

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 Mel Friedel, the Ezra Experiential Education Fellow at the Bronfman Center.

Mel Friedel: How has my Jewish identity been shaped in the past year? It feels like the most rich year for my Jewish identity, like, I think, starting to, like move through society as a Jewish professional for the first time, a little over a year ago, I really have sort of started to like, I guess sort of slipped into a confidence that I didn't have and like, not only am I developing new lenses to see the world in a more like spiritually empowered way. But I think a lot of the spaces I've been a part of, and like the teachers I've had, and the conversations I've been a part of have given me a lot of permission to be Jewish in a way that feels authentic for me. And that's so different than what being Jewish in the way that I was raised in a certain like shape of Jewish form that I was expected to fit into, that I didn't ever like Judaism. And it just didn't have anything to do with me. And over the past year, it feels like every day, it has more and more to do with me. And I'm finding myself more in it, or I'll find out like, oh, this is already something that I really love practicing, like, oh, I already feel like this deep sense of gratitude and this like new level of depth of my lungs when I reach the ocean, and when I see the ocean and then finding out that there's a Jewish blessing for when you see the ocean is like what that's been in me all along. And so, I do think there's, um, yeah, like a new empowerment that through being steeped in more Jewish experience and Jewish text and Jewish practice over the past year, and just like being invited and called into new spaces, I've learned a lot of ways in which I actually do fit that I didn't know about before. It feels so funny, because, um, there's like a version of myself that I've become that no one from home recognizes, before Bronfman, and before springboard, and they, like are loving, seeing, like, who she becomes, but they're like, oh, we don't remember her. So how did I get here? Oh, why did I become, why did I even choose this path, literally, random, random, I am a random Jew, like.

I think I'll, I will, I'll refer to like this sort of pivotal Jewish moment that I kind of like realized that Judaism was important to me, that was in my junior year of college, in my semester abroad in Paris. And at that point, I still like wasn't into Judaism. I was raised in a casual conservative community, where like, most of my friends were in like a reform/conservative practice. And no one

was like, really into it. It was like, as a spiritual religious thing. It was a cultural and social hub for us, which I loved about it. But I never really was like, Jewish on a I was like, I refused to go to my confirmation ceremony, even after my parents had sent me through all the confirmation year classes. And I like playing every Wednesday and Sunday, I went, I went and then I refused to go to the confirmation ceremony, because I was like, I actually don't want to be confirmed in this thing that I don't believe in and I don't identify with. And then I kept that sort of like anti organized religion, atheist very, which I don't think that that, like, there are plenty of Jewish atheists and I think Judaism is welcoming of that. But I just was sort of, yeah, resistant to like, a lot of the like canon and the parts that like, are foundational to the community that I think followed me through college. And then it wasn't until I was in Paris, my junior year, where I suddenly was so aware of my Judaism in a way that I had never noticed before. And suddenly it felt like okay, wait, this is actually something to be examined. And this is actually a part of me that is apparently relevant. And I started I started to realize like, I was the only Jewish person in my program. I actually was studying at the Catholic Institute of Paris. I remember like at one night out with other students, I met this French Jewish student and it was like this fascination to me because I was like, oh my gosh, like I walk through the streets here and I feel so aware of my Judaism and like finally now like someone who might understand, and I was really seeking that understanding, and I didn't feel belonging there and the way that I had accidentally taken for granted all the years in Jewish spaces growing up. What was it about being in Paris that made me feel out of place as a Jew? I think it was like a lot of the narrative before I got there of like my parents saying, don't bring any of your Jewish jewelry or your Hebrew jewelry, like don't tell anyone you're Jewish. And like this sort of, like, fear that I'm laughing just sort of out of like, this sort of nervous laughter But um, it really is like this fear that that was instilled in me before I went there. And I did share with my professors and peers that I was Jewish and I actually was, thankfully accepted for that. And people were sort of like, fascinated by like, oh, this Jewish girl in our class. And it was really amazing to be sort of like a Jewish representative for some people, but part I think so it was part of like, before I got there, and then also just like, I think not being able to tell where the Jews were [laughs]. Like, I feel like in America, I've always found that like the Jewish people and like gravitated towards them. And like, I'm in college, I didn't really gravitate towards Hillel during the first three years of college because I had already made so many Jewish friends just through like the dorms and classes and

other activities. And I felt so I felt Jewishly surrounded and Jewishly held phrases says that people would get. And when there was a bomb risk situation in one of the Jewish residential neighborhoods in Paris, everyone on my program was talking about it as sort of like a political like separate event from them, like, oh, how scary and it for me, it felt so personal, but like, I just I became very aware that I was sort of alone in that identity. And yeah, the passive part of it really came to the surface and I realized this can't be this can't be something passive for me anymore, I need to make it active. Are there other times in my Jewish journey, right, had that exhale, experience? I think like even once I once I became a Jewish professional, and I tapped into this Jewish pride and Jewish excitement and really like, this thirst to keep drinking from this well of like wisdom and excitement and I feel like I was having these like two different identities where it's like, okay, like secular Jewish Mel, is this version and then, like, hyper spiritual Jewish Mel is this other version? And like, how do they both fit into like my body in my interactions in my life. And even though the first chapter is so much longer, this later chapter feels so much louder.

And the first time that I really felt like, I actually like, they could be one and like, I actually could be a part of myself and like, move through society with like, spiritual pride, rather than sort of like spiritual shame was last summer when I was in this program called BCI in California to run by Brandeis Ziering. And I went as a professional development opportunity as part of Springboard and it was this cohort of like 40 Jewish people in their, like, 19, to 29 age range. And what we created there really was like, wow, it was a very radical experience of Judaism. It was, like a new, like, part of the goal of the program is sort of to like, make people feel like they are creative. Really, the main, the most pivotal moment of that was a practice at BCI, called Avodat Halev, service of the heart, where we all would gather every morning and every evening to hear sort of a five minute story from each of the participants and staff members. And I wrote mine about where I had this, this crazy experience where I like, was in communication with a star. And I'm even laughing about this now because it feels so silly. And I am embarrassed to talk about it still in so many spaces. The way that people actually like related and supported and celebrated me for that aspect of myself at BCI was like a whole new sense of belonging that like I finally had permission to use this language of like God and to like talk about talking to a star in a way that in my old community at home, I just, yeah, never felt comfortable. The message that I sort of received

from this star was like, really like a, like, it felt like an umbilical, like, nonverbal, like love flow, like, it just felt like a little like, delivery of just like, divine compassion and like okayness that is, like, what I also see as like a lot of like, this core, like sense of being that is, like, neither good nor bad. There I was, like, you know, not the first person to feel lost in that desert, certainly not even first person, like in my own ancestry to be wandering in a desert. And that's what a lot of like, God language means, to me is like, just just holding it all. Even in the walls of Bronfman, there's a certain version of me that is still like, you know, to align with certain expectations of like, what a Jewish educator or a Jewish professional like, should look like or sound like or, honestly, with full transparency like, I don't think it's like, I still don't feel like it's that relatable on a wide level to like, talk about communicating with stars, that feels a little weird to me still. And so that's why it was like such a radical experience at BCI to really be held in that and to feel like that was actually welcomed and like relatable, so maybe it's more relatable than I'm giving the world credit for. But yeah, I definitely like feel like I'm still coming into this full version of myself. And so I'm really grateful for you like holding this space and allowing me to reflect on my most recent, fully formed as, as of yet, version of myself.

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.