

**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 Jon ZefTel, Manager of Operations at the Bronfman Center.

**Jon ZefTel:** So I grew up in I grew up in Western New York, just outside of Buffalo, New York. And I went to the day camp program of the JCC, of greater Buffalo Camp Centerland. And that was, that's absolutely my earliest memory of being involved in any, Jewishly. And like, specifically, I remember the Shabbat celebrations at camp, and even more specifically the Shabbat Queen, who I'm pretty sure it was the camp director, but they would bring out the Shabbat Queen, we'd all be sitting in a field and there were trees it was very dramatic. And the Shabbat Queen would come out and there'd be some bit and you'd laugh. And I don't remember what we were eating. But I imagine we were eating challah and drinking grape juice, but that part doesn't stick in my memory as much as much as the Shabbat Queen in a field. And like I like I liked Shabbat, I remember that at day camp. And the other piece I really remember it's again, it's at Camp Centerland is, is sitting at a picnic table with my group and saying the motzi before you eat lunch, like every day you did that. I grew up, I grew up in a deliberately secular household. My father is Jewish, my mom is not. So that's, you might sense it in my voice, like always sort of a piece of insecurity because, you know, Judaism is sort of passed down matrilineally and like halachically I understand that I'm not Jewish, yet, like, I've always identified as Jewish and I feel Jewish. And again, like I said, I grew up very secular, secular, but like, I always knew I was Jewish. So, I guess I'll say, by way of example, like if you grow, if you grew up in New York City, like my wife grew up in New York City, and like, she didn't belong to a shul or, you know, or she wasn't like, but the thing is, by, by growing up in New York, it's, it's such a it's such a Jewish environment, that you just sort of like you get, you learn. You get a Jewish education, like through osmosis, you know, like, everybody eats bagels and lox here, everybody eats matzah ball soup. You know, like, I didn't see my first sukkah in there, I didn't know what Sukkot was until I came to New York. And I was at Ducati Park during Occupy Wall Street and I saw Sukkah and I learned about Sukkot because like walking around, Buffalo like I never saw a sukkah there were no sukkahs up, you know, whereas if you're if you're a someone like me, you know more on like the culturally Jewish spectrum growing up in the city, you would have like walked around, you would have seen a sukkah, you would

have asked those questions you know, you it's, it's it's more like it's more in the air.

So I really didn't I've gotten like my entire Jewish education not not my entire Jewish education because like, I got that like identity piece at Camp Centerland. But like I really like learned about holidays and prayer and ritual completely through my career. I wanted to move to I wanted to move to New York, my sister was living in Brooklyn and I had visited, I was done with college and I was looking for jobs just to get like, get me through a first summer there. And I probably found on like Craigslist, you know, this was 2010, I saw a job to be a counselor at New Country Day Camp, which is the day camp program of the 14th Street Y and I was like, oh, I loved my Jewish day camp, that would be cool. Like I could work at camp like that sounds cool. So you know, I applied and then I got the job and I moved to New York and I started working. And I worked that summer and then in the offseason, I would do camp fairs and other things for the 14th Street Y. And then I continued doing that for three years each summer I would. I was I nannied for kids that I met at camp and I worked at a coffee shop and I would do offseason stuff for the Y and then after three summers of that, you know, my third summer I met my now wife, she was the assistant director. She was like, hey, you're 25 and I'd been like, oh, I need to find a career. I need to shoot like you know, you can you're pretty good working with kids coming up with these programs. You know, I was like in charge of the Maccabee games at uh New Country for a summer and I like loved it. She's like, you know, this is a career. You can turn this into a career. There's this whole like Jewish nonprofit world and I was like, oh, really. And I happened into it, like, I didn't go even looking for it for the for the Jewish piece, but I've like, you know, I've gotten this whole Jewish education just through my jobs at the Y and BBYO and now at Bronfman.

Jenny and I were married by a Rabbi, and we're raising our two year old, Violet, Jewish and like, I couldn't have imagined this. It just it just sort of happened. Most of my experience has been a feeling of being outside, though, the better question would be when I felt in the tent, because, well, I think back to, you know, to growing up where I grew up, not knowing any Jews not really seeing anything, anything Jewish, but I do remember when you'd be like, oh, what are you like, qhat's your nationality? I would always say, I'm, I'm half Italian and half Jewish, and people would be like, Jewish is a religion, not a nationality. And I'd like and I remember being very firm, being

like, no, it's both. And I'm like, I definitely didn't have the language then to like, talk about like, Jewish peoplehood, or anything like that. That's funny, like I was, I remember being so insistent upon it, and being like, you can't tell me what I am and what I'm not. No, I'm Italian and I'm Jewish. And it's funny and like, so I like my early, sort of like a combative stance about my identity, even from back even back then. In my working life, and my career, like, you know, I have felt outside of the tent because like, I just don't know that much. But like, I'm, I like to think I'm a very curious person. And I like to learn. I'm feel like I'm pretty earnest too about it. Like I will say, oh, I don't know that and I want to know more. But that feels that's harder in Jewish spaces because like, I don't want people to know that I don't know. And then I don't want it to lead to like, oh, I wasn't Bar Mitzvah'd and my mom's not Jewish, and I didn't, you know, like, I because then it's like, oh, you're what do you you know, you don't belong. It's not actually possible, or I'm trying to, but it's like this idea of, I wish that in all of my interactions, everybody knew and it's my, my, my backstory, my Jewish backstory, and was like, had already like internalized it, thought about it, and like, understood where I was coming from and brought and and was like, oh, yeah, and he's really trying. Because I'm like, both proud, I'm very proud of my background and how I was raised where I came from, at the same time, just a natural human desire to, to want to be like fully accepted and fully recognized.

**Outro:** Thanks for listening. This episode was produced by the beehive story collective of the NYU Bronfman center, subscribe on Spotify or Apple Podcasts for new episodes every Monday.