

Introduction: You're listening to Opening the Tent: Stories of Jewish Belonging, an original podcast produced by the NYU Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life. Our guest today is Aaron Baron, a sophomore studying computer and data science.

Aaron Baron: I think at the beginning of this year, I follow like, I don't like labels in the Jewish community, because I feel like there's so many it gets so confusing, but like a conservative, modern Orthodox, sort of background in the sense of, I may not necessarily like keep all the Halachic rules, but I want to be more observant, and I've been trying to grow on that. So like, at the beginning of this year, I didn't fully keep kosher, to the extent which I do now, and I wasn't as observant of Shabbat and stuff like that. So I think coming in to the Orthodox community, Shalhevet, I did sort of feel like an outsider in some regards just because you know, I didn't go on a gap year to Israel, I didn't study in yeshiva, I went to a public school. So definitely moments of isolation, I didn't necessarily connect to everybody. Even within, you know, the other sects of Judaism, or denominations, within Bronfman, like, I much prefer to go to an Orthodox service, just because I was raised in like a very traditional environment and I'm very used to their prayer styles and how they go about things, but I may not necessarily have the most in common with the people that go to Orthodox services. So it's been, it's been a journey, sort of like finding my nation, finding my people and seeing what's right for me. Where it gets sort of messy is that most Middle Eastern Jews are sort of just "Orthodox", and I'm saying that with like air quotes, just because we all come from like, very traditional backgrounds, and there's no real, like, Conservative or Reform or, like less Orthodox sects, it's more so just like everyone is sort of Orthodox, but some people are more observant than others. And like, yeah, I guess you could put a label on that, but it's never really something that we were too aware of. The reason why I don't like it so much is just because, I don't know, I found my love for Judaism on my own. My dad is very observant, but he never really forced anything on me necessarily and I do thank my parents without all the time, just because I have friends that, you know, grew up in the Five Towns, for example, and that was the pinnacle of their life, Judaism in every single aspect sort of dominated everything that they did. And now they're not necessarily fans of Judaism. And I think that I've grown to really love it and like who I am today, just because I was able to sort of find that on my own. And I feel like putting a label on yourself gets in the way of that, because then you feel like you're grouped into this one denomination of

Judaism that follows halacha in a specific way or goes about things and I just think that it's, it's not my favorite thing in the Jewish community, it gets a little messy, it's, it's not really too fun. Shalhevet, for example, praise that Magen David synagogue on Sullivan Street. And there are two floors, so on the basement is where all the students basically go and that's Ashkenazi services and then the floor above is the Mizrahi services, and I only go to the Mizrahi services just because they pray faster, which is a big plus for me. And they just like are lacking people like I've talked to the Rabbi of that synagogue many times, and he's a little bit disappointed about the fact that they don't get a full 10 man minyan, and I just try to help them out in that regard. And it's also just a prayer style that I'm way more used to. In some ways, I guess that like, does make me feel a little bit excluded, because, you know, maximum, one other kid will come that is a part of Shalhevet. But I like it just because I don't want to have to go to services just because every other student's go in there. And it's very much up to my convenience and my prayer style, which I like that, you know, that's an option on the table. Coming out of the Great Neck bubble and just seeing that there's, you know, life behind a majority of Persian jewelry in one place is a thing. So I am still trying to figure out, I also, you know, I'm like, Rachel you know me I'm like very sarcastic, I'm never serious, so I don't think people necessarily know that right away. And they think that the way that I talk about Judaism might be perceived as like, derogatory in some way or just like, you know, like joking around too much, but that's just like who I am like, I don't take anything serious ever. So I hope that people realize that whenever I talk about my Jewish upbringing, and that they don't think that I'm like, bashing it too much because I'm not I'm just not really a serious person. I enjoy life much more like living through a lens of not taking things too seriously, but I think at the end of the day, a lot of like, obviously there are a lot of terrible things in the world that should be looked at not really in a comedic lens, but like at the end of the day, most of the things that we encounter are on a very basic level, very funny. I try to perceive it through that lens.

The way that it first started out was that the Hillel presidents, Avital and Joseph, sat me down and told me that they want me to be the chair of what this year's Shabbat for 2000 creation would be. For any of the listeners that don't know Shabbat for 2000 was sort of the Bronfman Center's pinnacle event where they would have, you know, 2000 people for Shabbat dinner. Over the years, that's kind of changed. Two years ago, they had Havdalah for

2000, which was a closing of Shabbat, and like a big ceremony. I wasn't there so I can't really give too many details on how that looks, because I truthfully don't really know. Last year was Rest for 2000 because you know, Shabbat is the day of rest, so there's programming around that and they tried to make it more accessible to the online sphere. And this year we're doing Chesed for 2000. And Chesed for 2000 is community service for the whole community. Chesed is the Hebrew word for loving-kindness, so we're sort of giving back to the downtown Manhattan community through the Bronfman Center through events going outside of the Bronfman center and through the virtual and asynchronous space. So with that we're imagining it is that on May 1 of 2022, we're going to have 30 events throughout Manhattan, throughout the Bronfman Center, throughout the virtual sphere, which are going to help give back to the different communities that we encounter. And I remember this very vividly because it was a pretty cool moment. Avital, Joseph, and I were sitting down and originally we were planning on doing a Havdalah for 2000, then this was before NYU lifted any of their restrictions with COVID, from the Student Activities Board, so we couldn't play music, we couldn't have dancing, we couldn't really do much, couldn't have food indoors. So we were a little nervous to do that. I wasn't necessarily looking forward to it that much. And we're sitting in the third floor in the student lounge, and I sort of just like, ah, like a chesed or community service type of idea. And from then on, it sort of sprouted and it was our little project. My co-chair Sarrah Livson and I have been working pretty hard on it. And we're very excited because I think it has the opportunity to like, leave a pretty big impact on the community and leave a good legacy for Hillel. I've really liked it because I like being a part of Hillel board. It's definitely been a bright point of my year. And yeah, it's introduced me to a lot of people that I wouldn't have met before. I'm not a JLF intern this semester, which I was last semester, which was a lot of fun, so much of my engagement, I guess, with students this semester is just sort of leading them down the path to get involved into Chesed for 2000, which has been great. From a leadership position. I've seen sort of the nitty gritty of managing a big team, because there are obviously moments where we have to reevaluate ourselves and how we're operating, wee being Sarrah and I. From what we're doing, I'm sort of just surprised about how creative everyone could just be on the fly. We have some really cool events coming in. We have some great things planned. And I'm just grateful. I'm grateful that I have you know this sort of platform that we can do this and that we can, you know, like I said, sort of leave this legacy behind. So I'm pretty excited for it.

Well, coming in, I did JLF my first year in the Spring, so Spring of 2021 and I wasn't necessarily a huge fan of JLF, you know, obviously online, it's not as fun I'd say personally. Might be a hot take. I don't know. Probably not. But I was I developed a close relationship with Mel Friedel and she I mean, for lack of a better term, she like roped me into the Jewish community when I didn't think I would get too involved. So I was telling Jake Banglesdorf I'm like, yeah, I'm not gonna get too involved in the Bronfman Center, like, I'll go to Shabbat I'll do this, I'm not going to like, be fully immersed in it, and like now I'm here. So it's pretty ironic. I really, really liked it. I think that my year specifically, the current sophomores, the class of 2024, has been going above and beyond and getting involved in the Jewish community. And I think it's something really special just because we all sort of missed out on every social interaction during our first year. So it's been overwhelming at times just trying to juggle all these different projects that I'm working on and all these different responsibilities I'm taking within the Jewish community, but it's it's also been very, very rewarding. So like I said, not necessarily always the easiest task, but having a lot of fun, made a ton of friends and, like found a real sense of community and I didn't think I would so, God bless Mel for roping me in.

Outro: Thanks for listening. This episode was produced by the b|hive story collective of the NYU Bronfman Center. Subscribe on Spotify or Apple Podcasts for new episodes every Monday.