

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 David Ratz, the IACT Coordinator for the Bronfman Center.

David Ratz: I've been cognizant of my Jewish identity for a long time, I want to say probably like, four or five years old. I grew up modern Orthodox. I still consider myself modern Orthodox. We were always doing Jewish things all the time. But I feel like it really was after I had gone to Israel for the year did my gap year and then came back. And I was in culinary school. And I was like the only Jewish person there. And that was kind of the reason like, not only my family background, and having done it for so long, but like the motivation to like keep doing it was because of that, like time that I had to figure it out for myself. I'll give everyone like a quick little update of how I got here. I went to HAFTR until I graduated high school than I did yeshiva gap year in Israel. Then I did culinary school in Brooklyn for two years, non-kosher program, at a community college in Brooklyn. And then I finished my degree there, and I did a year and a half at Queens College studying media studies. Within that time, I worked in two restaurants, one on the Five Towns, one in Jerusalem. And I also got to staff my first Birthright trip them, which really like opened my eyes to being like, this is a lot of fun and I wish I can do this as my job. And so from 2017 until now, I'd been looking for a job that's like, getting to do this. And after graduating from college, I ended up in New Zealand for five months, I worked there as a chef and the only kosher restaurant in the orthodox synagogue. And that was a very interesting situation. I can delve more into that if you like. I have a friend that I went to high school with who ended up in the Israeli army after high school. And when I was working in the shuk in Jerusalem in summer of 2017. She was like, I'm going to New Zealand after and I was like, that's cool. I want to go to New Zealand. I didn't really have plans for after college, I was applying to jobs. But nothing was really panning out. So I sent her message being like, are you still going to New Zealand? And she's like, yeah, so she was like, my plan is to go pick fruit in New Zealand. And I couldn't tell my mom, I'm flying 1000 miles away from my house to go pick fruit in a random country. No, that doesn't work for a Jewish mother. So I was like, okay, I need some sort of plan. So I googled kosher New Zealand, and there is one, there's a restaurant inside of the orthodox synagogue in Auckland. So I sent them a message being like, I worked in different restaurants. So please take me and they said, yeah, sure. So I ended up there for five months, it was a difficult time, because we were living in the basement of the synagogue for the first eight weeks. And the rabbi expected us to be at minyan every day, which was like, no. And then also, my supervisor had worked in pastry for 25 years. And I was coming from working in a savory kitchen. So every time that I would make anything and didn't all look the same, and wasn't all measured the same, she'd throw it in the garbage. And so it'd be like, okay, great. So how can I make my way around this. And then another moment that happened to me in New Zealand was that I wasn't going to davening every day. And it wasn't making me very happy. And

so then on Pesach, I didn't go. So I was coming there for a meal. Because I was we were having lunch there. And my friends that I went with was like, don't come inside. And I was like, why he's like the rabbi's really upset with you. And he's been like telling everyone in the community that like you're taking advantage, and you know, you're wasting everyone's time by being here, because you're not being participatory in the community. And I was really upset about that. And that was like, okay, either I can just like drop all of my Judaism right now, because that's how I really felt at that moment. Or I can be the opposite of that person and be like, I can come and accept you however you are because that's really how it should be and not just be like because you didn't come here you're a terrible human being. And so after that moment, it kind of was like, I'm going to try my best to be the other type of person. And then I like did other things for the community that wasn't specific to prayre, I led a challah baking class, I did a few other things that were more like non prayer related. And that kind of also was like a nice stepping stone of like, Jewish education.

A lot of my art also is like Israel inspired because COVID was like I want to imagine where I want to be right now. And that's kind of how I got into painting a lot of Israel stuff. Yeah. It's weird to think about though, because it's like, everyone's like, oh, try a different way of going about it. And what's weird is like I do, like Israeli themed art, and then I'll collage a drag queen, and I'm still able to be who I am, you know? And, yeah, I think it's the ability to, like, be a lot of things at once, which I think I'm doing. Yeah, I think it's just like, it's fun. Being gay and Orthodox, is basically two different tents. And it's intense [snaps]. And I think that trying to fit into both spaces, simultaneously, and also at different times is like, interesting. When I'm, I mean, I love gay pop culture. Like I love Drag Race and Pose and Queer Eye and all that other really great stuff. And feeling like I'm fully immersed in that community while also feeling I'm in the Orthodox community and I think I give off the impression that I'm gay. So like, that also comes into play from other people. But then I've come to terms with I don't really care what other people think about me, as long as I'm content and confident in who I am, I'm going to continue being who I am. I'll go to a gay bar, or a gay club. And then like, I'll meet a new person. And they'll be like, you're so sheltered, like you haven't, you know, done a lot of the things that I've done, and it's like, cool, we're each on our own, like, path. But then also, like, I'll have a Shabbat dinner. And oh, fun fact about me is I live in the Moishe House, on the Upper West Side, we run events for Jews in their 20s and 30s. We have a lot of people over all the time. And one time a guy was over, we were dealt, like, he was like, beating around the bush when it came to like being Orthodox and gay. And he was like, I just can't imagine what a, like an orthodox gay wedding will look like. Or like, what like, being accepted in the Orthodox community is because it's not allowed. And I'm like, that's beautiful. I'm so happy you think that way. But also, I exist as a human being. And like, there are many people that are like me. And he was like, What are you going to do? Like, what are you going to do for your wedding? And I was like, let me find the person first. And

once I found the person, maybe we'll go about that that way. But it was more about like, I don't think like how the day of my wedding's gonna look like I don't think like, what my children, if I have children, what like their religious upbringing is going to be like. I think it's like an interesting thing to see other people who have gone through what I'm going through how they're continuing to persevere. And yeah, I think it's really we all like, are on our own journey, and doing our own thing. I knew that I was different from like, 10 11. Like, I was like, whatever I'm going to do is not going to be getting married at 21. And like having seven kids. And like, I always was like, whenever I would do, like go to prayer. I was always like, just, if we could not do this, it would make life a lot easier. But yeah, it made me fall into like, like, it wasn't a fun time in middle school. It wasn't a fun time after yeshiva, emotionally, mentally. But like coming to terms with that, and being able to be like, I can have a full life. And this is I know, this is not what life was imagined for me. But this is what I'm making it for myself. So yeah, and like, it's crazy to think that I'm in this spot, because like, there were times where I was like, I'm not gonna exist that 25 26. So like, it's crazy to think I'm finally in a really great place. Because there were times where I was like, there won't be a 26. There won't be past that time. So yeah, for a long time, I was longing to find community to do a job that I really wanted to do to be my full self, all of those things. And like, I'm actually getting to embrace that now in my life, which is really nice. But for a long time, I was like, it will only be good when I get there. But there was a lot of a lot of time. There were 26 years before that moment happened. So yeah, I think it's like, we just have to take it one day at a time and see what comes, you know, be open to embracing new things and seeing new things, because that's really how we continue to progress and grow.

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