Thank you, Duke University Press for these.

[5:01]

Please consider becoming a patron of Commonplace if you aren't already. We need to bring another person onto the Commonplace team, and the support of patrons is what keeps this show going. Whether or not you can become a patron or are a patron, it would be enormously helpful to us if you could write a review and give us a rating in iTunes. We want to make sure that people who are looking for a podcast like this can find us. And as always, we love your encouragement and feedback. We've got great things in the works here, including upcoming episodes with Aracelis Girmay and Joshua Bennett, as well as other fabulous guests and some special episodes I can't yet reveal.

Happy summer from all of us at Commonplace. And thank you for listening.

[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. So you're in New York City. For Passover?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: For Passover, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What does that, what does that entail for you?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: This entails, let's see, well we have two seders. Um, I desperately try to teach my sons the four questions in Hebrew and then translate it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yep.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: And in translating it, um, realized that we were coming into a lot of problems [laughs[. So, um, basically, let's see, I tried to explain. So the four questions, one of them is like, why do you eat, um, vegetables on most nights, but on Passover you only eat bitter herbs. So we had to talk about the bitter herbs and we had to, then my son said, but we also eat strawberries and chicken. So I had to explain that, which is not really explicable in the Ma Nishtana. And so we were just going around and around.

Then I had to describe the splitting of the sea. Um, it just got to be like a total nightmare and my kids go to Montessori. They don't go to um, Jewish day school and I had gone to Jewish day school.

So I'm trying to like fill in all the pieces in this fragmented way, so um, it's been very strange where like, one of my sons said to me, after we went through all of the plagues, he was like, why can't everyone just be kind to each other?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Good question.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: And like why did everybody have to run away? You know, and then of course, you know that there's that sense of like you're telling this story as if it's not happening now, you know, and and then, and as if you, know, you have this sense of like these stories as places to go that feel like, you know in a lot of ways real, but in a lot of ways fable and fairy tale, and then you're answering and then I'm like answering these questions, but I'm not really answering them at

all, where you know, I have my five year old saying, why do we all have to run away?

You know, and then then there's the describing the like dipping the um, the potato into the saltwater to taste the tears of our enslaved ancestors, which is like pretty heavy stuff for a three and five year olds, but, um, you know, so it's just, it's very strange. And I think because I went to Jewish day school, there was that sense of, because it was all of the time, like all the miracles and all of this, I, I didn't question it as much until I got older, you know, it was just kind of part of my vocabulary. And here for my kids, it's sort of like injected into their vocabulary, like injected into their atmosphere at different times. But most of the time, you know, they're, um, it, it's, it's not part of their language. So, um, it's, it's a struggle in that way.

RACHEL ZUCKER: w I don't even know how, where to start. 'cause I feel like wherever I start, we're gonna spend all our time talking about that. And there's, there's, all these things feel connected to me, but, um, so I know you grew up in Brooklyn. And what Jewish Day School did you go to?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I went to Yeshiva Flatbush. And then we, I went to Ramaz Upper School in Manhattan.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: So yeah, Yeshiva Flatbush is in Brooklyn. And then I was, I was there until sixth grade. And then Ramaz, which is also a Jewish day school.

[10:00]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. And and, and when, but you're younger than me, you're born in ‘75. So, okay. So do you know that I went to Ramaz from first to eighth grade?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: No!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Oh, wow.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And then I left. Um, so we never overlapped. Um, I, I did not know that you went to Yeshiva.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh, until two days ago, when I was looking some stuff up about you. So I'm having this like crazy experience right this minute, which is, you know, um, I have loved your work since I read it. I don't remember who gave it to me or how I found it, but I, I just, it was like, uh, I just, the first time I read your poems, I was just completely blown away and part of, and I, and I couldn't explain to myself or to anyone else why I loved them so much. Like I didn't have the vocabulary almost, but one of the things that I loved about them was that, um, loving them felt like it made me, uh, it was, it was my, uh, my easiest and most pleasurable way of saying, you see, I love things that are really different from what I write, which is a really important thing and, and is true. Um, but your books are the books that I often give to students who I feel like are not writing, um, kind of like confessional narrative autobiographical poems.

And by that, I'm, you know, when I think about your work in that way, um, I feel like there's a false dichotomy, but a dichotomy that I believed in for a long time, between the real and the imagined. And your work, um, uh, felt like it can't, it, it, it was poetry that, that embraced and, and explored the imaginary or the imagination in ways that I never feel like I've been able to do.

Okay. So in some ways, like you know, loving your work, um, has always felt to me like loving the other, or the, the opposite, or, or the, and, okay, and I never saw, I mean, your, your, your second book is called *Tsim Tsum*, and so I was like, oh, she's writing about this, but I never thought of you or your work in a Jewish context.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Oh, that's interesting.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And so, I'm, you know, I've been rethinking that, obviously, and now thinking about Passover and just all the things that you said and in the past few days, like just knowing that you went to Yeshiva and, and now finding out that not only that, but like you actually went to for high school, the same yeshiva that I had been at this for, for eight very, very bad years of my life, um, is so profound.

And the poem that I printed that I want you to read, um, that had, that in some ways has nothing to do with this, in some ways has everything to do with this, and to be talking to you in my kitchen, um, the first day of Passover, um, or well, before the first day. Um, but you know, leading up to the Seder and, and like preparing for Passover and thinking about having you here, I'm, I'm just like blown away because I have this new understanding of actually how much we have in common. And it's like seeing the same person in a completely different way. Um, so I just had to, to put that out there.

Okay. So your kid, you have two boys. They're three and five, you live in Athens, Georgia. Do they have a Jewish identity in Athens? And is that like kind of part of your life with them? Because you just described sort of like trying to cram in the four questions, and Passover is so complicated and offensive in so many ways and also my favorite holiday. But I just asked you 10 questions at once. I'm sorry.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Well, let's see. So they do go, they they go to Sunday School, so we're part, we're members of the synagogue there. They have there's one synagogue in Athens, Georgia, um, and it's good. I mean they get they get something. Um, but you know, it's very different than all day every day um, I mean, from the time I was what, like in first grade, you know, you're praying every morning for 45 minutes, like standing and rocking back and forth. Like they don't, they don't have that.

[14:55]

Um, and um, and there's something very strange and beautiful. about that, like having like an eight year old, you know, really meditating for 45 minutes every morning. Um, and I remember that being like my favorite part of the day, even if I

didn't understand half of what I was saying, because there was that like connection to language where like, you have that sense of like, these are… language is a spell, you know, like I can be in language for 45 minutes and have no idea what i=I'm saying, but it might transform me, you know, and if and that's what I want my kids to have, you know, um and that's you know it and it comes with a ton of issues and problems, but there is a ton of beauty in that.

Um, and wait, let's see. So yeah, so I, they do get pieces, and we do do like Friday night Shabbat dinners with their friends and I try to do it almost every Friday night as we're all falling over, but like we do it, you know, like we do the challah and we do the grape juice and the candle lighting, and, and it's good for them like it's grounding and it helps also I think um, you know, we're, we're, we don't have family there. So it's good to just kind of have that structure. Um, so wait, let's see. I'm forgetting.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wait, did you go to Ramaz by choice? Was that like a thing, or was that?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: It wasn't, I mean, going to Jewish day school or not going to Jewish day school, I don't entirely remember it being an option. I do know that what, you know, I lived, when I lived in Flatbush, um, there was, I mean, it was, really like the Orthodox Jews, um, like on one side, right? And African Americans on the other side and, and, and never the two shall mix. Like there was very much that, um, and my, I remember like, you know, driving past the public schools and if we complained about Jewish day school, my parents would be like, do you want to go there? And we would just see these like enormous buildings, you know?

And I think that in many ways, like, you know, I mean, we, we lived in this like very racially divided world. Um, and there, there was a sense of like, it not even being an option. And then even in New York, growing up in New York, you know, I, going to Ramaz, I don't think I had a friend who wasn't Jewish until I was probably 16.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. So did your family move to Manhattan or did you commute from Brooklyn?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: No, we moved into Manhattan.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Got it. Yeah.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You have siblings?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I have two. Yeah, I have twin brothers and then I have a half sister.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh huh.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: So -

RACHEL ZUCKER: And did they go both to Flatbush Yeshiva and Ramaz?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yes.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Well, okay. Yeah, so and there are three of my my, my twin brothers went to Flatbush and Ramaz. My sister who is 23 years younger than me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah, um, did not. She went to, um, Heschel. And now she's at Westchester Hebrew Day, Hebrew High School.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Westchester Day Hebrew High School.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh huh. Yeah. Okay. Wow. So your parents split up?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yes.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh huh. Which is probably not so much in the current Happy culture of the Orthodox, right?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: And that's why we moved into Manhattan, because we were living in Flatbush and it was very, you know, very Orthodox neighborhood, and it was a big scandal. Like there was a sense of like, oh my god, you know, they're getting a divorce and what's going on? And there was, I remember going to um I took piano lessons and I hated it. I hated it. And the, um, the piano teacher would always ask me, like, what's going on in your house? I know something's going on. I know that your parents are fighting. Like I know that they're, and there was a lot of like peeking in through the windows, and my parents just like, split. Yeah. Like they just had to leave town. It was, it was too, I mean, it was, we were very ghetto-ized, in a lot of ways, so yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mmm Hmm. Did you feel, uh, um, like, so my parents split up when I was 12. Um, and, but - same age. Yeah.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Same age. Yeah, it's around like fifth grade-ish.

[20:07]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yep. Yeah, but my you know, I grew up in Greenwich Village, and I spent an hour each way on the bus going to Ramaz, because even though it's, I was in Manhattan, that's how long it took, um, and very similar, you know, I was in school from like 8 in the morning till 6 something in the evening. I, there, in the winter, I never saw the light, basically. And, um, I was one of the very few kids who lived in the village. My mother worked. No one else in my grade had a mother who worked at that time. And it was pretty clear that we didn't keep Kosher. Um, we did not regularly go to synagogue. When we did go to synagogue, we went to the Carlebach Schule on 79th Street, and that was like a total hippie, you know, thing.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah, I went there once. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, and, um, and it was pretty clear that my parents were not gonna stay together, um, or at least that they had a, a marriage that, that seemed very different than everybody else's marriage. And I remember very clearly, um, other kids, I mean, first of all, I had pretty much no friends, but when I would go to other people's homes, um, the mothers in particular would say, like, are you okay? And it was always like, oh, what, you know, you poor latchkey child whose mother works and travels… and you live in the village…

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Which is another way of saying you will never be okay. Right? [Laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Yeah. I, you know, and now looking back on it and this, what I was wondering about these people who are, you know, your piano teacher, like I think looking back on it, there probably was a lot of envy, um, and, and curiosity, and I, I can't meet, you know, maybe I'm wrong, but I, I now, at the time, I took it totally at face value, and I was just like, yeah, I am outcast, abandoned, fucked up, you know, like, like, but I now thinking back on it, it's gotta be that some of these women were asking, you know, what would it be like if I worked? Or what would it be like if I could, you know, this wasn't my mother's situation, but like, if I could get out of my own fucked up marriage, that's making me really, you know, unhappy. Um, but then what they were saying was, Oh, oh, this is so exciting and horrible and I can't turn away. And I really want it to go badly for you. I felt that like, right, because it would justify their life choices. Yeah, right.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah. You know, it's interesting because at Yeshiva Flatbush. It was totally different than Ramaz. Like Yeshiva Flatbush to me was, it was super Orthodox. Um, yeah, right. Most of the mothers did not work. Um, there was a much more, um, sort of, uh, everyone seems, there was a kind of, um, kind of cloistered feel, whereas when I got to Ramaz, I remember going to a party. Oh, no, it was my party. I had a party, but it felt like I was going to somebody else's party [laughs] and I invited my Brooklyn friends, and so it was the sort of like the coming together of like the Brooklyn kids and the New York City kids and I

remember like the Brooklyn girls, this was like my bat mitzvah party, but I think it was, it was sort of like, uh, um, it might have been a year later or something. I don't remember when exactly it happens, but, um, the, my Brooklyn friends came and like little girl party dresses, and my New York city, my new New York city friends, Manhattan friends, um, where I remember just in these like sleek black, everyone was very sophisticated and I was like, I can't handle that. Like I'm somewhere in the middle. I don't know where I am, which is probably why I felt like it was somebody else's party.

But I, I, I, and I remember thinking like my Brooklyn friends were just sort of sweeter and, um, and I was very intimidated by the Ramaz kids. Super intimidated. Um, you know, and probably still would be [laughs], I don't know.

RACHEL ZUCKER: See, it's so fascinating. I mean, all that makes sense to me because your experience was going from Brooklyn Yeshiva to Ramaz. And so Ramaz was much more cosmopolitan -

[24:58]

SABRINA ORAH MARK: And like the parents, everybody's parents were divorced. I felt like by the time I got to Ramaz, like if your parents were together, that seemed a little bit strange, almost, right, like it was quaint for you to have two parents that were still together, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, so the difference of okay, so I'm born at the end of ‘71, you're -

SABRINA ORAH MARK: ‘75.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so the difference of like five four or five years, and the difference between the high school and the elementary school-middle school was very, is a really big deal. It's hard to it's hard to really imagine that but I think that's really true because first of all a lot of kids came into Ramaz at in in the high school, and I think it's a it's a different population to some extent, even though just

it's the on one hand, incredibly homogeneous population. It's also very different population.

My feeling from going like from Ramaz, I left after eighth grade. I went to Fieldston, and I I, I mean, the pictures of me, you know, from the very beginning and my memory of it is that I looked like I was out of Big Love when I showed up at, at Fieldston. Like I was wearing, you know, not little girl party dresses, but close, like I was wearing, you know, ankle length skirts and, you know, uh, wrist length shirts with like, you know up to the collar with the crepe. Like I just I had no idea like and then I did have like one or two pairs of jeans but I didn't know how to wear them. I didn't know how to pin them. I didn't know how to do anything, right?

So it it's so funny to hear like my departure from what the same school, although it really wasn't the same school, was, like getting out of prison and like, you know, going 20 years into the future in like one week, and yours was sort of similar in a weird way even though it was to Ramaz.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: It was, right? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah I'll tell you something, you know, thinking about like just the whole idea of like, you know that sense of like being very buttoned up and feeling um, like you're crossing into this entirely other world. When I was in graduate school, I was taking a, this is when I was doing my doctorate. I was taking a, um, biblical Hebrew, um, translation class. And at one point there was a conversation of like, who wrote the Bible, right? And I was like 30, I mean, how old was I was, uh, you know, 28. And at one point, and so there was all this, you know, discussion about like, you know, um, well, maybe the Bible had been written by this person or this person, depending on these, these, um, pieces of the Bible were most probably, you know, written by this person.

And there was this one moment where I was like, so the whole thing about like the Bible being written by God is out [laughs]. Like I just want to make sure like, and I'm 28, you know, and like, I mean, I, yes, I had thought about it somehow, but there was always like sort of at the center of my heart, the idea that, Oh, no, God wrote, God wrote the Bible, you know, and, and I think like, there was part of that Yeshiva education that like, you know, I drag, I drag that around. I mean, I'm not

religious, you know, but I drag a lot of that stuff around with me like, where, where I'm like, so the whole thing with like, believing in miracles, like, can we still do it a little bit, you know, just a tiny, just like something, just give us something. Um, you know, and I think as I got older and also like with kids, like it, there is a point where you're like, no, you know, you can't believe in everything. Like that's just, it's very dangerous in a lot of ways, but like I do, I, I remember like sitting there and I had that experience of like wearing the very long sleeves and the very you know and the the long skirt but in in the way of like, but it was God, right? [Laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, I I'm having this really fascinating emotional experience and I just want to ask you if, and it's totally fine if you're like, no, I'm definitely not having that. You need to talk about that with your therapist. Um, but, uh, it's so interesting cause I, I'm feeling, um, this urge to like talk to the podcast listeners right now and say, don't worry, we won't talk too much about Judaism. Don't worry, we're really going to talk about poetry. Don't worry, we're not going to just like keep talking about yeshiva.

[29:56]

Um, and it's so, could at the same time and, and also to like, say, this is really actually related. It's really important. Let me tell you how. And I, and I do feel that way very strongly like, we're gonna talk, don't worry podcast listener, we're gonna talk about um, the way I think maybe the this experience, um of having come from a very religious community, gone to a very religious school, um not being currently religious in a certain, in that same way, um, has led to or fed or whatever, um, for both of us, um, but in kind of opposite ways, um, the most kind of important stuff about our poems.

And, um, things that are imagined or things that are real, or our relationship to language or what you're talking about about having had essentially a meditative practice as a very young child, before that became kind of in vogue and we realized maybe that would be important, or for me, you know, I was involved at that same age in my life with my first rebellions. Like I refused to stand up during standing prayer during Amidah. I was like, I'm not doing it. And I had all kinds of ideas

about, you know, sexism and misogyny and, and the patriarchy. And also I, it was really important to me to say, I don't believe in the God that you're describing, so I'm not going to stand up, which would result in me being sent to detention and to the principal's office and, you know, all these things.

So, so the things that we've both, uh, embraced and held with us, um, the things that we've both rejected and for what reasons, um, I think are all like incredibly relevant for us as writers. But I just find it so interesting that I feel really self conscious and apologetic about having this conversation. It feels like um, I mean I I've talked with lots of people on the podcast about things that you're not really supposed to talk about. And it's interesting to me that this moment feels the most embarrassing in a certain way. Like this is see, this is like, you don't, you don't, other people don't want to hear about your Jewish thing, right? And it feels, you know, and I'm, it also, I mean, Passover is so, I don't need, I just, every year I come face to face with the whole chosen people problem, right?

And so it feels uh, it feels a little bit like that, I think, like, you know, if I share this experience with you, um and I want to talk about that, there's something incredibly obnoxious and exclusionary. And, you know, I don't know. I don't know. Are you feeling that at all? Or are you just like, oh, this is nice.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: You know, it's interesting because I think that, you know, I live in, I live in Athens, Georgia. I, my husband's African American. So I'm raising two Jewish African American boys in the South. And so when I come to New, well, when I'm, when I'm at home, there, I have this thing where I want to be like, we're Jewish, just so everybody knows, it like we're Jew, it like, I just want you, I'm Jewish, and I feel like when I first moved there even before I got married and before I had kids I was like, I'm a Jew like, quickly. Because I think I felt like, just don't say anything that you may regret saying in my presence.

Likewhen I come to New York, it's a totally different, like, I, I, I think like it's, there's a sense of, um, I don't need to sort of like perform my identity as some kind of like, body of armor in a way that I did feel definitely when I first moved to Athens. It's a little bit better now. It's definitely better. It's gotten way more diverse over the years. Um, but, but I also understand like, um, that sense. I remember

somebody, when I was in graduate, when I was at Iowa, somebody said to me, one, one of my class, one of my classmates said to me, um, I would never, ever date a Jewish woman because you're all so goddamn self righteous. To my face.

[35:00]

And um, I didn't, that was pretty, I mean, that was probably like one of the most intense, like anti-semitic encounters, but it's interesting the idea of like, the chosen people, you're also goddamn self righteous, like that is, you know, that circles around and circles around and I think, um, being able to kind of like crack that open and talk about that as opposed to just being this like, floating, you know, thing, is is, is difficult.

And even like, actually when I was just, just griping the whole Passover story to, um, my boys, my son, Noah, who's five said to me, but I thought God loved everybody. And I was like shit, okay, so I'm, like well what happened was you know, and and then you start again with like the being enslaved and like freedom and questions of freedom and you know, and they have some you know, serious ancestors, my boys. So like um, which is all to say I have no answer, like I don't have an answer to that at all. But I do, I do understand that like feeling of like, oh, no, it's okay. Like I won't talk too much about the Jewishness, you know, or even with my second book. I felt like, because it was maybe more obviously like had, I mean because it's it's called *Tsim Tsum*, and it's you know, it's a Kabbalistic phrase, I felt like I would look at these reviews of the book and think, like, nobody wants to touch this. Nobody wants to talk about it. Nobody wants to touch it. It's too, it's, it, I, maybe there's a sense of, like, I can't talk about it. Like, I, I don't know what, but it was, it was a very weird experience after *Tsum Tsum* came out and just, like, It was weird reading what…

RACHEL ZUCKER: Because they were focused on like, oh, these are prose poems or they were, they weren't, they weren't addressing the Jewish…?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: It seems as though like the Jewishness was just like, we can't talk, it's, it's too much, like I can't talk about it. So, right. I, there, in fact, whereas, whereas like with *The Babies*, because, you know, the Holocaust is sort of

like in the margins of that book in many ways. Like you can say Holocaust, but you can't say Jewish mysticism. You know what I mean? Like you can talk about, we can talk about the Holocaust, insert… almost more freely, but to start with the Jewish mysticism and like, you know, um, ritual and that nobody there was a sense to me that like, nobody wants to talk about it. Nobody wants to hear about it.

And I would, even when I would start talking about the book, I felt very apologetic about that, where I was like, I'm really sorry. I just, can I just say one really quick thing about the Kabbalah? And then like, I'll never talk about the Kabbalah again. Not that I even know that much about the Kabbalah, to be honest. I mean, I haven't studied, studied it. Um, but, but there, there, I mean, I feel like if I studied it, I'd have to study it with somebody. I couldn't just study it on my own. And I, there's like warnings against studying the Kabbalah by yourself and like loose, you don't want to study the Kabbalah loose, but anyway, but I do, I do, um, did have that experience of feeling apologetic.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. Brief, broad strokes context. Okay. So you, so you went to, yeshiva in Flatbush. Then you went to Ramaz. Then where did you go to college?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Barnard.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so you stayed in the city, but you went to Barnard. And then, um, I know you went to the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Right. But how, did you go straight?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I went, no, I went, straight from undergraduate? No, I went, um, I think there was a year in between. So I taught in the New York City public schools. I was the poetry lady. I'd go from, um, I worked for Teachers and Writers Collaborative and then Leap, also, um, so I'd go from, um, uh, public school to public school and teach poetry. I think I did that for two years. And then I went to Iowa.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. And so then you graduated Iowa, what year?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: 2001.

RACHEL ZUCKER: 2001. Okay. Okay. And then, um, and when did you, and your first book is called *The Babies*. And it came out what year?

[40:00]

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I think I, I think it came out in two, oh boy, I don't know. Okay. 2004?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. But you, were you working on those poems in Iowa?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Some of them. Some of them.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Okay. There's a big half of the manuscript that's just, it's very discarded. I mean, I think it might be in the library, um, unfortunately. [Laughs]. And then…

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, I want to come back and ask you what it was like to go to Iowa, um, you know, from Brooklyn and New York for the first time to live in that part of the country and to be uh, in that environment. Um, but then, but okay, so then how long between Iowa and you did a PhD, uh, in, what was your, what -

SABRINA ORAH MARK: English.

RACHEL ZUCKER: In English? Yeah. Okay. And so how long between those two?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: So then I did, so I graduated from Iowa in 2001, then I went to Provincetown. Mm-Hmm. And then from Provincetown I went to Georgia. Got it. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And so you've been living in Georgia ever since?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: For a thousand years. Yes. Yeah, I think it's 1000 years.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Is it, you know, 40 years in the desert?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: It's 40 years in the desert, exactly [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Before you're allowed to come back. Before you're allowed to enter the promised land. But we don't even know what that is.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: It's yeah, it's right. Exactly. Yeah, exactly.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so I want to keep talking about all these things, but I feel, um, I'm worried that there's a listener who doesn't know your work. Okay, which is the biggest loss of all time. So in order to give this conversation some context I was hoping you'd read a poem from *The Babies*. I printed "The Babies" but, and I, there's a line that I really want to talk about.

Okay, but if you have a different -

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I'm happy to -

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, great. Okay. So so this is from your first book which is called "The Babies" and it also is the title of *The Babies*.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Okay, "The Babies."

[Sabrina reads "The Babies"]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Awesome. Thank you. Um, so, uh, so one of the producers on this show, Christine Larusso, was an undergraduate student of mine at Fordham, and then a graduate student of mine at NYU. And I think, um, I, that I gave her, um, one of your books when she was an undergraduate. Um, she was just an enormously talented and amazing student who was writing these very strange, um, kind of dense, lyric, surreal, you know, poems that were not autobiographical, um,

or narrative in a, in a traditional way. And, um, I was like, oh, you're gonna love this.

[44:52]

Um, I think I, I remember that. I think it was me that gave it to her. But in any case, I asked her, um, the other day like do you remember what you loved about Sabrina's work, because when I told her you were coming on the podcast she was like overjoyed. So, um, she wrote this:

“Um, I loved Sabrina's work in college as you know but I haven't revisited it in forever because I don't know where her books are. We haven't even unpacked -she just moved to LA not that long ago - umm all of our boxes. I can talk about what was special about her for me then, if that's helpful the imagination she brought to poetry was really important to me. I think I had only ever read straightforward, true, or true narrative poems, and *Tsim Tsum* was such a journey into a different world, and I was like, wait, what? I can all have all these non sequiturs and prose poems and walruses? Okay! Also, her work feels both very adult and mature and very childlike to me all at once.”

So she's talking about *Tsim Tsum*, but I think this, that, um, when I first read your work, um, I read *Tsim Tsum* first, and then I read *The Babies*, I think, but with both of the books, in slightly different ways, there was that feeling for me as well. Like, I didn't, wait, why is this poetry? Oh, it definitely is poetry, but I don't even know what I mean by that. And, poetry can do this thing that first, a lot of interesting reasons I don't feel permission to do, and yet I I felt like this door opening that was like, you can, you can come in this room, because in this room there's also poetry, and in this room there's something happening that is clearly not fiction that is clearly not prose, even though the poems are prose poems, and so they look like prose on the page ,um, and uh I think I just I I, it was just this feeling of like, um, I don't know how to describe it, like learning another language, but like in a minute, um, that I could only understand, but not speak.

And I was like, wow, this is the most amazing thing. Um, and, and almost every student that I, um, give your work to describes a similar feeling, like I didn't know

I could do that. have this, I could do this, I could, that this was allowed, that this was available. Um, and and a lot of students also, and myself as well, being like, I'm not sure I can do it, but, um, wow, this is, this is totally amazing, and not what is being kind of given to me.

So, I want to talk about all that, but, but can we start by talking about what it was like to, for you, both, you know, as a Jewish woman from New York, having gone to, um, these schools, and going to Iowa. Um, and also what it was like for you aesthetically at Iowa.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Well, um, I spent a lot of time by myself [laughs]. Um, I mean, I will say when I got to Iowa, I was very happy. Um, I looked around and I was like, I have a porch. Like, I just want a porch. And I want everything to be very quiet. And I felt, I mean, you know, and I was such a New Yorker. Like, I was, I went to, I mean, I grew up here, I went to college here, and I never thought, I figured I'd go to Iowa for two years and then come right back, and everything would just, it would be as if, you know, nothing, Iowa had never happened, you know, and, um, I, I will say though, like my first year, I remember bringing in poems, and I remember being told, surrealism is dead.

And, and I remember thinking, well, no, it isn't. And then I remember thinking, Okay, so why would that be? Why would someone say that? Like, why is that? And why is it important to make surrealism dead? And, um, I mean, because we have a choice, right? There is a choice like as artists, you know, we don't you don't have it doesn't have to be dead. Um, but you have to think about it, like, in terms of like, its historical context, and then like, how does the surreal continue to exist now as opposed to, um, how did it, like, um, exist like in its very beginning stages, and why did it happen and like, you know, the war that it came out of and like the, you know, the, the sense of like, okay, well, here we have surrealism, um, that comes out of cubism as, as a necessary thing to echo a world that is being like ripped to shreds, right?

[50:11]

Like we are, we are, we are in this space where, um, um, the world has been like cut up and rearranged in these particular ways, and we have to like repair it, understanding that we need to repair it, embedding the brokenness into the repair. Um, But then I remember talking to Claudia Rankine about this, who I had studied with at Barnard and saying, okay, like, what do we, what do I do here? And she said to me, and this was one of the best pieces of advice I'd ever been given. She had said to me, you follow the image as far as it can take you and then you follow it farther and then you follow it farther. So as long as you make a case as for why each thing is there, then you're okay, right?

Like, so rather than it being kind of like shenanigan, like, ooh, whimsy, like, you know, here, like with the walrus, I don't think I've ever used a walrus, but like, let's say, you know, with the walrus, the walrus can be there, but you, you need to give it its own language. It needs to adhere to the rules of that universe.

Like you have to, there has to be… a grounding for it. So like if everything's floating, that's fine, but then you need to, you need some how to, um, stitch into that world like why everything is floating when it doesn't, float and why, and what's and what is the necessity like why, why? And that was what Claudia Rankine taught me like that idea of like, you know, why is this important? Why does everything need to float? Um, so I mean, and and I remember like I brought in this poem. And it was, there was a bridge made of dresses, and my professor at the time said to me, well, like a bridge made of dresses can't stand, like you can't have just a bridge made of dresses. Like nobody can walk across the bridge made of dresses. And even though I was really pissed off about that, I remember coming home being like, yes, you know, Yeah, there can be a bridge. And I, I, It made sense to me. Like, okay, fine. I can make a bridge made of dresses, but like, you need, it needs to be a bridge still, you know, and people, you need to be able somehow to walk across it. And there needs to be something on one side and something on the other side. And there needs to be a reason for it.

Um, and that was, I mean, I got, I got pummeled like my first year. I mean, I remember really being pretty, um, like walking out of workshop just like thinking, Oh God, they're going to kick me out. But, um, but, but, um, I take, I think I'm

good with like, I'm good. I'm good at being humbled. I've been, I, I turn it into something positive. Like I'm good at that.

Um, and I think, um, I remember as an undergraduate, I studied with Kenneth Koch, and it was a, it was a, um, uh, an imitation class. And in order to get into the class, you had to write a ballad. And I had never written in iambic pentameter before. I had never, I mean, and I, so I taught myself iambic. I'm like, I have to take this workshop. I have to be in it. So I taught myself iambic pentameter and then and he said and he also would make us speak in iambic pentameter, go around the room and just speak in iambic pentameter. Like you learn that fast. It was out of, and we had to do a John Donne imitation. And so everything was form and everything was imitation.

And I remember bringing in a poem, and it was something like, um, if we were two pages in a book, I would be page eight and you would be page three. And he would read the poems out loud, and everybody laughed and he wouldn't, and he and he wouldn't say who it was. He would just like read the poem out loud and then talk about why it was a good imitation or not. And everybody laughed and he said, no, he said John Donne would have done that.

[55:03]

And then he continued reading the poem and you could see like his face falling just from total like sheer disappointment. And he took the poem, and he ripped the two lines that he thought were good and off the page and handed it back to me and crumpled the rest of the poem and threw it in the garbage. So after that like I don't know. I I like you couldn't say anything to me. I mean, I I just toughened up. Like I really toughened up.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But what was your relationship with him and with the other students in the class such that you were like, oh, you um, at least I have these two lines that he likes, or were you just devastated like, oh my god, he just crumpled my poem up?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I, I think like he had liked some other work that I had brought in, so I felt like I had, was already like, a bit sustained by that elsewhere. Like I had that to hold on to. I was fortified by like, I think a little bit of praise that had come before. So I was holding onto that and then I guess was able to deal, but yeah, I mean, but it was very much like, you know, um, I think I was the only first year in the class and the fact that I was even there, I was just happy to be there.

Um, and I learned a ton. I mean, I learned a ton about form and, um, you know, even though, like, I have two collections of prose poems, in many ways, I mean, they're very formally driven at the same time, so um, I mean, that's one thing when I, when I teach, um, prose poem, uh, workshops about the prose poem, I usually will really start with the sonnet. Um, you know, as sort of like the prose poem is as the extraordinary cousin of the sonnet. Like, I think that one mistake that is made sometimes with the prose poem is that sense of like, there's no music in here, right? Like there has to be, there has to be music.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You know, I just, I think that's part of what I, um, initially responded to so strongly and continue to respond so strongly to in your work, but I don't think I ever had the language for it until I just heard you say what you said, which is that I do feel so strongly in your poems that there is this like, um, deep commitment to accuracy even in the imagined landscape. And I think I feel that way about Cathy Park Hong's work as well. Very strongly.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Totally.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, and, uh, and I think that I, this for me totally has to do with my educational history and with being Jewish and with like a kind of, uh, very strange, internalized message about, um, graven images, um, that I think I felt like, okay, I'm, I'm doing something really wrong if I make a painting, but it's okay if I make a photograph because I have a responsibility to accurately record the world as it is.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Oh, that's fascinating.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And my poems came out of that. It was like, I don't have permission, and in fact, it would really be, you know, somehow, um, and the Holocaust is absolutely related to this. Like, what is my responsibility as an artist? It is to remember, to explore, to do, um, to repair the world. And we need to talk about that, um, in a minute in this way that, that, that I got attached to accuracy as a mode of representational art.

And, um, I was fascinated by painting, by dance, you know, by, by modes that were not modes that I felt permission. Like it's, it's shocking to me to some extent that my first published thing was a chapbook that were all poems. Um, it was called *Annunciation* and it was about, um, going to Florence and seeing these paintings of the Annunciation, and as like a total yeshiva girl, like being in the presence of these paintings and feeling like I want the story of the Virgin Mary. I want, you know, these paintings, but also feeling that it was, um, utterly forbidden to me.

[1:00:00]

I should not be in those cathedrals. I should not be in churches. I should not be, you know, reading about what, you know, the story of the angel Gabriel and, like, what's going on there. I should not be writing poems, you know, uh, about any of those things. Um, and yet, of course, it was like all of those not not nots that made me, you know, compelled to do it. And, um, and that book, nobody wants to talk about that that book is like, absolutely out of a Jewish, uh, consciousness and a Jewish background. Um, like, what does it mean to be …

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Walking into a church, you know, yeah, you know…

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I mean, and you know, when I was in Florence, I had, um, my son Moses was nine months old or eight, eight months old, and we took him, you know, it was the first time we took him somewhere, you know, what did it mean that I was leaving my little infant son, um, you know, just to go for a few hours around Florence and, um, you know to think about, those weren't the first poems I wrote, but at that moment like to see myself in this narrative. Um, in this completely different way, but okay. Anyway, I'm going on this crazy tangent.

Um, let's come back for a second. Um, you were talking about, you know, why is it important to make surrealism dead? Which is a fascinating, um question and then um, the idea of repairing the world. So, um, for people who don't know, um, what *Tsim Tsum* means, can you talk about that for, for a minute?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah. Um, tsim tsum is, um, a Kabbalistic, um, term. So it's from Jewish mysticism. Um, and it's basically considered like the flawed phase in Genesis where in order for the creator, um, to, um, allow the creation to come into existence, the creator needs to, um, put itself into some kind of exile. Um, and so there's always a set, and that's sort of like where, um, the mark of trauma is, because it's sort of like the one who has created the thing is never there, right? Like, um, the abandoned, um, the abandoned worlds.

Um, and so, but. In order for, this was my favorite part of it, um, in order, right before, um, the creator departs from its creation, the creator will, um, stuff light into these vessels, but the vessels couldn't hold the light because the light was so intense. And so the light shatters, um, and the light, um, spreads everywhere. And, and so we spend like our whole lives, like, going around, um, kind of collecting these shards of light and trying to make sense of things. So, um, like I really love that idea of, um, that kind of bewilderment. Like, that there's something that, um, can somehow be healed or repaired, but it's like it's a life's work, right? It's like the world's work.

Um, and then that's also like Tikkun Olam, which is like repairing the world. And so, but I just, the idea of like the light being scattered everywhere and we're just like, okay, what's this piece? Does this piece fit with this piece? Maybe this piece fits with that piece and that's just sort of that's like our work here. And you know, and and I think like the idea of like you know, we live in a world where The Creator is in exile is just very beautiful to me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm hmm. You know, I, it's so fascinating. I mean, this is the title of your second book, which I read many times, and somehow I just was like, I don't really totally understand why she's calling it this, but okay. And then I remember really distinctly, um, I wrote this poem, um, about my second son's birth that was really, um, Arielle Greenberg asked me to write to give her poems for the,

for this experimental feminist, um, uh, for *How To*, this experimental feminist online journal. And I really wanted to write about this birth, which had been really traumatic for me, and, um, and also life changing and, and, um, and, I couldn't, it was really hard to figure out how to write that poem and keep it really accurate and really descriptive of what the experience was like, but also not clean it up and and make it a poem in the way that I thought poems were supposed to be.

[1:05:15]

And it was only when I was, I don't remember what brought me back to this concept of Tsim Tsum, but I, maybe it was like doing research and thinking about Abram's briss, and and what I was going to say, and what we were going to name him and why, and you know all of these things, and his middle name is Benjamin, which is my father's name, and I was thinking a lot about, you know, Rachel dying, giving birth to Benjamin, which I thought I was going to die in in the labor. And it was only when I thought about, I mean we're talking about exactly the same somewhat esoteric concept and for you, um, the idea of of the creator being in exile, um, is is kind of, um, one of the central connection points. For me it was, um, okay, if, if God is everywhere, then you can't, then God cannot create anything because there's no space. And so I remember learning that there had to be a contraction in order, right, like a withdrawal is one word for it, but I thought of it as a contraction.

Um, and so in that context, I mean, I just remember thinking, this is, this is a, a, um, like a secret, um, birth metaphor. And there has to be this, this very painful, um, profound contraction in order to create into the space a person who never was there before, uh, an art or an idea or anything like in order for their, for creation to happen, there has to be this contraction and, and, and, um, you know, but but also feeling very strongly like, um, this was never presented to me as a birth metaphor, you know that or one that I could use, um, it was, you know,it was sort of I didn't, I didn't feel that anyone had prepared me for the experience of that, of birth, uh, of pregnancy, of motherhood, of any of these, of any of these things.

Um, and so I was searching for this in the language that I had kind of been given and been raised with and, but but had never been able to use the way I needed to

use it. And the idea that that the that the vessels were filled with light was so beautiful for me, but also that they that they of course would shatter, and that you could spend, you know, I in terms of social justice this feels exactly right, like in that you spend your whole life, you know and the world spends its time um collecting these and and and somehow repairing them felt very deeply, um true to me, but also it feels true right now as a mother of teenagers that in the ,there was a contraction, there was creation, and there was a kind of shattering that is sort of played out in separation and attachment all the way through. And now, you know, I see that I'm, I'm just, I'm trying to gather them, you know, and I'm trying to gather my love for them. And they're trying to gather themselves in this other way, like away from me and with me and towards me. I don't know the whole, it just feels like utterly profound.

But also, I just keep coming back to this feeling that when I put that in the poem, I felt like I wasn't supposed to do that. And even talking to you now still about this feels really weird, um, almost. And I don't know, um, you like -

SABRINA ORAH MARK: That, that you aren't supposed to take something bigger than yourself? Is that what it is?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think, I think maybe part of it is, is, is just, uh, bizarrely esoteric to me and part of it is not at all. So part, I think part of it is, um, I spent a lot of my childhood and early adulthood rejecting Judaism and rejecting all these different parts of Judaism. So then to see it come back in my poems or to feel the need for it in my own life, um, is a complicated thing that I feel very torn about.

[1:10:07]

Um, I also think that we're at a particularly interesting moment right now where, like, someone contacted me and wanted me and, um, Erika Meitner to be on a panel for AW, for the next AWP about, um, Jewish women writers. And I, I, you know, I didn't, what I wanted to respond, I haven't responded yet, was to basically say, I'm only interested right this moment in talking about, um, the way in which being Jewish is being a White minority. And I, I, I don't, I, I feel like my major work, um, is to think about being white um, and so there's some weird way right

now, where it feels to me like being, talking about being Jewish, talking about um why it's it's still important to me right now, feels like an act of White supremacy in this completely bizarre way, right? And that feels very confusing.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Well, you know one thing i've been thinking a lot about is that I spent a good deal of my 20s and 30s studying the Holocaust, thinking about the Holocaust, as if the Holocaust was in the past, you know, like as if like this was something that's not happening now, and um, and I don't, I'm trying to reconcile, like I'm trying to figure out what that even what, okay, so then what, how do we continue that conversation?

RACHEL ZUCKER: You had said that earlier, um, you're telling this story as if it's not happening now, right and that's my feeling about the Passover Seder. Also, like we're talking about getting out of Egypt, right, you know, you know, first of all slavery continues in this day all around us.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Exactly, And what I was gonna say just remembered was that you know I remember and this just kind of has really been tearing me up, but I remember as a kid like all through yeshiva land being taught, you know, Holocaust, Holocaust, Holocaust, Holocaust. What makes a Nazi? You are born evil? No, you're not born evil. You're not, you, when your neighbor is dragged out of their house because of the color of their skin or their system of beliefs, you turn your head and look away. That's what makes a Nazi, right? That was what, and what was very, very heartbreaking was how many Jews voted for Trump. Um, you know, the, the, and, and, and so I had to kind of like go back and think, so we spent all this time talking about the Holocaust, right? And talking about this, like, um, we will never forget this will never happen again. And then, and then you go and you vote, a big percentage of Jews went, I mean, I don't know what the percentage is, but, um, uh, and vote for a man who has opened up this, um, war, like has, has allowed for this to continue, um, and, and like, I mean, I, it's just heartbreaking and I don't know.

I mean, we're in it now, right? Like we're deep in it. So, um, you know, we, we write the letters and we go to the marches and like, I talk to my kids and I want my kids to be okay. And like under, you know, I want, and they're little, so they don't

entirely know, but they are being brought up now with. You know, there's sort of like the echoes of Obama, but like the real, the president of the United States that they will understand, the first president… I mean, my five year old knows Obama, but like my three year old, the first president that he will understand, will be Trump, of this country. And it's just like, I don't know what to do with that. You know? And, um, like I don't let them use the word stupid except when they say that, except when they say Trump is stupid, I don't say anything [laughs].

[1:15:00]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I mean, I think so many things. Um, that last line, um, in "The Babies," or the last few lines actually, um, that you read, um, "Mrs. Greenaway/still talks about how expertly they gathered me into their tiny/arms. And how they took me away, not like a prisoner. But/ like a mother. Into a past I still swear I never had."

You know, I was thinking about you and I did not live through the Holocaust, but we also never lived a life that wasn't profoundly influenced by it in so many ways. Um, and you know, one of the things that the Passover Seder is that you're supposed to tell the story, and sort of feel on some level, as if you yourself were brought out of Egypt, not a metaphor, not, you know, but that, that you, that you had that experience.

And it's so utterly complicated to think about, you know, whether to what extent, um, we are supposed to take, um, these stories literally, and to what extent we're supposed to, you know, for God's sake, say, oh, I have a history of coming from an oppressed people therefore I should really empathize empathize and not become a Nazi, you know and not you know, and and look at look at who is in slavery now, look at who is oppressed now look at the ways in which in my daily life, I am contributing to systems that oppress other people, and also look at the ways in which I myself may be, uh, psychologically, emotionally, um, oppressed in certain ways, but, but, you know, not be the victim to that that gives me permission to become the oppressor, to face up to like what it comes, what it means to come from a religion that has a vengeful God, um, on the one hand, and also sees itself very

much as a victim. Um, uh, but and then what do you do with that? I mean not to mention the whole Israel problem…

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean just just as American Jews with that history you know, I just came back from Virginia, I went to colonial Williamsburg and Monticello with my oldest and my youngest and, you know, to think about the formation of this country, which on the one hand as a Jew, I don't feel responsible for, because I, I, none, no one that I come from was here, um, and yet I am utterly responsible for, I'm an American and I, and I, and I live in a country and enjoy, uh, a country that was founded on slavery, on the idea of freedom and the institution of slavery.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Well they just found, um, at University of Georgia, um, the buildings on campus have been built over African American graveyards.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: And so now they're, they're, um, they're trying to sort of, um, in hopefully the, you know, the most respectful way possible, move these, um, move these graveyards. Um, a friend of mine, and I think one of them, and I might be wrong in this, but, um, I think that it's the social work building, of all places.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Mm hmm. So, I mean, there's, you know, this, it's just, and, and there is that sense. I mean, and that's one thing that's very interesting about living in Georgia, as opposed to living in New York, is that, like, you the bones are literally like rising to the surface, and you have to deal with it. Tike you're you, there's that sense of like body to body, face to face And there's like a ton, I mean Athens has like one of the, I think it's like the fifth poorest, um, count there. One of the fifth poorest county in the nation is Athens, in Athens, Georgia.

[1:20:03]

Um, and so you're kind of like, there and there's a very little bridge between the community and the university. And now, except for the fact that, like, the buildings are on these graveyards.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, a literal bridge or a figurative bridge? ,

SABRINA ORAH MARK: A, uh, figurative bridge.

RACHEL ZUCKER: A bridge of dresses.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Exactly. Yeah. So, um, but the other, what I wanted to say also, though, about this, about the Passover Seder, in terms of just that the whole story, is that the one of the things that I was obsessed with as a child was that was that glass of wine you leave out for Elijah, and you fill the wine up all the way high up, and then you I remember looking and being like, he came and he took a sip. We didn't see him, but he came but you leave your door open. Like your door is supposed to be wide open throughout the entire seder, and there is that sense of You know, Any stranger is, this is a home to any stranger. Um, like you belong here too.

And, and there are all of these stories about like not knowing who Elijah is. And Elijah may be like, you know, it's always like, um, the poor broken man coming, but in fact, like he is also, um, going to save us all. And so you like open, you open up your door. And I mean, and those are the pieces of the story that like, I mean try to illuminate, um, which is not to say like, you you, and then you say this part of the story is a problem, and this part of the story is a problem and this part of the story is a problem, too, but I think that there's a lot and yes, like in terms of, it should be an exercise in empathy, like it should be like like, to taste to dip the potato into the salt water and taste the tears of your ancestors is to taste like everybody's tears, right? Not just like, you know, you you And and and you and you bring it into your own body and…

Because it is in your own body, like it is all the energy around us like, too bad like if you're gonna be you know filled with hate, you know, and that, you that's something you carry around in your own body, like you that is transformative right, you know and, and so in the way that like, you can become like what you most despise.

It's like J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which I've I dragged that book around with me for a very long time and then like went to reread it and it's so beautiful and, but like brutal, that like, I could read like a few pages and then a few pages and a few pages, but like that whole book is very much about like, you know, the barbarian that you believe to be like watching you, like about to like come and destroy your whole world is actually you, like you're the barbarian.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, I remember for years having a kind of, uh, love hate envy with Christianity and thinking, you know, what would it be like to have Jesus, to have this idea of kindness and, um, uh, goodness and forgiveness and, and like, of course, that's what God, you know, should be. Um, and feeling really utterly confused by these moments, um, in, in the, you know, the Old Testament, which is, it's even called the Old Testament, it's complicated, but, um, you know, where there's vengeance and you know, and a lot, an utter lack of empathy, um, both by the, the people and by the divine.

Um, but you know, I, I, I feel for the past few years so moved by that moment in the Seder story where Pharaoh hardens, um, uh, God hardens Pharaoh's heart against Moses. And I used to, like, really just hate that moment so much. Um, and lately I, I find that to be incredibly helpful. Like you're saying, you know, you're trying to illuminate some of these really clear, um, wonderful parts of the tradition of having your door open, of it being a mitzvah to, you know, have someone who's hungry come to the Seder, of, of being open, of, of, of, of living in mystery and contradiction and all these things, but also saying like, well, this part of the story is really hard.

[1:25:14]

I mean, that part of the story now, for me, has given me a feeling of responsibility to think about like, what is it that is hardening my heart against other people against, um, groups of people, against certain kinds of ideas, um, against living my life a different way? You know, is it fear? Um, is it money? Is it, um, you know, worry about hurting my father's feelings? Is it, you know, what is it that's, that's, that's hardening my heart?

Um, it's not, it's not someone else. Um, like, you know, because I don't, really believe in God in that way. Um, but the idea that, that, um, I guess, I guess what I'm saying in a very long winded way is I both long for a set, I long to have come from a set of stories in which there is a parable, it's a parable, and there's a good message at the end that is like, do unto others, you know, or or just like be kind and forgive, that I can give to my children, and that I can say, see we come from a people who know that the way to live your life is to like really reach out and to and to you know, help the poor and to be open and you know all these things.

So I I on the one hand I long for that, on the other hand I feel like okay, but you know what also human nature is that we keep fucking hurting each other over and over and over again. And there is something valuable in these stories that helps me talk to my kids and to myself about, why don't we make the right decisions? We know what they are. We know that it's, you know, that we should live lives of kindness and generosity and gratitude and empathy. And we often don't. So what is that?

And I, something, I don't know, lately I'm feeling grateful, um, but, but still sort of embarrassed, um, that I am finding guidance in, in these very old stories, um, which is part of why that line, “into a past I still swear I never had,” feels really meaningful to me today, because I did have this past, and I didn't have this past, um, in so many different ways and that feels so much like, um, what it just feels like to be in the world.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Right. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: This feels utterly related to our most recent contacts that we had. Your trash project.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Oh yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Can you talk about that?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yes. Okay. So I had this idea that I wanted to start collecting all of these poets' discarded lines. So I contacted, um, many poets who I deeply, deeply admire, whose work I am totally in awe of. And I was like, I've come for your trash. Um, and actually it was funny, the, um, Josh Bell wrote back to me. What took you so long? [Laughs]. I just thought it was really funny.

Um, It was a very weird, um, process. I thought it would be, I just, I think I thought it was going to be something very different than it ended up being. So I contacted all of these people, like some people said, um, uh, no. Some people said like, I'm keeping my trash, thank you very much [laughs]. But what the idea was basically like, I wanted to see like what a heap of discarded lines might turn into. And I guess like that's sort of connected to tsim tsum also, just like the, you know, like the shard, the shard, the shards of light, or glass, or light.

Um, and it was very embarrassing in certain ways, um, because I thought like, okay, here are these lines, um, and there, I think like, my feeling was that a lot of the poets seemed to be like, fine, here's like my ugliest thing. And then like we had had this, like while this was happening, in my own life, like all these really, I sort of had like the most difficult year I've ever had, where just there was like some like health issues and, um, uh, just all sort of, um, kind of, uh, difficult things, and it was almost, I remember you writing to me saying like, maybe you shouldn't invite things that nobody wants into your house [laughs].

[1:30:22]

And it really I really started thinking about that like, oh like um, and then I started thinking about that um, that beautiful, it's like one of my favorite things of all time,

which is Magritte's "The Healer." It's stunning… It's this sculpture of a man, of a man in this long overcoat, but his torso is a cage, and there are birds inside. Um, and then, and there's, and he's wearing a hat. He's sitting, you know, and, and like the idea of the healer as like having some, somehow like his heart carved out. Like, um, like you can't, I, I, anyway, so I started thinking about that and, um, and then I, and I had all these lines and I was looking at them and, um, and many of them were incredibly beautiful, um, but they were like these little strange little like dead lines, you know, like, um, like pieces of skin or something, and I put it, I put them all together, um, it felt kind of terrible to do. Um, they weren't my lines, and they continued not being my lines. And that was sort of like the ongoing struggle that I had had with *The Babies* where it's like, you know, into a past I still swear I never had, like you're, um, I'm pulling, you know, these, um, uh, imagined moments surrounding the Holocaust into these poems, which is by itself incredibly problematic, and then there's the idea of like commodifying disaster and like, you know, how do I own this thing?

And um, like I've been, I've been working, I have a student who's working on this beautiful memoir, and we've been going back and forth about Emmett Till and, um, this idea of, um, um, and the, the, the painting in the Whitney and the controversy around that and, um, you know, and the idea of, um, like owning or, or, or claiming trauma, you know, like, like claiming somebody's, um, broken thing, right?

So I'm like, oh, okay, here, I just contacted all of these poets. I love all of them. I've just embarrassed myself. Now I'm going to, now I'm, I'm not even going to do a good job with these lines. Like I am trying to like repair something that's not even mine to repair. What does repair even mean? Um, but I also like needed to be in that process. Like it was really uncomfortable, but I think um, I think that, yes, like the world is very broken and things are really especially terrible right now. I have to believe in healing, like I have to, you know, and, and I don't know what that looks like or doesn't look like, but I think that we need to just like collect all the trash, you know?

And I, like, even, um, um, and find like some use for it. I mean, I, I do, like, I think about like Walter Benyamin's the Collector, a lot, you know, and the poet as a collector, and the poet as like a healer, and I actually, I don't teach at, um, a

university anymore. So I had, um, renovated my garage, or half of my garage, and it's now like a poetry workshop.

But it's also, I remember, like, when I started poetry workshop, there was very much the idea of like, don't talk about your mother and don't talk about your pain and don't talk and don't cry, what you're gonna cry now? Okay, so now everybody's gonna cry? like there was that very much that, and and I was like all for it.

[1:35:00]

Like I was like, don't talk about yourself, ever. Just like, it should only be what's in, what's the poem, what, what is on the page. I don't want to know background, you're not allowed to talk, like there's no, nothing. And now, I've created a space where all we do is talk about where these poems and stories are coming from. Like, how did we get here? And like, and so a part of my house is like, just totally devoted to like, crying [laughs]. It's the crying room actually, I, in, in a lot of churches, they have crying rooms. Um, which, but it's for children. Um, so anyway, I, I, I, um, going back to the project, um, so I, I did collect, I, so I collected all of these lines and, um, and it was, um, terrible [laughs].

And I don't think, you know, and, and… I don't think like there was any, I don't know what exactly came out of it. I want to revisit it. I need to like, open it back up, especially now that like, um, that the health crisis in my own life is over and, um, hopefully over, um, and, and see, see where we are. But you know, and and I think was that… and that was also this summer. So that was before the election.

RACHEL ZUCKER: First of all, I'm sorry if my response initially seemed like unsolicited advice.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I love unsolicited advice.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Just I, I don't really remember sending you that email, but I know I did. Um, uh, and I do think it is good advice. Like, be careful about, like, what you ask for, um, and, like, especially if you're asking for something like that. But I also feel like it's an amazing project, and, um, you know, you, you ended up

giving a lecture about this project, which I listened to and loved. And hopefully maybe you'll give us permission to put it on the website or give it to patrons or whatever.

Um, but, uh, it was, it also was an experience where, um, I felt really, well, first of all, I gave you another little bit of, I, I feel like I take on this role of like old lady with you, where I'm just like, [speaks in false granny voice] Sabrina, um, you know, don't apologize in your lecture.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Oh I apologize. What did I apologize for?

RACHEL ZUCKER: You apologized in the lecture for something. It was in the beginning, maybe, or, or in the Q&A.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Oh, it was for the entire lecture.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, yeah you say -

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I apologize for the entire lecture [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, and I wrote you an email like chastising you for apologizing. Which is like so annoying, but whatever. I stand by it and I apologize [laughs]. Um, but, uh, you know, maybe about halfway into the lecture all of a sudden it becomes about the Holocaust. And the story that someone had told you about a child um, uh, taking something right?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: A shoe.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, a shoe from from a Holocaust museum, um, and not knowing even whether that story is true and whether that happened and, and the relation, you know, this, this very important, um, kind of question about, um, commodifying tragedy and, um, and trauma and, um, you know, either one's own or, more problematically or more, you know, with a different set of ethical, um, ramifications someone else's, um, and the pressure to perform, um, one's kind of

worst either personal or historical trauma, but also the pressure to shut the fuck up about it.

Um, and how all of those things kind of come into play around what started as it, as it seemed like a kind of uh, not empty, but less weighted, procedural, like, oh, you know what, I, I'll write a poem or I'll engage in a poetic project like this. And then all of a sudden, I felt in listening to that lecture, oh my God, I'm right back. I did not think of it, uh, in that context at all. But once you went there, I was like, oh yes, this is, this is really profound. Um, and, and also like always with me as this kind of subtext to how I'm engaging in my present and in my like American, uh, narrative.

[1:40:00]

Um, so I was, I was, I feel like I keep having that experience with you, um, where we're, I'm, I feel connected to you on one level, and then I realized like, there's this almost mystical, other set of connections that I didn't even really, um, realize or something like that.

Um, okay. So I love thinking about the crying room. Um, is your work changing because of this new, um, process of talking really explicitly and at length about where the poems come from and what are the stories behind them and who you are and who the, your students are and this very like non-academic way of engaging in teaching and writing and living?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I'm not sure yet. I think that, um, I have been writing a lot of these, um, I guess they're stories. Um, but they have these like little poems embedded inside them. So they're not prose poems. They're not really like your, your classic short story, um, because they're not really plot-driven, they’re image driven. Um, but what has happened and well, there's the being a mother, um-

RACHEL ZUCKER: That whole thing [laughs].

SABRINA ORAH MARK: That whole thing, where I'm like, all right, um, I can't be as private as I thought I could be, right? Like where it's just like your body is

wide, like everything's wide open, like everything's showing my kid is like, you know, um, I mean, I think I wrote this to you in an email, but, like, at eight, it was, it wasn't eight, it was, like, six in the morning, my son woke up and said, um, "I had, I had this dream that you were, you were ripping a dragonfly to shreds. Why did you do that?" You know, and so there's that sense of like, from, from starting at six in the morning, like your entire guts are hanging out, you know, like, there's like nothing you can do about it anymore. And I think like, I, my relationship to the poem had been for a long time, like, here is a sort of like perfect, enchanted prayer or chance or spell like it's everything's I mean, like, you know, confined to this box, right? Like we're, we're good. Everything's neat and tidy. And like, we're in this space.

And then I, I had babies and, um, well, one thing happened just in terms of time was that I used to like write these poems and it would be like, you know, a 15 hour thing. Like I would write one poem like in 15 straight hours. And then you don't have 15 straight hours, you have like 30 minutes, two hours. So I started just like adding a little piece, adding a little piece, adding a little piece, but also they were like, there was the sense just formally that they were like showing their insides more, you know, like, um, and, and I guess, and then while this was happening, when Noah was six months, I started these workshops and um, they were very much supposed to be about, like, writing towards healing, which, um, I believe in and I don't believe in, in certain ways. Like, I think it's more like writing towards, like, cracking yourself wide open, and then you have to, like, show all your wounds, and then that's really painful and horrible, and then maybe in your next life, like, you could come back somehow more okay. But, uh, but so I, and, and I started saying, I think something happened with the stories where I could bring in the Im and for, and in *Tsim Tsum* there is no I, um, and I couldn't deal with the I, and I was sick of the I and I was like, get the I away from me right away. Like, just stop talking, please stop talking.

[1:45:00]

And, and then. I think I was able to sort of like carry the I back in um but, but I needed like the longer prose lines, and I needed more time and space or something. And like the poem the prose poems weren't giving that to me. And since my son

was born, since Noah was born, I've probably really only written a few poems, like things that could pass off as a poem, and like the rest are stories. And my new collection, um, are really, they're stories, I mean, it's more fiction than poetry, I think.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And yet the I is there?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: The I is there and the fiction allowed me to say things, um, that I never thought I could say.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, that is utterly fascinating.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Like, I have in one moment, the worst thing that anybody has ever said to me in my entire life, um, that I, I put into a story, like the exact quote, and by doing that, I just, it was like, okay again. I mean, it wasn't this like constant wound. And I don't think, and, and, um, and what I'm trying to do is sort of like, get back to poetry now through this through the stories. I still, yeah…

RACHEL ZUCKER: Because you feel like you should? Or because you feel like there's something that poetry does for you that is important that if you come back to it, you'll get?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yes. Yes. I mean like I think that… I think that with the stories I'm able to like embed these these these, um, strange little transformative moments, like these little, almost like miracles in miniature where like suddenly something will happen that needed this whole narrative that will bring some clarity to this emotional state, whereas with the poem, I think like it is like this actual spell that, that is in itself like the mirror.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm hmm. I want to talk, let me ask you like five questions and you choose which one you want to talk about. I want to talk about miracles and your relation to miracles. Um, I want to talk about like how it's like, is your husband here for the Seder? And how does that discussion that you're having with your kids get played out with him?

I want to ask, um, what it's like to be living still in Athens, Georgia and to be teaching these workshops that are really really different from you know what you got, and and whether that whether it's creating a sustainable and sustaining work life family art… I cannot even use the word balance because that's such a thing doesn't exist. But for right now is, that how's that going for you? Is that a, is that a tenable existence? Um, I want to ask, um, you know, about what you maybe hope is gonna come next. Oh, I wanted to come back to, you said you can say Holocaust, but you can't say Jewish mysticism, which is utterly fascinating to me. So just like going back to to that moment, and then of course I want you to read like a million different things. Okay, what do you want to talk about?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Okay Oh my goodness. Let's see, um… So…

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. I'm breaking all the rules of how you're supposed to do this. I know that. So, sorry.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Um, well, it's interesting. Okay, my husband converted to Judaism actually before I had met him. And he probably, I remember one time having this conversation with him when we first met, and I said to him something like, well I believe in everything like, wouldn't… what is there to lose in not just believing in everything? And we like, like our hearts, like we met, like our hearts met in that space.

[1:49:52]

But I also I think now feel in a lot of ways that I don't believe in that as much anymore. You know like that that idea of like believing in everything, like that idea of like, anything can happen at any point, and I and I do really think that that came out of being a mother, where I was like if anything, I need to believe none, like very few things are about to happen, right? You know that that's sort of like, and it's, and it is, and I'm trying to think of like how that is exactly… you know, it's connected to miracles in the way that like we, um, you know, there's like sort of the miracle as nourishment, and then there's the miracle as a kind of, um, catastrophe, you know, like as a kind of like, I don't, I think I'm a, I, I, I, I want there, I need a

certain, I need to believe that, um, I can somehow, um, like this building won't fall down.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Or like the killing of the first born or the killing of the first born.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Or the killing of the first born. Or, and then, you know, and it's very much connected to metaphor, you know, like where you um, like you're pulling the, like, you're pulling the, the essence of one thing out of the thing itself and storing it in another, like that in itself, like, is, you know, like, I mean, poets work in that space all the time of like, of, of language needing to be alive and needing to, um, be transformative, you know, um, I don't know if transformative is exactly the right word, but like, needing to be, um, malleable at least. Let's see. So, now I'm I scattered.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Why did you, what what led your husband to convert?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: He just always felt Jewish, and when I met him, and I didn't know, I mean he's like a very large Black man with long dreadlocks and when I first met him, I'm like oh, he's Jewish. Like I recognized him as being Jewish, like just his whole essence. Um, yeah, it's sort of, um, he has a very, very, very powerful presence. I mean, people are always like, um, people are always, um, I mean, he's, he's a fiction writer and he's a well known fiction writer. Um, but like when we're in the airport, people always think that he's a famous jazz musician. So, Um, they go up to him, knowing, not being able to remember the famous jazz musician's name.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wait, is there a particular jazz musician that he looks like?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: We can’t figure it out.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Or is it just like, oh, he looks like a Black man who's confident in the way that I can only imagine…?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: I think that's what it is. I think it's like you look, like, there's a lot of that that goes on, like, where, you know, um, you look like a very, right, you, yes, you have this, um, kind of, um, insane presence and, um, you must be famous and so that would mean that you're probably a famous musician.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Interesting.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: So, yeah, like, I think it happened like three times just in the airport the other day. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow. So, you know, I obviously made this assumption that your husband wasn't Jewish.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Right.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And, um, that you were engaged in a conversation with him, uh, with your family, with your kids. I mean, I'm, you're, I'm sure you still are engaged in a conversation with him. It's just slightly different than the conversation I imagined. Um, wow. And how does, how does, what is it like being an interracial family, but both, all of you Jewish, living in the South? And then coming up here with your family?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Honestly, that's kind of what I've, I mean, in terms of thinking about how to even start understanding my life, um, is probably something that's going to take me a very long time. Like, I don't, I don't really, it's interesting that you ask that, because nobody asks that.

[1:55:00]

Like, no, I mean, my friends, I think there's always this sort of like unspoken thing, like, wow, like, you know, you're, you're, it's a weird, like, from where you've come from, you've gone very far away, and yet, like, I always feel like I'm exactly where I always was.

Um, so, I mean, to me, like, in a lot of ways, like, my husband's, like, the closest thing to home I've ever, ever known. And so, in a way, we can be anywhere. Um, it's very, um, it takes a lot of work, like there's a sense of, I think if we lived here, in a lot of ways, there's like a lot of givens like, you know there's like a synagogue on every corner or like, you know, there isn't um, we would be less visible in a lot of ways. Like I think we're very visible. Um, more visible than I think I even realize. And a lot of, and sometimes that's really good um, and sometimes it's terrifying.

Um, and I will say like, um, you know, I was brought up very privileged, like, I'm a White woman. I grew up in New York, like, you know middle class family, like they're you know, I got to go to good schools and um, and um, there are these places where I always, like, I wasn't ever scared of the police, for example.

Whereas, whereas, the other night we were coming home from, there's Athens, which is this like oasis, but you go 30 minutes in any direction and it's it can get really scary, really scary. And, um, we were coming home from this restaurant and, um, my husband thought we were being pulled over, but it turned out that the car behind us was being pulled over. But the reason they were being pulled over was because their lights weren't on, but we didn't see that car because their lights weren't on. So my husband pulled over and I was like, we're going to die. You know, and my boys were in the back and he's like, um, I'm just drive, I'm just gonna drive off. And I was like, don't, nobody… in my, in my mind, I thought, I mean, I very much thought like, we're just going to be here on the, on the side of the road forever. Like just freeze. Don't, you know, and I was really, really, really terrified.

Whereas like, if I was in the car with my brother, like, you know, if I was in the car with my father, like I, it wouldn't have been at all the same experience. So, um, and I'm scared, you know, and I'm scared for my boys. Like there is that sense of like, um, past a certain age, you know, they are not going to be read as as cute as they're being read now, you know, and I don't know what to do with that. Like I don't know what, I don't know, I don't know if I'm equipped, like I don't know how to raise them in this world. Like I don't know, I think it's like every day like I just have to keep teaching myself .But you know for me like, that that that big, I always

felt safe, and I just I, in a lot of ways, and and that is very much… it is very much…

Even like for even little things like I've had had these conversations with my husband about just like returning things at stores. Like I never worried that like I just return a thing at a store, right? My husband never returns a thing at a store, because it's just too complicated, you know, like there's that sense of like, this is going to just be more trouble than it's worth. Whereas like, I never thought about that, you know, I never, um, and so now like, I'm in a car with my husband and my boys and I'm like, nobody return anything at a store, don't drive away, we're all gonna stand very still, you know, and I don't know, you know, I don't know if moving would be any safer, somewhere else would be safer… I think that's a myth in certain ways. I think like I think this, I think that there might be the illusion of more safety here.

[2:00:00]

But I don't, I don't entirely know.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So forgive me if this is an offensive assumption. Um, I feel like, um, I don't have these experiences that you're talking about. My husband is White and my kids are White and, um, I am aware more and more of how much I take for granted the the feeling of safety that comes with Whiteness, um and the feeling of safety and and and like invisibility or or safe visibility, of being Jewish in Manhattan, and being Jewish in this neighborhood in particular, um, you know, it's a cliche almost. It's like not, it's not remarkable, um, in any way.

At the same time, I feel like one of the things that, that I'm really aware of is the way in which there are two fundamental, or there's, there's all of these contradictions that I feel. So that, that enormous safety that I take for granted, but I'm becoming more and more aware of, um, and the ways in which I, I haven't felt safe, and don't feel safe, as a woman, or also thinking back to my yeshiva education. I mean, I didn't feel safe. I didn't feel safe there. I didn't feel safe within that community because I never felt a part of that community. I felt ostracized by people who on the surface were, you know, exactly like me in this one way of

being Jewish, but also, I mean, at an age that was much too young for this, I was told, you know, they tried to kill all the Jews and shown, you know, pictures of the concentration camps and, you know, was most of my teachers, not most of them, but many of them were Holocaust survivors, um, who had been hired because maybe they spoke Hebrew or because they were Holocaust survivors, and should not have been around children.

Um, and, uh, you know, there, and, and, you know, I knew the story of my grandparents, um, you know, fleeing from Europe, and, um, it was very, very close, and I, even if it wasn't spoken about, um, you know explicitly, I was definitely raised in a culture of fear that they were coming to get us, and and that um uh, you know, America is like maybe the easiest best place to live, but there's nowhere safe, and there's no one, you're not, you know you and so it, you know, that's the collision of those two things, or the contradiction of both of those things being true, of enormous privilege, enormous safety, and a really, really deep, you know, uh, I mean, it's funny, I'm even, I feel shaky even talking about it, um, uh, feeling of danger and feeling of fear and scarcity and refugee and uh, you know uh, but and then on top of that I'm living in a moment right now where I feel like it's really important to, you we know, part of the mark of privilege is that you don't see it. And so to, to, to stay too close to part of the, the truth, which is, uh, you know, the feeling of fear, is to is to reenact your own privilege also as a White person.

So it's, it's just interesting to hear you talk about, um, coming into contact with the ways in which you've been, you've, you really feel safe. But, so the question that I was worried would be offensive to you was, is it also the case that you have many ways in which you don't feel safe?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Um, well, I mean, there's that, um, it's that's really fascinating, because there is the idea on one hand that um, like the knock on the door, the constant like knock on the door… that I have like, you know, and who are they coming for? Like, and, and, um, that is like in my body. It's in my, it's in my genes, like, it's just, it runs through my blood. Um, so there's that and, and there's that kind of like my whole family, or especially me, like I pick up the phone and it's like, what's the matter? Every time the phone rings, I'm like, ah, shit [laughs].

Like I don't, you know, or like the phone rings, I just want to like throw it into the sea and like start running.

[2:05:00]

So there's that, that I have, that's just like my weather, you know? And then there was sort of like the safety, the, the sort of, but there was also the sense that that was like in my body and that was in the past.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mmm hmm.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: And, and, and that's not true. In certain, in certain ways, it's true. And in other ways, it's very much not true. And then there's now the other present, real, face to face encounters and the, and that anxiety. So it's sort of this like doubling up of fear, I guess. But then, of course, you have to, like, constantly, like, pick away at it and pull it apart and, like, talk, I think. And, and for me, it's like, the talking and the writing, the talking and the writing, because otherwise it just becomes, it just embeds, like, it, it just, um, it's paralyzing. And, you know, I can't, I don't, and that's, I don't have that, um, that's a luxury, I think, you know, to go to be, you know, to go still and cold and like not feel it all the time.

RACHEL ZUCKER: When I went to, when I went to Iowa, um, My great aunt who was still alive at that point, my grandmother's younger sister who I was very close to um, she uh, she said, you know, “Good luck living in Central America” [laughs]. It was so beyond right the conception of anyone in my family that I would move to the midwest for any period of time.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: [Laughs] So you can imagine Georgia!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Well, I can't I almost can't, um, and, uh, and I never felt so visibly Jewish as I did when I was living in Iowa. Um, it wasn't, we didn't come back to New York because I was like, I have to always live in New York. We came back to New York because, um, my husband who wasn't, my husband then

got into Columbia and wanted to go to Columbia and he wasn't from New York and he hadn't lived in New York and he was excited about it.

I was not. I thought, oh, I'm going to, like, go to Iowa City and then who knows? Maybe I'll go to California, right, you know, or I don't know. I think I was still too afraid of the south to imagine that, but like maybe? Maybe? Maybe I'll go to the south, who knows? Um, but then I came back here and I've basically lived here my whole life. Um, not exactly on purpose.

Um, but you know, I, I, it's so, um, I feel like both of us are engaged in really different ways in trying to make the self visible and to make the person visible present visible and to make the interactions of the mind and, and even like miracles and the divine visible, um, and that the experience of like, uh, for me of living in New York and for you of living in Georgia are so, um, you know, fascinating and, you know, in, in, in the ways in which they both push us and hamper us from doing that work of making, of making things visible, and the way in which we're like reaching back, or it's not even reaching back, but like the ways in which our past um is available to us in different, in different ways, um in that, in those moments, um, you know, like what it is, um, you know, trying to imagine, um, the ways in which motherhood is the same and different for you, um, of raising your sons and whether, I was thinking about, um, have you read *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* by Jane Lazar?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yes.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. So I was thinking about her talking about the experience for her of her sons saying to her, um, we consider ourselves Black, not, you know, interracial, like we, this is, this is our identity, but, but, and that, and how, and how, and that connection, um, that she has with them that includes, um, what could feel like a disconnection.

Um, and so I was thinking about that and I was, and I was also thinking about, um, the ways in which your connections and I assume normal disconnections, um, from your husband are played out, um, over sharing, what seems like sharing like a real deep belief system, not just Judaism, but like about life.

[2:10:04]

Um, but also people, you know, you look different, you're, you're, you're clearly different races and, and how people respond to that and how that, and then my experience of my husband, um, who, when we were in Iowa, everyone kept saying, like, you, are you siblings? [Laughs]. I was like, no. Um, those kinds of assumptions, uh, you know, I, I don't know, it's, I'm, I'm just fascinated by, and then every once in a while, I just look at you and I think about wanting to visit your crying room [laughs].

SABRINA ORAH MARK: You should come to the crying room. I, I, yeah, yeah. I feel like everyone needs to be in the crying room. It's funny because I, um, my parents both have, or especially my mother has this tendency of saying to me, like, just get over it. You know, just, it's just like, move on. There's a lot of just like, move on. And, and, and I thought, oh wow, like, not only have I not moved on from anything ever in my entire life, but I've renovated my garage to house all, everyone, everyone's stories about like, never moving on.

You know, like there's that sense of just like, we're going to just keep talking and talking and like, you know, revisiting the scene of the crime. It always reminds me of like, um, Bruno Schultz, you know, where he talks about like the single knot and artists and writers like spend their like whole lives just like working at this single knot. Um, and it just gets tighter and tighter and tighter and that's the crying room, that’s the workshop. the workshop.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But there, but it, ok, but I actually think it's both. It is that the the single knot that gets tighter and tighter, but in some ways don't don't you kind of feel like it's like this miracle reincarnation of the Anne Frank room, right like, where you know, you would never hide Anne Frank in your garage. She has to be in the attic. You have to be quiet. There's no crying. That's the whole thing with the with, you know, you know those horrible stories of you know, suffocating the baby because the baby is crying, and you you know, the Nazis are coming like there's no you cannot cry in the Anne Frank room, right? Um, and and it is a place where you are totally not safe, but you know, everything is about trying to stay safe, and to be quiet and to be inconspicuous, and to not, you know, do any of those things.

And when, when we moved in here, there was a hidden closet, um, and inside the foyer. And I found out later, um, that the person who used to live on that side was the mother of a man who bought the apartment for her, who had been in the Kindertransport. And she, he had been separated from his mother. And he, was reunited with her years later in New York, and he bought her this apartment, and he lives, he's still alive, he lives across the street, and in the morning they would look at each other across, from his apartment to her apartment, her kitchen and his kitchen, you could see each other.

And we took out the closet within the closet because I found it super creepy, but I also think that I do always feel like where is the secret closet within like… where would I hide? Right, but when I think about the crying room, I feel so hopeful, right, because it feels like the opposite of like, oh my god, where can I hide? Where can I hide? It's like where can I cry?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yes, and that's what, that's my, like, that's my goal.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Like as a teacher, and for my own writing. Yeah, to just, um, you know, give, give that space. Cause we don't really get it very much. Like as we walk through the day, like how much space do you get to just like, I mean, like this, like have a conversation. I mean, and frankly, like, this, I drive around Athens, Georgia, like listening to your podcast [laughs], like what, if I'm not in my garage, I'm like in my car listening, and it just opens up these worlds, you know, that like are so necessary, because it's like, what's the Herzog thing like, otherwise, like, um, you know, we need to do this, otherwise we're just like the cows in the field, you know.

[2:15:06]

I mean and who knows what, the cows probably have a much and even more interesting story going on, but still. Let's pretend we don't know that…

RACHEL ZUCKER: I should totally rename this podcast The Crying Room.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: The Crying Room.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It we be so… ‘cuz it…

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Everything. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thank you for saying that because I think it is like my space where I'm like, come in this place, this virtual place with me and let's not get over it, you know, sorry to say something mean about your mother, but like no, let's not let's not get over it, right?

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Yeah, like let’s not mop it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Or let's, or let's, you know I I love what you said before about like, both believing and not believing in healing, and feeling like that is what um, art and teaching is about, but it's not healing like, you know, uh, walk it off, cry baby. Um, it's, it's cracking yourself open as a way of, of, you know, and crying and talking and, and not, you know, moving away from it in order to get to some kind of integration or, or, um, community and communication and, and that we know is necessary for, for health.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Right. And I think, and for, and for art, and for, like, really finding, like, the heart of the matter inside. our writing, like what are we even talking about? You know, so yes.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, let's stop.

SABRINA ORAH MARK: Okay.

[Music]

This has been Episode 33 of Commonplace, Conversations with Poets and Other People. I'm Rachel Zucker. Music by Moses Zucker Goren. Design work by Eitan Darwish. Commonplace producers are Nicholas Fuenzalida, Christine Larusso, and

Zach Tackett. Thank you to Duke University Press and to Saturnalia Press, and to all the other publishers who make our wonderful raffles.

Thank you to our patrons and to all our listeners. Thank you for listening.