

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 Tziona Chernoff, a senior in Steinhardt studying Childhood and Special Education.

Tziona: I grew up modern orthodox, and I think one of the things about modern orthodoxy especially when you're in a community, of modern orthodoxy, is Judaism is like breathing. Like it's a part of everything we do. However, when I was 10, we went to a pluralistic camp, where we were like the only Orthodox Jews to attend. It was really a camp of kids who were either like pluralistic or culturally Jewish or conservative and reform, but their families have gone there. Going from being like a 10 year old, where like everything, and everyone you know, does the exact same as you to a 10 year old where like, you're very distinctly different made me really conscious of my practices. One of the pretty easy examples is me and my siblings would daven by ourselves while the other kids would like pray. But it definitely made me really like aware of the decisions I made. And it also changed it to a decision because prior to that, everything I did was like, of course, I was going to keep Shabbos, no one didn't keep Shabbos. Like, it wasn't really a decision, it was like the way I lived. There's a lot of tension sometimes with my pluralistic movement and my practices. And I will say that, in the end, I kind of always got what I needed. And when I was a camper, a lot of those pressures came from other campers, that was really easy to deal with it. It didn't necessarily feel like an authority figure telling me something, it felt like a bunch of people that I was friends with. So I had the ability to like, explain myself and like make my decision clear. However, when I worked as a counselor for two years, I was faced with a lot of issues that I had never had before. And it was a really hard thing for me to like accept that I had to like fight for a space that I had been in for like a very long time. They had a Jewish like, leader director, and they were like, very personally offended by my practices. And I didn't understand why. And it was really frustrating because they were a direct supervisor to me. That had had a camper, that was not necessarily great with like spaces and people. I had worked very hard with this camper to like, get them into a better space. And this advisor had told the camper not to trust me, and that I like separate myself from the community, and their example was the fact that I pray by myself. And it was really like hard because I was, I was 19 with the responsibility of a full grown adult, like I was the mother to like 10 kids, basically, because that's how camp works. And like there's this like,

40 year old woman, like going to my camper, this child, and like saying, don't trust her. And then on top of that they had had this religious director, we were doing this activity to like, show kids that we all come from different Jewish backgrounds. So it was like, "raise your hand if you light candles Friday night", like, "raise your hand if like your family celebrates Christmas" like activities that would give kids this view, right? And this person had said, "raise your hand if you go to a shul where men and women are equal". And then they said, "raise your hand if you go to shul that men and women sit separately". And that was like their opposite. And it was very difficult for me to hear that because I had been working with all my campers talking about how like I'm orthodox, but doesn't mean this and that. And like there are a lot of kids who come in with a very negative view of Orthodoxy because of either personal experiences or family experiences, which is totally understandable. And like I had been building this idea of like, that's not all Orthodox people. To have, like a person in front of the whole camp, kind of just like knock down what I have been doing was like really difficult.

So orthodoxy. I am a really proud, modern orthodox to open orthodox person. I love it. The thing that I didn't necessarily love growing up was I was also like, a feminist. And when I grew up, I went to a school where like, from basically kindergarten to like eighth grade, I was with the same 30 kids. So like, I was always the angry feminist and I had this like, idea, like everyone had this idea of me, which meant that when I fought for things that was just like, brush off of like, oh, it's just Tziona. I think that like the thing about it was also a lot of people in my school that I felt should have been on my side weren't because they didn't necessarily like agree. So like girls on my school were just like, not on my side. They didn't get it. I was like, but this is for you. Like this is for you, shouldn't you be agreeing with me? I think that what I learned is like, there are people who are going to be satisfied with the situation and that's not necessarily wrong, and like to turn to them and say like you're wrong for doing it is not going to get them on your side.

High School I didn't really think about sexuality period. I was kind of existing. I was like, very focused on getting into college, like moving on in life. So like, I was like, I have to be straight because everyone's straight. Gonna just shove anything else aside and I'm gonna get myself to college. So I would say like my story of figuring out myself really started Israel, which is probably a weird place like a year, in an orthodox yeshiva program is probably not where

everyone's like, and that's when I discovered I was gay. But we talked a lot about like going to Yonatan and David and like, it's clear coded like very clearly and like even people who don't necessarily believe that they were in a gay relationship, have to acknowledge that there was something here that was more than a friendship. And like how if we have this in Judaism and we have this as like, the statement of friendship, David and Yonatan pop up 1000 other times in Talmud. It's like they are this like, clearly very accepted people. How do we have this and like reconcile everything else? And how what is right and wrong. And I think it helped me a lot like that you're not doing anything wrong if you are gay, because like clearly, at some point, we were like, this is chill. I think people think that I'm like this enigma, but like, I would argue that I know 30 of me. The issue is we just don't talk about it. I think that just like having more conversations, would like benefit kind of all involved.

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.