

Machloket Podcast Transcript - Episode 1

Participant

Yes, we're delighted to be in a Jewish golf club with other Jewish people. And even if they're not Jewish members, we are comfortable because we are in an environment that we know.

Participant

I don't know whether I came to Cornwall to escape being Jewish, but in London, I never felt quite at home there. I do now.

Participant

Just it being like a synagogue full of mostly queer and trans Jews and that just being very visible and not even necessarily talking about anything, but being aware that we were filling the space and how different that felt to every other experience of sitting in a synagogue.

Tash

Hi, my name's Tash.

Nick

Hi, I'm Nick,

Tash

and we are theatre and community arts makers,

Nick

and we're both Jewish.

Tash

This podcast is one element of a community arts project called Machloket.

Nick

Or Macheloikes. And this translates as a halakhic or religious dispute or disagreement, which would bring people closer to G-d.

Tash

We like the translation, a disagreement for the greater good.

Nick

In this Community Arts project, we are aiming to explore, share and celebrate what life is like for all sorts of Jewish people in the UK.

Tash

Jewish communities and Jewish people in the UK are vastly different, exist in different places, meet in different ways and for different reasons.

Nick

We know this, you might know this, and if you don't know this, we hope you will soon.

Tash

We have visited 30 Jewish community groups from around the UK, including the three you're about to hear from.

Nick

The last group you're going to hear from in this episode is an LGBTQ+ Talmudic study group.

Tash

The second group you'll hear from is a community in Cornwall.

Nick

But first, when we were putting this project together, I really wanted to include a golf club.

Tash

A Jewish golf club?

Nick

Yes. Tash, just because you haven't played golf doesn't mean it isn't Jewish.

Tash

Yeah, fair enough, Nick.

Nick

So I grew up in Essex, and the local Jewish golf club was a big part of my upbringing. I used to get taken by my grandparents, both sets, who really wanted me to play golf just like them. I'd go into the locker rooms, put on my collared shirt, you know, it had to have a collar. And the rooms smelt of aftershave and talcum powder. Wrinkly old men would sit on wooden benches and tell me all sorts of stories and jokes. And then I'd be taken onto the driving range, only to disappoint my grandparents. And I always loved the jacket potatoes I got in the clubhouse at the end.

Song

There's an elephant in my bedroom and I keep him under my bed. He says he's nice and comfy. But he always bumps his head.

Tash

Bernie Winters, born Bernard Weinstein in Islington. He was a Jewish comedian and he was in a double act, Mike and Bernie. At the time, they were big competition to Morecambe and Wise. Sadly, though, they haven't lasted in the nation's imagination.

Nick

So Bernie, at the height of his success, moves from Islington to a big house in Buckinghamshire and at the bottom of his garden, a fancy golf club. And he wasn't allowed to join it because he was Jewish.

Tash

So what did Bernie Winters do? Well, he had a statue put up at the bottom of his garden of a rabbi sticking up his middle fingers directly at the golf club.

Nick

And allegedly, the club would grow the hedges higher and higher to cover it up. But Bernie would put the rabbi on a higher and higher podium and it.

Tash

Would go on and on.

Song

He wakes up nice and early and he jumps into my bed. He pulls the covers off me and pulls me out of bed.

Nick

Tash and I both have a friend, originally from Manchester, and his parents are members of a golf club, a Jewish golf club just on the outskirts of the city. In fact, his mum was a captain for a while, so I got in touch and we went to visit them.

Nick

Like the history of Jewish people and golf, and golf clubs in particular in this country, has been a history of Jews weren't allowed to join golf clubs. They just weren't allowed. That was me on the train.

Tash

Imagine we're on our way to this golf club just outside of Manchester. We get into a taxi and the cabby says to us,

Nick

You don't look like golfers. We pull up at the club. Our friend's parents are waiting for us by the glass doors, felt like a proper royal welcome. Each of them open a door for us to enter the large atrium. My friend's mum, the former lady captain, is firm, direct but very hospitable. Her husband, who doesn't play golf, is more relaxed, wearing a blue suit jacket.

Tash

Pictures line the walls of past captains of the club. Jewish surnames, often Sephardi names underneath the pictures, with a charming photo of our friend's mum amongst them. And next to it, a cabinet of trophies.

Participant

We had our grandson's Bar Mitzvah here, in February.

Participant

Did you want to have a look round?

Tash

Yeah, could do.

Tash

We're taken into the main dining room, with ceiling to floor glass windows. And through the windows we can see the bright green golf course stretching out into the distance.

Participant

All the Jews are excluded in this part of the world. This club started in the sixties.

Nick

I tell him about my memories of growing up and Jewish people not being allowed into certain golf clubs. He tells me it's still the case.

Tash

So what started the non Jewish intake?

Participant

Well, everybody needs members. It's very expensive to run a golf. It's a beautiful course.

Participant

We're not starting till three.

Nick

Yeah, plenty of time.

Tash

So we're a large group made up of members of the club, but also friends of members of the club. Looking around the circle, there are lots of retirees in blouses, polo shirts and sports jackets. Definitely a kind of uniform going on. All in all, there are about 18 of us.

Nick

The conversation starts off with their experiences of Jewishness in the UK.

Tash

There's a little bit of hesitancy to start with. And before we get going, there seems to be something on some people's minds.

Participant

I know it's a small one, but considering the size of the Jewish community, all you hear, in my experience, is anti-semitism. I just wondered if it was aimed at, opening out and combating it in some way.

Participant

Should we just see what the questions are and let's get on with talking about what they want.

Nick

This is our friend's mum keeping us on track.

Tash

I think maybe the answer to your question is the goal that I've shared with you, that it is about exploring, sharing and celebrating what life is like. And I think for some people that means anti-semitism, for some people it might not. And we're really open to whatever that comes up from that, based on your experiences and the people we speak to.

Participant

I'm sceptical about the whole thing thing. I only heard about this a couple of hours ago. I'm just sitting on the sidelines waiting to see how it pans out.

Nick

Amazing.

Tash

The participants weren't exactly making it easy for Nick at this point.

Nick

As we get into it, our friend's mum begins to talk about how she alerts people to the fact she's Jewish. When first meeting them.

Participant

We don't want them to feel awkward that all of a sudden they're finding out we're Jewish. They might harbour some sort of malevolence or prejudice and it's true that in my working life, I would also make sure that people knew I was Jewish because I didn't want to hear something negative. And, yeah, we're all proud of our heritage, but it comes as a sort of a cost, somehow or other, it doesn't feel quite comfortable

in all situations. Yes, we're delighted to be in this situation in a Jewish golf club with other Jewish people and even if they're not Jewish members of the golf club, we are comfortable because we are in an environment that we know.

Tash

The sceptic from earlier, he talks more about the changing nature of the club.

Participant

This club, Jewish golf club. Well, in the minority, very much.

Participant

The men are.

Participant

And a lot of people don't feel the same because it's not as Jewish as it was.

Participant

It's was changed.

Participant

Something was going to come up about how this golf club has evolved, but it has evolved. And when we call it a Jewish golf club, I'm not quite sure what that means anymore. But the influx of all the people who have come in who are not Jewish has definitely made a positive impact on the club rather than anything else. It's fantastic to see how everybody does get together. They play together, they talk together, they play bridge together. It's fantastic.

Participant

There are a lot of non Jewish people here who want to be here.

Participant

And we want them. That's the point.

Participant

We want them. Yes, actually we they need them.

Participant

They're great people. No, they're great people, most of them.

Nick

You can't quite hear it, but they're laughing because our friend's dad has made the joke, "Some of my best friends are not Jewish".

Participant

You can't dismiss the fact that this golf club is only here because we couldn't join others.

Participant

That day's gone by,

Participant

It is days gone by, but I'm still sure there were certain golf clubs you couldn't join now.

Tash

It felt like the real theme in that workshop was about clubs and what it means to be in a club. Is being Jewish, being part of a club? And we were at a golf club set up because Jews weren't allowed to be in golf clubs, so they set up their own. What that means? Kind of like, thinking about exclusion.

Tash

We're on our way home to London from Manchester, and we're thinking about clubs and being Jewish.

Nick

So my granddad was the founder of the Redbridge Jewish Golfers Society, which was set up to have a society for Jews to go and play golf at golf clubs where they weren't allowed to be members. And then he went on to be a founder member of the Jewish Golf Club in Essex.

Tash

It's clear that this space has been carved out as a response to exclusion, and it's become a space for celebration where people can have Bat Mitzvahs, birthday parties and jacket potatoes.

Nick

But interestingly, this club are now letting in people who may have excluded them in the first place. But there is a sense that they are still a Jewish club, despite the new membership rules. And they can be the type of Jew they want to be. And the non Jews there,

Tash

of which we didn't meet

Nick

knew about that. And if they had a problem? Well, I guess they wouldn't join Tash. Want to hear a joke?

Tash

Go on, then.

Nick

I heard this from one of the most wrinkly men I'd ever seen in my life, in the changing room of a golf club in Essex. What'd you call a fish with a carrot at the end of its nose?

Tash

I don't know, Nick. What do I call a fish with a carrot at the end of its nose?

Nick

Gefilta fish.

Tash

Very good.

Participant

I think one of the things that is very different about this community, and probably every other one in the country, is the geography involved. I mean, we stretch - Cornwall's a long county and we've got members on either side of it. There's a commitment just to get to things.

Nick

That was a man who was born in Brooklyn but has lived in Cornwall for most of his life.

Tash

We're meeting this group at a community centre just outside of Truro in Cornwall. This is the furthest south and the furthest west we've been so far for the project.

Nick

When we come into the community centre, we find about 15 people sitting on chairs in a circle and it feels like they're holding their breath, poised, ready to speak.

Tash

When I told my grandma that we were going to Cornwall for this project, she was surprised that a Jewish community exists this far southwest.

Nick

Yeah, same thing happened when we told some of the London based groups we visited. But in fact, Cornwall has had a Jewish community since the 17 hundreds.

Tash

Anyway, back in the room, we start to talk about the Torah Scrolls of the community.

Participant

We have two scrolls. One is on permanent loan from Exeter Synagogue and the other one belonged to Falmouth Synagogue from the very early 18th century, which actually comes from what is now part of the Czech Republic until the end of the 19th century. And there's a long history that I won't bore you with.

Participant

You can watch antiques road show next weekend and find out about it.

Participant

Yeah, that is our Torah. And in a sense, you could say it's our renewed Torah, because it did belong to the Cornish community a long time ago, and now it belongs to the new Cornish community.

Tash

Thank you.

Participant

We actually paraded it around Truro at the time we acquired it.

Tash

Wow. Can you describe a little bit more about what that was like?

Participant

Terrifying.

Tash

What did the scrolls look like?

Participant

Well, it's quite large, it's got a beautiful cover on it and handles above and below. And it's a real honour to actually hold it and take it out of the cupboard.

Participant

And the cover of the ark in which it lives were made by members of this community.

Participant

And didn't you have the Ark, oh, the wooden box.

Tash

It's got a little bit of lots of people in this room.

Participant

Yes, we're in some kind of self help community.

Tash

One of the participants is the honorary life president of the Cornish Jewish community. He's sitting upright and his wife is sitting at his side, facing him.

Nick

He says that he ended up marrying out, to a non Jewish lady and then later to another non Jewish lady. And at this point he gestures to his wife next to him.

Tash

You haven't done very well on that front.

Participant

No improvement on the first one.

Tash

That's nice to know.

Nick

She says.

Participant

I don't know whether I came to Cornwall to escape being Jewish, but it was interesting how a Jewish community became formed here and it's kind of reinvigorated my Jewishness in a way, which is nice. I appreciate it, being a member of a Jewish community. Whereas before in London, although my parents were members of the Jewish community and we went to synagogue in Dean Street Shul, I never felt quite at home there. I do now, which is nice.

Tash

People have travelled from all over Cornwall, some for hours to be here, to be together.

Nick

And in a wider sense, people have travelled from all over the world.

Participant

I was born in France.

Participant

I was born in India

Participant

and I was brought up in Glasgow, in Scotland.

Participant

So I'm originally from Mexico.

Tash

This participant you're about to hear is from Mexico and she's talking about the birth of her son here in Cornwall.

Participant

Because he was the first baby born in I can't remember how many years. I think it was like twelve years, I can't remember, but many, many years. He's the first baby born in so many years. And he was so happy.

Tash

In this community?

Participant

Yeah, in this community. He was so happy about it. He's like, he's the first baby. And that was also so really touching and that's lots of feelings inside. So it's like that kind of belonging. And in that sense it almost made me more like, oh, well, we're like the new blood type of thing.

Nick

So we're just in Truro with the cathedral to our right and we've just done a workshop in a community centre 15 minutes drive outside of Truro in like, you know, as we're standing next to this gorgeous cathedral with the Jewish community in like ya real standard community centre with fluorescent lights and a kitchen and squeaky floors. And clearly there was some sort of like. I don't know what it was, but there was some music coming from the...

Tash

some kind of dance class or something.

Nick

Yeah.

Tash

That experience of the fraughtness of small community and that you want to exist, but it's hard to exist and it relies on people's goodwill and time and energy. It's different, you grew up in north London, you have shuls that people have paid staff.

Nick

That's why it's interesting the guy who grew up in Soho, he said, I had to escape that.

Tash

Yeah.

Nick

I had to escape London and found Judaism here. Actually, those big communities can feel you know, he didn't say this, but can feel so claustrophobic.

Tash

Yeah,

Nick

maybe that isn't what he meant, he just, he wasn't interested in was he? It's something about them all finding each other.

Nick

What we have here is a group of disparate people from all over finding each other, finding home in Cornwall. As the last person says, I don't feel at home in the UK as a whole, but I feel at home here.

Tash

Just like what one of them said about their Torah. There's this feeling that this is a renewed community.

Nick

This international group who have chosen Cornwall are rightfully claiming, exploring and celebrating the link to the historic Jewish community using.

Tash

Using these Torah scrolls that have been there for generations. They're connecting with the Cornish Jewish community, and it's not their blood relatives, but it is their ancestors.

Nick

And I'm thinking about the experience of the honorary life president who left London for Cornwall, and he feels really comfortable here.

Tash

And as we move into the next story, I'm wondering about the different ways in which we can reclaim and reinvent our heritage.

Participant

I'm going to end up with drawing consent about so much shit.

Participant

I think I just thought, oh, that looks interesting, and came along. So I'm still a little bit, still figuring out what we're doing here.

Participant

I think it'd be quite funny if you just shared it, but, like, bleeped out most of the words.

Participant

I'm going to mute myself, so you can't hear me chewing.

Tash

We're on Zoom. Three participants bounce in. There's an energy coming off them, saying hello, making jokes, there's lots of laughter.

Nick

This is a group of people who are organisers for an LGBTQ+ group who study Talmud.

Tash

The Talmud is a body of texts that are central to Judaism. Traditionally, within Orthodox Judaism, it's been men who've been encouraged to study.

Nick

Women haven't been included, and neither have trans and queer people. Here is one group that are changing that.

Participant

I think, for me, being Jewish is to have been at Sinai, firstly to kind of commit yourself into that relationship with having, like, an ethical code to live your life and to picture yourself doing that alongside a community of people.

Participant

I would say an ancestral practise of storytelling and time marking that points towards a world better than this one.

Participant

I think, especially when we grow up in, like, a Western capitalist society, I think having the tools of having a different culture, a different standard of ethics, not necessarily to always defer to, to be able to expose the things in our society that we just take for granted, is a big part of it. But it's complex, because as much as I want to be like, oh, being Jewish is about ethics and the revolution and socialism and all these really lofty things, part of being Jewish is being in the British Jewish community, which can be really shit and not really about those things, but somehow it's like, you know, and having Friday night dinners with your right wing Jewish family and....all that kind of stuff. And that also feels like an important part of being Jewish to me, is like being an active member of British Judaism.

Tash

Over the summer, they run their first intensive queer Talmud study group.

Participant

It's hard to point to quite what we did that made it so amazing, but, I don't know, something just happened in that space and I think it just made me feel so positive about people, like, I felt so positive about queers, like, even the really annoying ones.

Participant

At the end of the summer intensive last August, there was, like, a group of us that were like stragglers and hangers on and we went to a restaurant in Walthamstow to get dinner and I felt high as a kite. I just, I felt like I was drunk, but I hadn't been drinking and, like, I was, like, on a sugar rush, but I hadn't been eating sugar. Like, I was just in this complete state of ecstasy. It's really hard to explain if you're not in it, but it was like ecstatic dancing, prayer.

Nick

As he's talking, he's gesticulating faster and with bigger movements,

Tash

and the others are smiling and nodding, getting closer to the camera.

Participant

Like queers coming together and feeling like they were godly for the first time ever. And Jews coming together and meeting each other in complete wholeness with none of that Kiddishy chitchat bullshit. Just like, complete vulnerable openness that just created this complete sense of joy and just like, incredible chanting that got everyone so elevated. Simcha. Joy. And actually, every time I see these people now, even when I'm feeling so, so miserable and down, I come away with a sense of Simcha.

Tash

Towards the end of the conversation, we move towards the theme of visibility.

Nick

Someone who is described as the new generation of organisers by one of the other participants leans into the camera,

Participant

Just it being us just like a room, like a synagogue full of mostly queer and trans Jews, and that just being very visible and not even necessarily talking anything about anything, but being aware that we were filling the space and how different that felt to every other experience of sitting in a synagogue.

Nick

There's a collective moment of recognition and smiling, remembering the moment.

Tash

This is Nick and I after the workshop. Now reflecting together.

Nick

What started off as a rejection was like, by the end, was an acknowledgement of not so much a negative rejection, but as a positive framing of moving forward. We are going to be this exciting movement, which felt really amazing, actually.

Tash

And it felt like those people in that space had found like a really powerful way of connecting with it on their terms, in their way, reinventing with such sureness, confidence

Nick

laying claims of what's rightfully theirs.

Nick

This group is reclaiming Jewishness and redefining it on their own terms. And that is such an exciting legacy for Jewishness, for the way that future generations can meet it.

Tash

As a queer Jewish person, it brings me so much joy to be in spaces which are explicitly queer and Jewish and celebrating that.

Nick

Maybe these three groups have initially been fueled by exclusion or alienation. But it's not being an opposition that defines them.

Tash

They define themselves and what they're doing, what they're carving out, it's evolving. With the golf club, they're now letting in non Jewish members. With Cornwall, people are now being born into the community, it's not just people who've moved there.

Nick

And with the study group now, there's this new opening for queer and trans people to access the ancient texts in all their complexities, and it's thriving.

Nick

Next time we're going to meet three new groups.

Tash

Some students from a Jewish school in North London

Nick

Some people who feel like they're not Jewish enough,

Tash

and a group of Jewish Egyptian refugees.

Tash

You've been listening to the Machloket Podcast, a disagreement for a greater good, where we are exploring, sharing and celebrating what life is like for all kinds of Jewish people in the UK. Over the next few months, we'll be releasing podcasts where we share different voices from around the country and different perspectives on what it means to be Jewish today. Find more information about the project in our show notes, including a link to transcripts, and please don't forget to subscribe and rate us wherever you listen to podcasts and recommend us to a friend. Follow us on Socials @machloketproject.

Speaker 4

We want to thank everyone we've met, everyone that's taken the time to speak to us. Everyone that's made us a cup of tea, logged onto Zoom and invited us into their space. It's been a privilege and a pleasure to meet you all.

Nick

This podcast was presented and written by Nick Cassenbaum and Tash Hyman, in collaboration with take stock exchange, produced by Anna Smith and Becky Plotnick, composition and sound design by Anna Clock, dramaturgy by Olly Hawes, consultancy from Aron Keller, funding from Arts Council England and The Royal Court Theatre, with thanks to the Royal Court, JW3, Joss McDonald, Isabel Coutinho, Ira Coutinho Cassenbaum, Morwena Johnson, Sonny and Joss Johnson, Jessie Wyld, Em Hilton, Tommy Ross-Williams and all the communities we've worked with and those who've helped us to organise workshops, in this case James Blakey, and all the communities we haven't yet managed to meet. We can't wait to meet you. Thank you for listening.