

Ep #19: Azara: A Scottish Yeshiva



Full Episode Transcript

Presented by

Hebrew College

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Welcome to *Speaking Torah*. I'm your host, Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal, spiritual leader of Temple Beth Shalom in Melrose, Massachusetts and 2019 graduate of Hebrew College. In this podcast, Jewish leaders from around the world read essays, tell stories, and share projects from Hebrew College faculty, alumni, and students about how Torah can help us navigate the most pressing issues of our time. Together, we explore the ways Torah could help us approach the world with creativity, healing, and hope.

This week, we are pleased to welcome Hebrew College rabbinical student Jessica Spencer, who has helped found a yeshiva in her home town of Edinburgh, Scotland called Azara. Modeled after projects like Pardes and Hadar, Azara brings together Jews from across the spectrum to learn sacred texts and stories.

After a number of smaller programs, the group reached a critical mass in an unlikely area. Now, the community can learn locally what was once only accessible by flying hundreds of miles away.

Jessica is in her final year of rabbinical school at Hebrew College. She grew up in Scotland and studied mathematics at Oxford before working as a software engineer, and then in interfaith relations. She loves teaching and wrestling with difficult texts, including as a SVARA Hebrew College Talmud Pedagogy Fellow and was awarded with a 2023 Whizin Prize in Jewish Ethics. Read more about her on the Speaking Torah website at hebrewcollege.edu/podcast.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Would you tell me a little bit about the Jewish community you grew up in, in Scotland?

Jessica Spencer: Scotland altogether has about 5000 Jews, if I remember rightly. And I'm in particular from the community of Edinburgh, which is not even the biggest Jewish community in Scotland. That would be Glasgow. So, Edinburgh is a very small community.

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There are two synagogues. There's an Orthodox synagogue and there is a Liberal synagogue, which is roughly speaking the same as American Reform.

It's a very small community. My memory is that the census figures are that there are 850 Jews in Edinburgh altogether and the Jewish community really works on the fact that everybody turns up, even if something doesn't quite suit them or isn't quite what they would most like to see because they know that that's how they can support the community and that their presence and their involvement is really needed to keep the community working.

So, it was in some ways a very special place to grow up. And actually, although we had this very, very tiny Hebrew school and there were eight children in my year and the grade above me, altogether, we actually have this enormous rabbinic success rate.

There are three people roughly my age currently training to be rabbis, so that's either a fluke or an enormous success of the Edinburgh Hebrew school.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: What opportunities for Jewish education exist outside of rabbinical school in Europe?

Jessica Spencer: There are some in the UK and Europe, but not necessarily as many as you would expect. In particular, not necessarily as many as you would expect for Jewish text skills. As a country, we do have day schools. We do have a very high proportion of Jewish children in day schools.

But those day schools have less of a focus on literacy and Jewish literacy and Hebrew literacy than their American equivalents, to a fairly extreme extent, I would say. So, in general that's not going to be a place where you learn how to read Tanakh in the original. You learn how to decipher Mishnah in the original.

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You are not going to be getting that kind of ability to decode that you might get in an American day school education. And then, in terms of opportunities for adults, we don't have the – certainly in the kind of coeducational world, there isn't the kind of pro-going places like Pardes or Hadar or the Conservative Yeshiva.

These sorts of places don't really exist in the UK and Europe. As, Azara was really the first sustained yeshiva program to be happening in Europe, as far as we know, ever in 2000 years of European Jewish history.

And it's something that people have really been working towards and building and hoping for, for a very long time, because I think there is a real need in the community for people to learn more about our tradition and learn more from the inside and understand for themselves what the rabbis are saying, and to do that in a place that is open and accessible, to not have to go to a very good – Pardes yeshiva is in the UK, but that's really, to an extent, the extent of it.

There aren't even modern orthodox options, usually, for learning this sort of thing. I think there is a real hunger to learn in those ways that haven't been able to be filled, and certainly not in a way that allows people to gain sustained skills.

Plenty of synagogues might have adult education classes. But even a Talmud class, and you can go to Limmud and learn in a one-off session, which might be really fantastic. But you don't have an opportunity to really gain those skills that you get from doing this day after day in the way that you can in a month-long program.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: You just briefly mentioned Azara, the yeshiva you founded in Edinburgh. Where did the idea come from?

Jessica Spencer: Azara is the name for the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem. And when there was a temple, there were various bits – we were coming up to Yom Kippur and the Holy of Holies was a place where only the high priests can go. And then you have other areas where it's not just the high priests, but it is only priests.

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Then you have parts that are, well, everyone in a particular state of purity, and certainly only men, and then the Azara, everyone could be. That was the space for everyone. So, that was where the name came from.

It was that we wanted to create a space where everyone could feel welcome and everyone could be part of this Jewish experience.

The idea of a British yeshiva is something that's been in the air in the UK for probably decades and it's an idea that's been picked up by various people and put down and investigated. Because again, there is this need to give people a little bit more education than they've got and give people a chance to see these texts on the inside.

And in particular, there was a flurry of activity in about 2018 headed by, amongst other people, Rabbi Roni Tabick and around an organization called Open Talmud Project, which had been running long weekends or week-long Talmud learning in an accessible way in a space that was very open to different sorts of people in London for 12 years.

And there was an attempt made in 2018 to get something off the ground, which I wasn't particularly involved in. And then, I really came in with my cofounder, Rabbi Leah Jordan and Rabbi Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, we really came in after that and said, "Well, let's look at this. Is there a way to do this?"

We were having these conversations in early 2021, so it was very much still the height of the COVID pandemic and we had a lot of conversations on Zoom, not just with each other, but with people who had again been involved in the project of Jewish text education in the UK in various ways for a very long time.

Yes, so I certainly didn't invent the idea that we needed a British yeshiva. I feel very much that I'm sitting on the shoulders of giants. It so happens that I was starting to learn Talmud in London while these ideas were going around.

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So, I was going to evening classes and getting my first ever taste of Talmud in 2017, 2018. And I was meeting people and I was hearing these ideas and I thought, “That would be really wonderful.”

At the same time, I was in the process of planning to leave the UK to study yeshiva at Hadar for a year in New York because I wanted this kind of text education that wasn't available to me in Europe.

In this week's parsha, actually, as I'm recording this, we have this line of, “It is not across the sea that you say who's going to go and get it for us.” And I was preparing to go off across the sea to Hadar and to Hebrew College.

And I felt that very strongly the Torah isn't just across the sea. The Torah says no, it is in your mouth and it is in your heart and it's actually very, very close to you. And I really felt that. And I really wanted a way to help people access the Torah that is already close to them in the UK.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Where is Azara housed?

Jessica Spencer: So, this summer, we had a partnership with the University of Edinburgh.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Tell me more about how Azara works.

Jessica Spencer: So, we launched in 2021 and we've done a little bit of evening classes, weekend things, long-weekend things and some partnerships with, for example, JW3, which is the big community center in London, and with Limmud. We're very excited that we're going to be running the beit midrash at Limmud, UK, if anyone wants to see us there. But the real thing that we're trying to build to was some kind of more sustained program.

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Jessica Spencer: So, our summer program this summer was five weeks long and it was set up on a yeshiva schedule. We had students from all over the place, mostly from the UK, some from Europe, a few from further afield like America. And they were mostly staying in accommodation, it was

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mostly a residential program. We did also have some locals that were involved in various ways, which was really wonderful.

So, a typical day would have looked like we had shacharit, morning prayer, every morning at eight. Then we had breakfast. Then everybody learned Talmud for three hours.

So, the entire beit midrash, the entire study hall was just people learning in pairs out of a traditional Vilna Shas, a traditional text of the Talmud with no punctuation, one of those scary and intimidating volumes that you look at and go, “Oh, I don’t know what to do with this.” And then having class with various different teachers.

We had three levels for Talmud. We had a beginners, intermediate, and advanced, and those were very different levels. I was coteaching the beginner’s class and we had students – it was a range, as every class is. Every class is mixed level.

But some students came in not so sure about their vowels, or they had that aleph-bet but hadn’t spent time ever reading anything in the original. And meanwhile, in the advanced class, we had people who were rabbis, people who are rabbinical students, people who had spent several years in yeshiva, so there was a real breadth of knowledge across the yeshiva.

One thing I’m really pleased with is I think those people came together and really built a community together, and one that wasn’t super elitist and where the beginners didn’t feel able to show up or the beginners didn’t feel able to lead a service.

I think we managed to create a community where we could see everyone as a whole person with many, many skills that they were bringing to the space.

Then we would have lunch all together and we provided breakfast and lunch just because we thought it was so important for building community. We don’t have very much money but we thought that’s a place we wanted to make sure that our students could show up to learn and not have to be

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worrying about food and that everybody could have that time to get to know each other.

And then we had optional classes in the afternoon. So, for example, Rabbi Elisha Ancselovits, who teaches at Ma'ale Gilboa and at Pardes, we taught an afternoon class on the nature of Halakha. Yael Roberts, who's an educator based in London taught a Hasidut class. We had a whole variety of options.

We had Hebrew. We had Aramaic. The chance for people to get a crash course in things they haven't seen. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz taught a course on Ezekiel. So, really very different options for people to explore that were broader than the Talmud focus of the morning.

We also had a once-a-week [inaudible 0:12:40.3] so a class for everybody together, which was Talmud focused. So, one morning a week of that Talmud learning was everybody in the same room learning exactly the same material.

So, all through the summer, we were learning the same chapter all together. But different classes had slightly different focuses and they weren't learning exactly the same page at the same time. And then one morning a week, we were really all on the same page.

One thing that we are committed to is having there the opportunities for people to learn at whatever level they are currently at and whatever commitment level they're currently at.

So, if somebody wants to be learning once a week then that's wonderful. And if someone wants to dip their toe in and learn as a one-off, that's wonderful. And if someone wants to commit their whole summer, that's wonderful.

I think it's really about building up that infrastructure of learning and also creating a culture of Torah learning in a way that doesn't quite exist in British Jewery the same way that it might exist in America.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: You and your Azara partners come from very different traditions. How does that inform the yeshiva?

Jessica Spencer: We have real strengths coming from different parts of the community. So, Leah Jordan is a rabbi in the Liberal movement. I'm affiliated with the Masorti movement in the UK, so more conservative-ish or traditional egalitarian. And Taylor Guthartz is Orthodox.

So I think we really saw the breadth of the community. And actually, one thing that really emerged in those early conversations we were having is one of us would say, "I don't know about you but in the Masorti movement we've got a real problem of such and such..." Or, "In the Orthodox movement, I just don't think people are really connecting to prayer very much..." and the others would say, "No, that's us too." So that was very interesting to see, the ways in which different sections of the community were both very much grappling with different issues and also facing the same questions about education and the same questions about spiritual engagement and the same questions of what it means to be Jewish.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: What did the local Jewish community in Edinburgh think about Azara?

Jessica Spencer: We really wanted this to not just be an ivory tower, elitest exercise where we learned Talmud all day and we didn't give anything back to the local community and we didn't give anything back to the wider British community. We really wanted it to be as open-door as possible and give as many people as possible the chance to participate however they wanted.

So, with that in mind, we had various events targeted at opening doors more widely. And in particular, we had an evening lecture every week for the community and a community beit midrash, which our students ran every week in one evening.

And those were really wonderful events. It was really wonderful to watch our faculty, who some of them are very distinguished rabbis from America or from Israel, or scholars I should say, not only rabbis in the slightest. And some of them are my own teachers, and watch them interact with the local

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community and give them a taste of what we were learning or give them a taste of their own research.

And it was really wonderful to watch that and it was also wonderful then to watch how involved some of the locals got in being part of our space. We had people coming along to some of our classes in the daytime. And also our participants and the locals interacting, which was fantastic to watch and fantastic to watch everyone getting new ideas about Jewish life that they hadn't had before, in both directions, and exploring things together.

There would be things like I'd found out that some of my students had spent their Sunday morning weeding the garden with some of the Edinburgh locals of the Edinburgh Orthodox [inaudible 0:16:26.9] and that was really fantastic for me as someone who grew up in that synagogue and to have my students weeding the garden was really lovely.

And we also had an open week in the third week where we had participants, some of whom were local, some of whom were from London or other places in the UK, and had this chance to learn.

And I think everyone came away hopefully with new friends, and also with a much wider sense of what the Jewish world can look like in both directions. Not many people have experienced a community like Edinburgh's and the Edinburgh locals certainly got a taste of many different flavors of Judaism that they might not otherwise have seen.

Actually, one of our teachers, Leah Rosenthal taught a sugya about teaching Torah in the marketplace, teaching Talmud in the marketplace. And Rabbi [inaudible 0:17:19.5] in this Talmudic story goes out and he teaches Torah in the marketplace. And it's a bit of an edgy act for him to be doing.

It's not clear that you're really meant to be doing that. It's not clear that it's meant to be a doors-wide-open experience. These are texts that, apart from anything else, they're really subject to misinterpretation.

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And we were a bit nervous about teaching these things in public and there's also a real beauty that comes from opening those doors wide and you see that both in that narrative and I think we experienced it this summer.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: What have you learned from this experience?

Jessica Spencer: I think there were so many learning moments for me this summer. Honestly, I've been joking to people that I aged three years. I honestly feel so privileged to have been able to guide people through their first encounters with these texts and the originals.

We weren't learning easy material. And in particular, we were learning material that really challenges modern ideas and liberal ideas around people's worth, around gender, around ethnicity, reading these texts on lineage. This was in the third chapter of Kiddushin, for people who might be familiar with that.

And I think watching my beginners grapple with those ideas and watching us as a class all together. It was really work that all of us were having to do together to find ways to make meaning out of these very difficult or even problematic texts, and watching people make connections between this material and their lives and finding ways to find importance and finding ways to let the material open up important conversations for them. That was an enormously special thing to watch and to be part of, and I learned a huge amount from how my students interacted with those texts.

I've been very, very influenced by my teachers at Hebrew College and their approach to text. And the Hebrew College curriculum is very beit midrash focused. That's why I chose Hebrew College, was because of that focus on text and letting the text speak for itself and sitting with one other person in the beit midrash and discussing these texts together.

That was very, very compelling for me and still is very compelling and a really core part of the way I envisage rabbinical studies. And in particular, yes, I think the way that Hebrew College educators teach Talmud, teach these texts, you have to be willing to listen.

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You have to be willing to be open to what the text might be telling you. You have to – there’s a beautiful line actually in the Hebrew College expectations document which I was recently looking at. And the line is – I don’t know if I can remember it perfectly, “We acknowledge that the views we reject may contain wisdom we need...” I think was the line.

And I think there’s something very beautiful in that and I think it’s really necessary for not just dealing with these particular rabbinic texts where there may be extremely outdated views. This was written 1500 years ago. And there’s also deep wisdom. And sometimes those go hand in hand and sometimes it’s very difficult to extricate them from each other.

And it’s a good way of looking at more than that in the world. In life, I can think of other examples in my rabbinical training even. So, for example as a CPE intern, as a hospital chaplain intern at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, I was encountering people who sometimes had very different political views from me and also real human needs that they needed answering in that moment, and also their own wisdom that they were bringing to that situation.

And those can all go together. And unless you’re able to see those different sides of someone or see those different sides of a text, you’re not able to fully engage with them. That feels like something I’ve really learned at Hebrew College and really honed at Hebrew College.

Rabbi Jessice Lowenthal: Did Hebrew College help you in other ways with your work at Azara?

Jessica Spencer: Hebrew College is a space where people have very different views and different religious outlooks. I think when we were planning Azara, the reason we decided to be cross-denominational was because tachles, you know, in practical terms, the Jewish community in the UK is not large and the number of people that want to go to yeshiva in a coed, in an open environment, is very small.

And it’s not actually a place necessarily where it makes sense to go into little denominational silos, even though those denominations can be very

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meaningful in other ways to people and very important parts of who we are. But actually, coming together is important, just to create the spaces we need to create.

For example, Limmud, which has really transformed Anglo-Jewery did that partly by working across the community and having people from different views. Ad it doesn't mean saying that we all have to fit into one-size-fits all boxes. But rather that we're stating from the outset that we are all different and we're stating from the outset that our differences don't need to be avoided or ignored when we're creating a space together, and in fact that our differences can make the space stronger as we work together.

That was something we saw at Azara and it was particularly influential in how we were thinking about tefillah at Azara, where I personally am a very boringly traditional prayer or davener. I like to just mutter the full text of the siddur under my breath and have that be me.

And also, I was not creating a space where we had said that everyone fits that box. And indeed, the faculty very much did not all fit the same box. Again, we had Orthodox faculty, we had Masorti faculty, we had Reform faculty, we had Liberal faculty. We had people who don't fit into any of those boxes perfectly.

And so it was really necessary for us to kind of go into, "Well what does the tefillah space look like from a blank page?" Not from saying, "Here are your three options." Not from saying, "Here are your two option." Not from saying, "There is only one option."

But from saying, "Well what is tefillah? What is prayer?" And we actually did that together in the orientation. We opened some dictionaries and we looked at the word tefillah and we discovered it means all sorts of things, and some of those spoke more to some people than others. And we said, "What's your emotional goal for this time?"

It felt very important to us to have reflection time, to have a time built in to say that this is not just an academic learning program. This is a religious

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experience. And part of that is some form of prayer, whatever that looks like for you, defined as broadly as possible.

And then we asked people what they were interested in. we brainstormed a bit among ourselves. Various things came up. There were some people like me who want to mutter everything. There were some people who said, “Actually being in nature is what really helps me to a greater sense of things.” There was someone who said, “What about Shacharit as a dance party?” And we did that one day. One morning, there was a Shacharit dance party.

And so, I think coming into a space not having assumptions about everybody looking the same way or everyone being interested in the same thing really opens up possibilities that you might not have thought of if you had been assuming that everyone was the same.

I was texting my Hebrew College classmates as I was planning that part of the orientation. I was saying – I was thinking these are the experts on how to do meaningful tefillah that transcends boundaries. These are my experts. It’s my classmates.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: What’s next for Azara?

Jessica Spencer: This first summer was very much an experiment. And it’s an experiment that went very well. I think we’re still riding the high a little bit. And the real challenge now, the real work is going to be making it more than an experiment, making it a sustainable thing that can happen every year.

For example, our first year was crowdfunded mostly, which is wonderful. We’re so glad that we had people who are able to support in that way and all the volunteers who helped. And I can think of people who gave huge amounts of their blood, sweat, and tears to make this happen.

And also, I think we’d really like to become a structured organization that has a little bit more capacity, a bit more capacity to think strategically, a bit more capacity again to be doing those things I was just speaking about

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before about having opportunities for people wherever they're at, having opportunities for people regardless of their level, being as accessible as we possibly can be.

And hopefully, we'll keep running the summer program. Hopefully it will grow. And hopefully, we'll create more culture of Torah learning in the eUk because that's our real goal.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Thank you for joining us for this episode of *Speaking Torah*. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo and Hebrew College Rabbinical graduate and composer Rabbi Jackson Mercer for our theme music Esa Einai. To learn more about Hebrew College, please visit hebrewcollege.edu/podcast and remember to subscribe, like, and rate *Speaking Torah* wherever you listen to podcasts.

We'll leave you this week with Yom Zeh Mechubad sung by the students of Azara. I'm your host Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal. Thank you for joining us on *Speaking Torah*.