

**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 Ari Davydov, a sophomore in the College of Arts and Science, studying Philosophy and Biology.

**Ari:** I remember going to a Shabbat dinner with my great aunt or I don't know someone who's like, vaguely related to me and I went with my family and we don't really we don't do Shabbat dinners. Not really, we don't we don't do Shabbat dinners. And I remember sitting there and I was just like, I was probably like nine years old or ten years old. I just remember feeling confused, even though it was like, you know, a Bukharian theme, I don't even know what that means, Bukharian themed Shabbat dinner but I just felt confused. My brother went to Solomon Schechter, and I think my parents, when I asked my parents about this, when he asked them about this, like they always say that, like the other parents who immigrated here, just told them that that was right like that that was what they needed to do, and they were very confused. Like they had my brother like the year that they immigrated here. And they were also going to university at the same time and like taking care of my brother and I just don't think they did like any research. They're like, okay, Jewish Day School, it sounds good. It's like near us, but we have like an eight year age gap. And so I think in that, like eight years, I don't know if it was like a money thing, or if it was just like, they were like more understanding of the culture here in Queens in New York City, but they just decided to send me to public school and there was no Jewish education there. So I don't know if this is like a well known stereotype outside of Bukharian community, but like the large restaurants with very bright lights and huge tables with just serving Uzbek food that, you know, I went to those for, like Rosh Hashanah like we had family gatherings, but like I could tell that my parents were really just trying to like make sure we remembered we were Jewish, but they also kind of didn't really know what what was happening too, so they were just like, we're very like culturally Jewish. So I do have relatives and you know, people who are, you know, have a Jewish education, understand what it means to be Jewish and celebrate in like a Bukharian way like, you know, have their Jewishness, you know, through a Bukharian lens, which is good and great, and I never really had that. But I also of course, never had the Ashkenazi like Jewish experience. And so I guess if there are two tents, like Ashkenazi Judaism, and Bukharian Judaism, like I was not an either. My family back in the USSR was like, not very Jewish, they were afraid to be Jewish. And they

like grew up like that, and I just think my parents didn't really get that much of a Jewish education and so they didn't pass it on to us.

So I do so I have been to many Keshet Shabbats and of course, and those are great. I love with people there. But I think when I first started going, it kind of just like solidified the fact that I know so little, like, I was going to say you guys like, you know, you and like you and everyone at Keshet they like you guys would make kind of references to things, I don't know just like experiences that you like, all seem to know or be in on and I would just, I know my brother had experienced those things I know for a fact, but I didn't. So at first there was a bit of a kind of dissonance maybe like I don't know. Not disconnect because Keshet like really included me in so many ways like and really like was aware of my like identity and it wasn't like a disconnect, it was just like kind of me observing from the outside. You know, there's a point in this in Zoom Shabbat or Shabbats in general you close your eyes, what is that called?

**Interviewer:** The Shema.

**Ari:** Yeah, yeah. Okay, so I had never obviously gone to any Shabbats beforehand, and I like the first couple of times, like I couldn't tell when everyone would like stop closing their eyes and I was like, peeking through my like fingers and I was like, and then like, slowly, I decided that like, the first couple times, like I found different ways to peek through my fingers and I was like, it's fine, it's chill, and I figured it out. I do see like more value in like being in Jewish spaces, Jewish spaces than I did before, I think. And like I think the idea of a Jewish space has really changed for me. From like before I came to NYU it was more of like, I am here as a guest, I am here to like look from the outside. And then at NYU have felt a little more in on it. There is an organization called SMQN, which is Sephardi Mizrahi Queer Network. And I went to a Shabbat dinner that they had a couple weeks ago in Midwood, so like little Syria, and we have like Syrian food, and there were two other Bukharian Jews there. And so this was like a queer space, but also a Mizrahi Sephardic space. And it was really nice. I came away from that really happy. I don't know if it was just like because it was in person also, I think I'm also just like, kind of homesick, and the food was really good. And like very similar to Uzbek food. I am uncomfortable, of course, because of the idea like right before I got in, came to NYU, like, I didn't really think those two things could

exist simultaneously in one space, like queerness and Jewishness, but again, like that's, like, that's something that NYU has shown me could, you know, exist, but specifically SMQN, because the specific kind of Jewishness that I thought was incompatible with queerness was there at SMQN, whereas at Keshet like I feel like I, you know, I long understood that, like, you know, Ashkenazi, I don't know why I'm so hung up on this, but I was like, yeah, Ashkenazi Jews can be queer, but Bukharian Jews, Mizrahi Jews. Coming into SMQN like, I think, well, I'm gonna keep saying this but like the idea of a Jewish space like as a positive thing, right, like as a space where you can feel comfortable and as a space that will actively support you because of this, like shared identity, like that is something that I don't think I could have even, not even thought of, but like appreciated maybe when I was younger. I mean, I'm sure like if someone told me about it, I was like, okay, good for you. But I don't think it could have ever like happened to me. Like I don't think I could ever like get good out of this Jewish space. Growing up queerness was bad in a Bukharian space and how being Bukharian was not so relatable in an Ashkenazi space and SMQN is the opposite of that.

**Outro:** Thanks for listening. This episode was produced by the b|hive story collective at the NYU Bronfman Center. Follow us on Spotify and Apple podcasts for new episodes every Monday.