HMS Debra Messing

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

holocaust, people, humanity, jewish, moment, felt, story, anti semitism, cincinnati, conversation, child, inspire, center, jews, issues, challenging, compelled, talk, wanted, advocacy

**SPEAKERS**

Jackie Congedo, Bella Ouziel, Al Miller, Lisa MacVittie, Debra Messing, Elisha Wiesel

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:04

Behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders. One by one these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:21

Mine was 40018. My sister was 40017

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this, hear my story, so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations.

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:41

I will never meet someone else like my father. But there are many of us who if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you, they will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day. I'm Jackie Congedo. And in this episode, we are here in beautiful Union Terminal inside the rotunda where in a few minutes, I'm going to be joined in conversation with Emmy award winning producer and actress Debra Messing, of course, also a vocal human rights advocate and social justice warrior. This is part of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center's biggest event of the year, our upstander awards. I'm going to sit down with Debra to talk about her life and for work, her passion for these human rights causes and how she's leading the fight against anti semitism today. What a pleasure to have you here in Cincinnati. Welcome.

**Debra Messing** 01:36

I am thrilled to be back

**Jackie Congedo** 01:38

with the we added it looks even more like a real party out there than it did last year with the bracelets and the headphones from up here, you all are really quite a sight. Welcome, we are going to have a great conversation this evening. It's really a privilege to be in conversation with the one and only Grace Adler and of course about your own upstanders story. But before we get to that, I want to talk about the beginning. You grew up in a very Jewish home. But out in the world in Rhode Island where you were growing up, you were a minority you were one of only a few Jewish kids in your... in your kindergarten, I believe when you when you first arrived there, or even before that

**Debra Messing** 02:20

the whole town the whole town

**Jackie Congedo** 02:23

you spoken especially recently about how challenging that had been at times. Can you talk a little bit about how those early experiences shaped you and how you've been reflecting on those in this moment?

**Debra Messing** 02:39

It's interesting, I've haven't reflected on the antisemitism that I experienced as a young child until October 7. As you said, I was one of three Jews in my entire school system. And in second grade, a little boy said, "get to the back of the line, kike." And I didn't know what that meant. And then we had a swastika painted on our car. And that was just the beginning of a continual exposure experience. I think what I felt was a clear, I, I knew that people hated us. I didn't know why I knew it was because we were Jewish. But I knew that people hated us. And my response as a child was to be silent. And to not discuss the fact that I was a Jew, because it felt dangerous. And so I tried to disappear. And the only place that I felt safe enough to stand tall and to use my voice was on the stage. Because it wasn't me. It was someone else. And that person could be brave. And that person is telling a different story. And that's how I found my home acting.

**Jackie Congedo** 04:22

Wow. Wow, I didn't I did not know that. Now, early on, as you said, this was something you wanted to pursue this career in acting. But of course, you had two very sensible Jewish parents, many of whom are similar folks are in the audience tonight who said no, no, no, you're gonna go get a liberal arts education. And so you did that at Brandeis and then even still, you couldn't sort of shake the acting bug you really wanted to get back to that. Tell tell us a little bit more about sort of what inspired you beyond that feeling of being able to allow a different character to stand up and be brave was there were there other things that inspired you to pursue a career in acting?

**Debra Messing** 05:05

I think for every one of us, when we are a child, the thing that excites us the most is storytelling. We put our children to bed with a story. And downstairs, we see the potency of storytelling, it allows us to touch the humanity of someone who has lived a completely different experience. And I think that I have always been curious about all the sides and shapes of our humanity, and wanted to understand and feel as much as I could.

**Jackie Congedo** 05:51

Wow. And as you were pursuing this career, there was, of course, one tiny little roll that some people know you as in Will & Grace. And, you know, from, from what I've read, the opportunity came along, actually, as you were planning to take maybe a little break, take some time off, but you decided to audition anyway, what What compelled you to, to take sort of step up and take that opportunity? In that moment?

**Debra Messing** 06:18

It was the script.

**Jackie Congedo** 06:20

Yeah,

**Debra Messing** 06:20

I had just finished doing a drama, which is 15 hours of work a day, every day. And I was exhausted. And my agents called and said, we have a script that we think is pretty special. And I said, I'm going to sleep. I will talk to you in three months. And they said, no, no, you don't understand this script is special. And they said, We'll messenger it to you stay in bed. And you could read it in bed. And I read it. And I immediately recognized how provocative and groundbreaking and funny this world was, these characters were. And I... it just ignited energy in me to say, Okay, I've got to put my shoes on.

**Jackie Congedo** 07:21

And you did, and from, from what I understand you were very instrumental in sort of shaping the character of grace, and sort of her Jewishness sort of being out front in that character. Tell me more about why that was important to you.

**Debra Messing** 07:40

Well, it was clear that this show had the intention of of being provocative and pushing the boundaries and challenging its audiences to have a wider understanding and acceptance of all the beautiful people in our society. And I thought, here's an opportunity for us to also do that with Jews. So pretty, pretty soon I spoke with the showrunners. And I said, I want her to be obviously Jewish. I want to reference Camp Ramah. I want to reference my bat mitzvah. I want to I wanted to do a Passover one where we're all under the table, getting afikoman, that didn't happen, but that's my only regret.

**Jackie Congedo** 08:41

It's never too late.

**Debra Messing** 08:42

It's never too late. Yeah, and, and I was very proud. I was very proud to be able to be be honest show where I was able to be a loud and proud Jewish woman. And over the years, I have encountered young women who who watched and said, I saw your crazy curly hair. And you made being Jewish, okay for me. And I'm incredibly grateful to the writers for doing that.

**Jackie Congedo** 09:20

Wow. And you being so ahead of your time, I think about that decision in this moment. But you know, this was years ago that you were saying 25 years ago that you were saying this is really important, so incredible, of course, you know, in terms of Will & Grace as a cultural sort of phenomenon that really paved the way for the normalization and mainstream acceptance of LGBTQ plus lifestyles. Did you know that that was happening at the time? I mean, people look back now and say that was a pivoting like a pivotal moment. It was a pivotal cultural shift.

**Debra Messing** 09:55

We had no idea. We...we got together. And we recognized that this was, had never been done before. But we also recognized that Ellen DeGeneres had just come out as being a lesbian on her wildly successful television show. And they cancelled it. And there was a horrible push back against her. And so we got together that first reading, and we said, we're going to last three episodes, then they're going to cancel us when they're people...America is not going to be open to us. But at least we'll try. And luckily, this was years ago, they gave us enough time to find an audience. And by the second season, that's when we realized that it was having potent social and political impact.

**Jackie Congedo** 10:57

Wow. Incredible to think back on that now, and just what a what a moment that was for our culture and for our communities. So I want to talk a little bit more about your upstanding work your your sort of role as an upstander. You've been an advocate for so many causes, for, of course, the Human Rights Campaign, and the LGBTQ sort of community and issues. But also the global fight against HIV and AIDS, as global ambassador for PSI, visiting prevention programs in several African countries even testifying before Congress to help secure 100 million dollars in aid for that work. And now you've really become an upstander, I would say actually continued to be but sort of moved into the front of your advocacy against anti semitism. Can you talk a little bit about your work on this issue today, and sort of what compelled you to center that in your advocacy?

**Debra Messing** 11:58

Charlottesville was the pivotal moment for me, when I saw people with Tiki torches, walking and saying, Jews will not replace us. It was so chilling, and so terrifying. That I, I felt like, Okay, I have to get involved now. I think growing up every day, my parents spoke to me about the Holocaust, their conversations where you have to have more than three children so that we could replenish the people lost in the Holocaust. But I think what happened was, because the Holocaust was so unimaginable that it I think my generation felt like it was almost a promise that would never happen again, that we would be educated about it. But it wouldn't happen. And I think October 7, was when I was ignited into action.

**Jackie Congedo** 13:14

So you've you've really used your platform, to raise awareness about Holocaust education to combat not just anti semitism, but really the rampant hate that is unchecked in online spaces. And you've been doing more and more with organizations like ours Holocaust museums and organizations. And now you're producing a documentary on anti semitism sort of what we've seen in particular in the United States since October 7. Why is Holocaust history in your mind so important right now?

**Debra Messing** 13:49

Education is everything. Facts matter. And I think our educational system has failed us. I believe the number is 65% of of schools in America actually teach the Holocaust at all. And that's unacceptable. When I heard that, kids today, when you say the word Auschwitz, most of them don't know what that word is. It just became so clear to me that Holocaust education is everything. And we need places like this in every single town.

**Jackie Congedo** 14:52

You can clap for that.

**Debra Messing** 14:59

We do because for some reason, the Jews as a people are segregated from every other kind of racism and hatred in, in all of humanity. And it's always been that way. And it may not, it may not fix the problem. But it will educate people so that they're not ignorant. And as long as people have the facts, and today that is a very, very challenging thing to accomplish, because of all the propaganda and all of the lies and all the denialism. I feel like that is our most urgent call to action is to educate about the Holocaust.

**Jackie Congedo** 16:11

So this last year has has not been particularly easy. You've taken some really serious chances in stepping out and speaking up. You've taken some serious criticism for being so outspoken on this issue. I'd like to ask you what you think people are missing. The folks who, you know, you've been involved for so long in so many of these progressive causes. The people you marched beside that you held hands with on so many other issues, from women's rights to LGBTQ issues, to global health advocacy, I mean, you couldn't come up with a resume that's more allyship driven on progressive issues. So where, where in your mind is the disconnect? And how can we come together in this terribly challenging moment?

**Debra Messing** 17:06

I think for Jewish social activist, there has been a very long mourning period, realizing that all the people we marched with in solidarity were silent. And it's incredibly painful. And incredibly confusing. I, honestly, I thought by now that more people in my industry would be coming forward and speaking about what's happening on the college campuses, which is, is just blatant hate. And there's silence. I know, in terms of my, my work community, that it's fear. And it's self interest. People are concerned that if they step out and say, anti semitism is wrong, that they will be stamped as a Zionist and pro-Israel. And that they will be ostracized from the community that they won't get movies, that their DVDs won't be bought, that it will affect their, their wallets. And I think it's disgusting and disgraceful.

**Jackie Congedo** 18:51

And I, I think that what you said about education in particular is so important, because I think that there are a lot of people who are hurting right now and who feel compelled to raise a voice for humanity. And if we could only be more educated about how to do that, in a way that sees the humanity in other people as well. I think we would be in a better place.

**Debra Messing** 19:22

I think you're right. I think that I think that sharing facts, being open to difficult conversations is really important at this time. I think that this is a moment in time when we have to have moral clarity. And unfortunately, a huge percentage of people don't have it. It's conditional. And so the way that I keep going and thinking about pushing ahead and helping things move is to is to celebrate the unity and the solidarity that is within our community to celebrate what is beautiful about our culture, our heritage, our history. While they're screaming, we're dancing and singing. And that says it all. And so I think they want us to disappear. And so we have to be louder and more present than we've ever been before. Because we're not going anywhere. Israel isn't going anywhere. We've been down this road before, every single time we have survived, and thrived. And this time, we're ready. This time, we know what's happening. And we're going to be fine. And we're going to come out of it more attached to our Judaism, and to the community than ever before. And that will be a gift.

**Jackie Congedo** 21:28

So, you know, tonight, we are grounded in that we're grounded in the fact that hope exists, even in the darkest of times, and that resilience, Jewish resilience, but in fact, human resilience, the history that we teach here, it really can inspire us to be the best of humanity. Can you leave us maybe with a moment doesn't have to be recent, but a moment for you that you hold on to that gives you hope, in in this challenging time.

**Debra Messing** 22:05

I went to Israel in December, and visited the kibbutzim and the hospitals and met with the hostage families and the survivors of Nova. And I will never forget walking into the room of this IDF soldier whose leg was gone. I walked in, and he jumped out of bed and said hi, come on in. And I was so taken aback. And so I we came in and we we heard his story, which was incredibly harrowing. And he said, Wait, you've got to see something. And he put on a video of the prosthetic leg that he was going to be fit with. And he said, and as soon as it's on, I'm going back in. He's going back into fight. And that, and he said it with a big smile on his face. And that just left me so inspired. And wanting to be as strong and resilient as this child 20 years old, was he was looking forward, he had lost a part of his body. And he wasn't thrown by it. He just said, this is what we do. We go back in. And so that sticks with me

**Jackie Congedo** 24:02

Well, I have to say I didn't know if we'd be able to get through like a conversation with all this red hair up here going on. I was like the audience might not be able to take that. But I'm glad that we did. And I'm so grateful to you for being here in Cincinnati with us tonight for shining your light so brightly in this moment. But always the fact that you've had this legacy of what it is to stand up for so long and that you're doing that now is so meaningful. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you for being here with us.

**Debra Messing** 24:31

Thank you for having me. It's been an honor being here tonight. Such a special night.

**Jackie Congedo** 24:39

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