

**Intro:** 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 Matthew Fertig, a senior at NYU Shanghai, studying business and marketing.

**Matthew Fertig:** I grew up in Queens which is still where I live. And my neighborhood is very diverse, but there's not a lot of Jewish kids. So in elementary school, in my class, I was the only Jewish kid and people came from all different kinds of backgrounds. And, you know, were immigrants from all across the world. But a lot of people had never come across a Jewish person before, which is kind of unbelievable, because there are so many Jews in New York, and especially in Queens. So I think the first time realizing that I was different in terms of my religion, it was definitely around first grade. Actually, one of my close friends would make Jewish jokes all the time, like gas chambers, would throw pennies at lunch, like, this is like serious stuff. And, you know, when you're in first grade, you just shrug it off, like, what is he even talking about, you know, like, these things are so foreign to you. You've heard of the Holocaust, you, you get the jokes, but it's not like, you know, you don't take it as seriously, you don't realize how, how messed up that is until later on. So I think I didn't start realizing that I was different in my religion, until probably even later than that, because those jokes were kind of just like, you know, stored inside, I didn't really accept them as like, oh, this is something that makes me different, something I should, you know, try to hide because I might be bullied or might be targeted because of it. I, you know, I had so many different experiences as a kid in Jewish settings. Apart from school, I went to Hebrew school started from kindergarten, and I went to Jewish summer camps. I identified myself as like a reform Jew, or like, you know, realize my own way of practicing until later on. But I think being around Jews of different practices, helps you better inform like, you know, how you want to practice yourself. My Jewish practices have changed, you know, year to year, even like month to month. I think I've definitely become more religious and more connected to my Judaism through time, and I think the pandemic has definitely, you know, reaffirmed my connection to Judaism, and being outside the country has, has made me feel more connected to the Jewish community. Well I go to school in Shanghai. So that's obviously very different. And they've never heard of Jews there, or, at least I don't know what being Jewish is. So luckily, I formed, you know, my own small community of Jews at NYU Shanghai, but it's a very exclusionary society, I'd say, in terms of

religion, at least. You don't realize how different Judaism can seem to just like to someone across the world who's never heard of it before. So yeah, being in a society where they don't even know anything about your religion, where every single thing is new, that makes you definitely feel like the other. But at the same time, having I find that having a community of people that you can relate to, you know, that are also Jewish, in a place where so few people understand, it makes it that much more special.

And in terms of, you know, finding a Jewish community, I remember the first meeting I went to, it wasn't actually until sophomore year, and at NYU Shanghai. I didn't even know that we have a Jewish club or anything, because it's actually hidden, like, we sneak in the rabbi every single week. He doesn't have access to come in. Like, it's like an undercover deal. But you know, it's still pretty secretive because the government really doesn't allow it. And the coolest thing to me was, you know, NYU is diverse NYU Shanghai is very diverse, but meeting these Jews from all across the world, you know, like Jews from Spain, Jews from Ukraine, like it was just, those are two European examples, but there are much more crazier ones. Yeah, it just felt so cool. It reminded me of being in BBYO in high school and going on international convention. And when you meet people that like straight up flew from Bulgaria or um, I don't know, from Argentina, and they're like, in this place with you. And the only thing you have in common really is the fact that we're Jewish teenagers, like, that's the only thing I can relate it to. And it just felt it just feel so special. I think there's just such strong values in Judaism, that are like, kind of entrenched in you, if you grew up Jewish, even if you're, you know, conservative and I'm reform, we still have the same core values, like Judaism is still the same when you boil it down to its bare bones. So I think, you know, just like knowing a few words of Hebrew, even if a lot of kids like they don't even speak English, and I don't speak their language, so the way to communicate is by like the few words of Hebrew, you know. I think just the shared experiences of being Jewish, even in very different cultures and very different environments, is enough to like form that connection. You know, China just doesn't recognize Judaism as a religion. That's why it has to be underground. They only recognize three religions, and Judaism is not one of them. It's kind of expected, like I honestly was surprised that I would even be able to practice. But you know, I have friends that are Christian and Catholic, that go to services in Shanghai as well. And for all of these places of worship, you need a foreign passport in order to practice. As exclusionary as it may be

that I have to, like, almost hide my identity, or I have to, you know, practice in this like, very strange and secluded community, I'm so fortunate to even have that opportunity when like, you know, if you're a Chinese national, you can't have that. So as much as I'd love to take my Chinese roommate from freshman year to a service with me, he can't join. So I think, yeah, I think it makes me feel obviously sad that I can't, you know, practice the way I do in the US, but also grateful that I can practice at all and that I have other people to meet with.

**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.