



JOSH BLOCH: JEWS AND CULTS?

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers. Brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles and your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast where I'm very excited to introduce Josh Bloch. Josh Bloch was the host and co-producer of CBC's podcast, Uncover: Escaping NXIVM. He's worked on the CBC's daily current affairs show, The Current, since 2012, including as a documentary editor. He co-created the CBC show, The Life Game and How To Do It, and he produced the CBC's first virtual reality documentary called Highway of Tears. Josh, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast. It's really a pleasure to have you.

Josh Bloch: Thank you for having me.

JH: You've really made something of a blockbuster with the podcast, Escaping NXIVM, which is part of the series, the CBC series, Uncover. So I wanna pick up exactly on the angle that, A, made you a peripheral character but a character nonetheless in the story, and was really, aside from my general fascination with the podcast, was the specific motivation that led me to wanna interview you because you have a very specific personal connection to the person I suppose, we would term the protagonist, Sarah Edmondson. But before we get to that personal connection, which is fascinating and has an angle that I really wanna develop with you about the Jewish connection, is it fair for me to ask you to give, as we say [HEBREW] a one-foot synopsis of what the podcast is, Escaping NXIVM?

JB: Sure. The podcast is the story of someone who happened to be my childhood friend, Sarah Edmondson, who... It's really her story about how she got drawn into this organization which purported to be a self-help group, but which later the FBI claimed was a cult. And how she was sort of slowly drawn into this group over 12 years climbing higher and higher in the ranks, becoming one of their star recruiters, and then this phenomenal turnaround, this wake-up call that she has at a point when NXIVM is her entire life, when it's her community, it is her source of income, it is where she met her husband and they had a kid together. She has this wake-up call and realizes that it is not what she thought it was, and not only leaves the organization, but becomes one of the whistleblowers that eventually brings the whole organization crashing down. And so

our podcast series documents both that entry into the group and then her exit.

JH: So first of all, it's an absolutely gripping podcast. Congratulations on the amazing work. As a consumer of podcasts and a listener really, it's a wonderful, wonderful and challenging podcast.

JB: Thank you.

JH: The first thing I wanna ask you to do is to lay out for us the childhood friendship and connection between you and Sarah Edmondson in the Jewish realm.

JB: Sure. We first... I think I met her when I was two years old. We went to the same daycare together and our parents are friends with each other. And as we grew up, we... I guess there was two main Jewish, or I guess three main Jewish institutions that we were part of. One was a synagogue in Vancouver called Or Shalom, a Reconstructionist synagogue that we both had our Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah training at. We both belonged to the Jewish young people theater, which was a small theater group. And then maybe most significantly, we were both part of Habonim Dror, the Jewish youth movement. Went to summer camp for many years and then to the CIT program, and then we both spent a year in Israel after high school on the program they call Workshop where we lived on a kibbutz and there was other kind of educational components to it. So that... We certainly grew up in that context together, and that was sort of where... We saw each other a bit after that, but essentially parted way... Our lives went in different directions and I hadn't seen a whole lot of her past our early 20s until running into her after she had left this group.

JH: Okay, so that's one element. Now, I hasten to point out that when I think with you out loud about the degree to which it's legitimate to bring in a Jewish angle, I wanna point out that I knew about this because you yourself kick off the story with this connection that you just laid out. So it begs the question, and we'll get back to how powerful you think it is in a minute. But before we do that, I also wanna ask you about Clare and Sara Bronfman because the Bronfman of course is one of the great prominent Jewish families in North America, and Clare and Sara, two sisters, also figure into your story. So can you do the same thing and orient us briefly on the relationship between Clare and Sara Bronfman on the one hand, and NXIVM and your documentary on the other?

JB: So Clare and Sara Bronfman joined NXIVM in the early years of the group, in the early 2000s, and it was a huge achievement for NXIVM which wanted to... Spent a lot of energy trying to attract people with a profile and money and power. And there were a number of successes. They had the son of a former Mexican president, they claimed to have had Richard Branson take some courses and be associated with their group, and there's a number of other people they point to. But perhaps no one was a bigger get in terms of their wealth but also their connection to the group than Clare and Sara Bronfman, who not only took courses but ended up moving to the community where NXIVM was centered just outside of Albany, New York and investing tens of millions of dollars in the organization. Essentially, some people have said, handed over their

inheritance to Keith Raniere, the leader of this group.

JB: And it gave that group a kind of degree of power and reach that they wouldn't have had otherwise. Clare Bronfman ended overseeing a lot of the legal battles that they ended up getting involved in when they would go after and pursue their detractors in the court and were able to use her significant wealth to hire lawyers and to launch frivolous lawsuits against people who they saw as their enemies. So they were committed to that extent that they were willing to invest a lot of money in the group. And it was actually something that their father, at one point, was quite desperate to get them out of and never successfully was able to before he passed away.

JH: So by my count now, we have four characters in the story who have salient Jewish connections: You and Sarah Edmondson, the Jewish connection which you actually bring into the story, and then Clare and Sara Bronfman, who are secondary characters, but in the background along the lines that you just described whose Jewishness is also backgrounded, maybe not even mentioned explicitly except in so far as many people know the Bronfman name.

JB: Along this line, and then the other... One of the other central characters in this story is Sarah Edmondson's best friend within NXIVM who ultimately recruits her into this secret sorority within the group, and that's Lauren Salzman and her mom, Nancy Salzman, who is... Her mom is Nancy Salzman, who's the president of NXIVM, and her daughter was one of her best friends. So they're... Now that you... [chuckle] Now that you're highlighting sort of the number of Jewish characters that are essential to this, I would say Lauren's even more significant in the podcast as a character who is Jewish and part of this story.

JH: For our listeners who haven't listened to the podcast yet, that is kind of a climactic moment in defining it as a cult and it's a big deal, so thank you for pointing that out. So having established that, here's the next step in the... Thinking in the inquiry that I wanna surface, I would argue that one of the narrative streams of the 20th, maybe second half of the 20th and the 21st century Jewish story in North America is the spiritual search of many Jews that takes them outside of Judaism but often not to the point of going to Christianity. That Christianity holds for, I would argue, many, many, many, perhaps a vast majority of Jews, enough of a sense of discomfort that they're not willing to take their spiritual search all the way to Christianity or, for that matter, to Islam by and large, but they nevertheless sense a lack or something they're looking to fill that Judaism isn't obviously or conveniently or readily providing for them.

JH: And I do wanna go back and remove the word "major" in terms of it being a major narrative stream. I don't think it's a major narrative stream, but I do think it is a stream, I think it's a thing. And so the first question I wanna ask you is do you agree that it's a thing in our world?

JB: Yes, it's a narrative and a story I'm aware of because of my proximity to the... And my involvement in the Jewish community and the fact that I... The people I... Many of the people I know are Jewish, and so I've seen that story play out in various ways, and

of course, outside of my friend group as well. But one thing that comes to mind is that, unique to the Jewish community, is that a story that is... That many communities are grappling with and facing. Is there kind of a broader story in our society about people searching for meaning or for spirituality outside of established institutions and places that their parent's generation might have found it more readily? I'm not sure of the answer, but I do agree that it is certainly part of the Jewish story over the last, whatever, 50 or 100 years.

JH: Indeed. I don't know if there have been sociological studies in any scientific way about what we're saying, but I do think that most of us have some kind of anecdotal connection with people. You know the term, "Jewbu," is a standard term nowadays, but just as an example. So then the follow-up question is, this NXIVM experience in which Jews figure, at least in the story you had to tell, disproportionately prominently, do you think that that phenomenon of the Jewish search for meeting outside of Judaism is the motivator for the main characters who got involved in NXIVM, or do you think it's something else or a combination? But before you tell me that, when I initially approached you, I immediately said that the Jewish thing is what particularly struck me. Did that, in and of itself, surprise you? Or was it, in fact, something was already on your mind?

JB: It certainly is... It's on my mind to the extent that I recognize that there's mention of it in the podcast, and I knew that obviously. My part of the story and part of Sarah's story that I tell is one where, growing up, she talks about, and I recognize that she felt that she wasn't entirely accepted in the community that we were a part of in Habonim, and that she struggled with that, and I saw her struggling with that in her teenage years, and that I had discussed with her that her recruitment into NXIVM, the thing that she was searching for in her 20s was that sense of acceptance, was trying to find a community that she truly felt which she belonged to. And in hindsight, Sarah Edmondson says that she thinks that people that recruited her into it really were able to smell that out, could see that kind of vulnerability in her and offered her something that she really wanted. And they gave it to her, and she really had strong and what she felt like we're strong and meaningful connections.

JB: So I think that there was a connection to the Jewish world that she grew up in because part of it she felt like she didn't belong to, not that Judaism rejected her, but just the particular social group that she was a part of. So it wasn't surprising. The surprising thing for me is sort of like, is there a strong enough Jewish theme that runs through this story? Can we make a claim about what happened to Sarah and what happens with other people that were Jewish that were involved in this group? Is there something relevant about their Judaism and their involvement in this group? And I'm curious to know what you think. What did you hear that made you feel like outside of the dimension of Sarah's Jewish upbringing? What other themes were there in the story that made you see something that stood out to you in terms of its Jewishness?

JH: The phenomenon that we agree exists at least un-scientifically of Jews searching, I see more relevant than where they necessarily go. So the fact that they went to NXIVM is, I think, as you intimated in your answer a minute ago, the attractions that NXIVM

may have held for certain people are attractions, communitarian attractions, also attractions of a certain kind of promise that all religious systems, all cults, and almost anything that's aspirational in life promises, or purports to promise, or tries to promise, what have you. So in that sense, the receptacle of NXIVM does not have a distinctive Jewish angle as I see it, or at least I didn't feel that way when I asked you the question. Do you think that Judaism has a specific push? And I use the word "specific" advisedly because I don't think it's a unique push, but I do think it's a specific push. And I think there's a couple of factors. I think that one is that Judaism is a tiny minority, and one is subject to different idioms of finding meaning on the outside of one's community when one's community is when you're always an enclave and you're surrounded by definition on all sides by virtue of your minority-hood with so many other languages and opportunities. And so I think there's just a statistical component to this which does, I think, define some of the Jewish experience.

There's another element in Judaism which is that I think Judaism has... If one can speak of civilization making a choice that Judaism, as a civilization, chose to sideline explicit forms of spirituality that have to do with mystical connectedness. It's not that we have erased them, it's not that we have disenfranchised them completely; the civilization has chosen not to emphasize them as the primary mode of participation. The mode that we have Jewish law, we have Jewish community, we have Jewish customs, we have the Jewish calendar, we have Jewish education. We have all these other categories that precede downright mysticism, that intimate mysterious experience with the divine. Although we have it, and if one sought it out, one could find it. If you just grow up Jewish in North America anytime probably ever since Jews came to North America, it's the least likely expression of Judaism that you would probably have found. And that's probably true more or less throughout history, I would argue.

And then the third thing that I see happening in Judaism all the time is Judaism is foreign to Jews. It's a thing that one has to jumpstart to create. This is a function of minority-hood, but it's also a function of the culture that we are perpetuating, and I say culture meaning civilization. Everything about it, the religion, the culture, the communitarianism, Israel, the language, everything. It doesn't just happen. You don't just... You're not just born Jewish and you own it and that's it. You have to acquire it and it's expensive financially 'cause you need education. It requires time, expertise, patience, and motivation. You have to have an incentive to do it.

And so in some ways, the deck is stacked against us. I think people intuit this, by the way, and I think it's one of the reasons that insofar as people admire Jews, these are implicit reasons as to why they admire us. Because they recognize all of these challenges and yet we persist. So I don't mean to romanticize or to pat us on the back and be so congratulatory. I'm just observing that these are difficult things. And if one does have a very natural, very human, very widely experienced urge for certain kinds of connection, it's gonna... It's gonna happen that a certain percentage of Jews can't find it in Judaism.

And so that is what's behind my question. My sense that that is an inevitability of a certain subset of the Jewish people in any given moment. And even that subset runs the

gamut. There are those who really work hard to stay Jewish and still pursue these things. I interviewed one of these people on another episode of this podcast where yoga was the outlet, but this person had a passionate and very explicit Zionism and Judaism, and yoga is bland enough in the monotheistic thing that it doesn't contradict and it's easy enough. Same thing with Jewboos, for example. Then there are those who push the envelope. And I saw this as an example of that.

JB: It's interesting for you to lay that out about some of the exposed vulnerabilities of Jews in North America in terms of being attracted by... And not that it's necessarily always a bad thing; NXIVM is not obviously the same as being part of a yoga community or a Buddhist community, but there's a certain kind of challenge to hanging on to your Jewish identity in North America that other philosophies and other groups might become more attractive and easier to gravitate towards because of that challenge.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click Sign Up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

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JH: It's captivating in a way to imagine the kind of a dulling of one's critical faculty and the capacity to get sucked into these things which, by the way, your character spoke about quite a bit. That strikes me as a more human and generic thing. I don't know if you wanna elaborate on that, what it was like for you to encounter people, especially Sarah whose awakening casts into such stark relief, her lack of being woke, I guess, before. It's pretty stark, pretty shocking in its way, even though many of us have heard of cults before and we know that we've heard of it, but it must have been very, very remarkable for you, this person you've known, to see her have been that person and then, for lack of a better term, to wake up from it.

JB: Yeah, I think one of the central questions for me was how is it that someone who grew up in the same community as me with the same kind of education signs up for this self-improvement workshop. She takes this five-day intensive program that they offer, it's an entry level course. And then 12 years later, she is being branded, physically branded with a cauterizing pen on her body with what she later discovers is the initials of the group's leader, Keith Raniere. How did that process work? As we were investigating the story and the more media that were coming up and covering it in a really quick way, in the way that a newspaper or other media have the space to do it, which is kind of to focus more on the sensational, I realize that what we could do with

this podcast and what I was intrigued by was what is that journey? How do you sign up for this self-help course and then end up 12 years later getting branded? What is that process of indoctrination look like?

JB: And it was fascinating to hear. And really, a large part of what that is about is attacking people's ability to critically think, and attacking Sarah Edmondson's ability to trust her, the questions that might come up in her head, to trust her critical faculties. And it's remarkable how that happens, especially cults operate in all kinds of different ways, and there's religious cults and political cults. But in the self-help context, the way that was done was to have... The membership of the group... To see the part of their mind that was questioning what they were part of as a weakness. So that whenever Sarah arrives at something along her 12-year journey that raises a red flag or she thinks is some kind of issue, she is trained and learns that this is part of the barrier that's preventing her from achieving a personal goal that she's constantly having to question and find ways out of a situation rather than confronting it.

JB: And so she pushes away that part of her brain that says, "This is not okay." In fact, that that was her experience when she was getting branded, which is part of this initiation, she was told into this women's group in NXIVM, she wanted to run. Part of her just said, "Get me out of here, this is not okay, I don't want this to happen." And then right away, 12 years in, very quickly the other voice comes in saying, "This is exactly your issue. You try to find the way out, you try and find the exit, you don't have the kind of character and discipline that is required for you to achieve your personal goals. You need to stay here." And it was a remarkable thing to hear and to hear how that happened. And it's baked into the curriculum. She had taken thousands of hours of NXIVM courses that had got her to a place where she was very well-trained. And she taught these courses as well and taught others.

JH: Right right, she was which was an exponent of it, not just a...

JB: She was an expert, exactly. And it's remarkable to see how that works. And it was... We tell her account, but I talked to dozens the people that were part of the group, and especially those who climbed higher in the organization, this was an experience we heard about again and again. That the more NXIVM courses you take, the kind of worse you start feeling about yourself, and the more you feel like you have to take more NXIVM courses to feel better about yourself, and you're kind of caught in in this terrible cycle.

JB: Anyway, there's no... Small part of this was a deep-seated misogyny that ran through the philosophy of the organization that Keith Raniere believes that women lack the kind of character and discipline that men had, and that they needed an extra special kind of focus and attention and curriculum to address their deficiency as women. And that was something that Sarah really internalized and tells me that she still struggles with, "That pull apart the remnants of this group and the things that I was teaching and I learned that are totally corrupt and I need to get rid of, and what should I retain?" One of the complicating pieces of it is that Sarah believes, and many people that I've talked to who take their courses, do believe that there was value in what they learned.

JH: This is something that is really... And this might get to some of its attractions and its... There was a definite stream in the interviews you gave, the interviews you took rather, where it seemed to me that everybody who left NXIVM and gave you an interview made the point of articulating aspects of its bonafide value. And even I, who I'm totally unsympathetic to NXIVM from the get-go, to the degree I'd heard of it which is maybe just a blurb on some news thing, but... And then through the podcast, I'm completely unsympathetic to NXIVM. It's all villainous to me. But I too am hearing in the ideas that are related by you about NXIVM's own philosophy. I'm hearing bonafide wisdom embedded in a lot of the misogyny and the violence and their lack of critical thinking. That struck me as very compelling and disturbing.

JB: Yeah, and it is... There's a few things going on there. So first of all, NXIVM needed to have a very powerful hook. If people entered the group and were... And if most people were just entirely repulsed by what they heard, especially in those first courses, they would have not survived for very long. And something close to 20,000 people took NXIVM courses and a small percentage of those would carry on in the group and stay connected. And that's what you need to run an organization like this. You do need a huge pool of people at least to be willing to take the course, to pay a lot of money, to help finance the organization, and then also to become a pool of candidates from which a select number will become lifers, will join the organization and will be... And commit to it for life. So it is not surprising on some level that people who took their initial courses found them of some use.

JB: And one of the things that's going on there is that those entry-level courses were really an amalgam of stuff that Keith Raniere borrowed from cognitive behavioral therapy from other large group awareness training programs like EST and Landmark, which became Landmark, even some kind of Scientology stuff. It wasn't particularly remarkable; it wasn't particularly unique what's happening there. And people I talked to who said they took these courses and found value have reflected on the idea that, "Look, if you... " First of all, you spend \$5,000 to take a course. There's a huge incentive to have an epiphany or a breakthrough or really find value in it. And if you have a group of people in a room for five days straight in intense reflection, I imagine without any kind of specific framework, you're going to have what you feel like are... Discover... You are in an unnatural environment.

[overlapping conversation]

JH: You're precipitating it, yeah, yeah, you're germinating it.

JB: Yeah, you're already... You're germinating, and you're sharing with other people, and you're creating a space that is potentially safe to open up and to talk about things that you... You'd probably come there with issues you wanna deal with. So all those things make it unsurprising on some level that people found those courses beneficial. It does become... It becomes really complicated though when... For someone like Sarah who moves past just those the entry-level courses, who spent many years teaching all sorts of different courses and really internalizing this philosophy and then making that... That it was world... It was the way that she saw the world. Trying to parse out

afterwards what is worth retaining and still feeling like... Having a hard time letting go of the idea that what you did might not have been beneficial to people. She really does still believe, and then she might not be wrong that she helped people work past their personal issues, and that there were some of the tools that she used are not things that she just wants to abandon.

JB: And at the same time, the FBI's extensive investigation into this group and the six-week court case revealed far more disturbing things than we've even discovered in our podcast. And essentially, that this whole organization was a way that Keith Raniere was using this group to groom women to have sex with him, several times underage girls to have sex with him, that it was really a complicated system that he used to control people. So it's... I think people... I think Sarah is left in a very difficult position, and people who were part of the organization for a long time in trying to find a sense of self-identity and a personal view of the world and philosophy that makes sense for them. And the cult experts we talked to have spoken about how long that can take, and it can be a life-long journey that you don't entirely recover from when you are turned on your head to that extent.

JH: And the relationship to Sarah's mother was particularly poignant towards to the end, to... As kind of the relationship... The locus in the most important relationship where all of those lingering ambiguities and pain resided. It was very very difficult to hear, very compelling.

JB: Yeah, that part was... Doing that interview with Sarah's mom was I think one of the most difficult and moving things to me because I know her mom and I hadn't... As I was interviewing Sarah, I sort of hadn't entirely considered her mom's perspective on this whole thing or completely appreciated it until I sat down with her mom and heard just how torturous the whole thing was for her. Because she was stuck in this bind, "Do I confront my daughter," and risk losing contact with her and losing contact with her grandson, or does she have to play along with it in order to keep tabs on the group and keep the tabs on her daughter? And she chose to do the latter, which was very difficult 'cause, as she said in the podcast, she felt like... She actually went and took one of their courses because she wanted to suss out this group and see what they were about, and right away she could sense something was off and felt like it was a coercive group, and yet had to be so careful about how much she challenged Sarah at all on this.

JH: It's very very compelling. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. It was really a pleasure to get to know you a little bit and to hear your perspective. And I wish you every success on your upcoming projects.

JB: Thank you so much.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts, or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu where you can also stay tuned for a future episodes.

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