

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 Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, Executive Director of the Bronfman Center.

Rabbi Sarna: I was raised in a very Jewish neighborhood in Montreal, Canada, and I went to a Jewish school, I went to synagogue, I went to Jewish day camp. But I would say the first time that I became aware of my Jewishness almost like a rude awakening, was when I was in high school, and it was on the basketball team, and we played against another team. And when we came onto the court, I noticed that they were pennies on the court. And it would never have occurred to me that people in the stands would have been throwing pennies at us. Because, you know, Jews, you know, cheap, money. I had no idea what was going on. I was like, what are these pennies on the court? So I just started picking them up to move them to the side. And then someone came over to me, one of my teammates, came over to me, "Sarna, what do you doing"? So that was, I would say, one of the first times that I became aware of, of my Jewish identity in a kind of abrupt and rude way. No, I think the Jewish community that I grew up in in Montreal is very, very different than my own kids' experience growing up here in New York. In Montreal, the community's smaller, obviously, than the one in New York. It's also very, it's very well organized. There's like, one large Jewish community campus that has the Y, the Jewish Public Library, the social service base, the Federation building, it's all within like a few blocks radius. And then there's also, you know, obviously a lot of synagogues and schools, but to me, as a child growing up in it, I felt it really offered offered a lot of opportunities, as a young person. I would say what I was particularly aware of as a young person growing up there was kind of the historical vector. A lot, very high percentage of Holocaust survivors in Montreal, like I remember once being in shul, and an older gentleman asked me what I was doing for the summer, so I said that I was going to camp, he says, "you know, when I was younger, I said to go to camp. I didn't like it, so I left". But, of course, like his story was very, very, very different than my story. But that that was one of the features for me, growing up in Montreal in the 80s and 90s, was very much, you know, understanding where so many in the community had come from.

Probably one of the most formative experiences of my life, I was 15 years old, I had been raised in a modern orthodox family and was in a modern orthodox school, and that was my whole social circle. And someone in my class, actually a year above me, came over to me one day during school, and she says, "do you want to come to this conference that's being organized completely by high school students, for high school students, where we invited all kinds of speakers, but really, it's us high school Jewish student activists from across Canada, who are organizing and running it?". And so I was one of six students from my school who went and there were about 120 students really from across Canada, who were able to come. Part of the impetus for

the formation of the group was the Soviet Jewry movement, which was a decade or two behind us, but nevertheless, you know, fighting antisemitism, standing up for Israel, a lot of these causes. But then I really felt in the minority. I mean, I was one of the one of the few people there who was shomer Shabbat, and most importantly, it was really my first time encountering, on a substantive level, people the same age as me, who identified strongly as Jewish, but as a different denomination, or a different persuasion of Judaism. And one of my most vivid memories was, I'm hearing a talk by a reform rabbi who was based in Toronto, about who is a Jew. And I remember it sounded so foreign to me. And I went over to him afterwards, and I literally spent the next six hours the entire Shabbat afternoon, arguing with him, trying to prove that he was wrong, and I was right. And I came away from that conversation, but really from that weekend, it was like coming out of a bubble. Reflecting back, I realized that I had spent so much time and energy trying to disprove his position. And I had not really thought critically about why I believed what I believed. And did I believe things that I believed just because I was raised a certain way, or was I coming to them independently. So this was formative for me, not just in a, in a Jewish sense, but also in the sense that it made me realize something about myself, which is that I grow the most, when I am confronted with difference, when I meet people who have a different outlook on life than I do. And although that comes with a certain degree of discomfort, but it was, remains, one of the greatest kind of mind opening experiences in my life, it really taught me something about myself. The way this, that memory translates into the work that is the Bronfman Center, I mean, I can say that it's my, it's the only job that I've ever had, you know, I came here 2002, first anniversary of 9/11. Fresh out of rabbinical school. Actually, it's a dirty secret, I hadn't actually completed rabbinical school by the time I started. I still had a number of tests and courses left, but I did get it done, I got I finished, but it's very connected. I had, look, I in my own life, I swung, there were times that I experienced the greatest growth, through being immersed in an environment of difference. But at other times in my life, I felt like I grew tremendously by being around almost completely like minded people. And just drilling, drilling, drilling very, very deep. So the years that I spent in yeshiva, whether in Israel or at Yeshiva University in New York, you know, studying Talmud 15, 16 hours a day, you know, memorizing pages of Talmud, memorizing the codes, those were also great moments for me. So I think that what the Bronfman Center represents for me is, it's a bit of both, I mean, it's certainly weighted towards, you know, being immersed in New York City, New York University, with all their diversities. But at the same time, it also does afford the opportunity for me to plug in on occasion, to that kind of very the kind of depth that that really sustained me. And that's ultimately what speaks to me about the Bronfman Center mission, as we have it formulated now, which is to be a home for Jewish students, but also a Jewish center for the whole university. It's both about being anchored and drilling deeper than we've ever had before. But also, it's about understanding ourselves in the context of others. And I don't think that's going to go away. And it

you know, especially when I first started here, the first few years, I kept from friends and from colleagues, other people would ask me, "so how much longer you're going to be hanging out with college kids?". And for me, it was always something so enlivening, you know, because I always felt like, everybody wanted me, it's always a new story, no two people are the same. I'm just inspired and uplifted by the moment of journey that everybody's on, in a way that's very different once people are settled.

I accept the challenge, I guess that's what I'd say is that my version of Jewish practice comes with accepting the challenge that there is no performance of ritual, no observance of the mitzvah, which comes independently from the very present. And the very particular circumstances within which you find yourself at any given time. I got I felt very acutely, over the course of this pandemic, that although normally in a Jewish sacred space, what's located at the front, which is in some way, the object of focus, is the ark, which contains the Torah. And we were praying by and large in our dining room, facing the window, which overlooked 23rd Street. And what we saw over the course of the pandemic was, first of all, nothing, you know, especially even New York City emptied out March, April of last year, and seeing essential workers and the hospital personnel, you know, walking to and from, from the subway to NYU Langone go under the VA or Beth Israel at such and the other hospitals. And then we saw the Black Lives Matters protests, marching by our window. And so if anything in any kind of surreal way that window became our Ark, you know, that dining room is our sacred space. And, and to me it wasn't okay this is second best or it's better or it's, it's real it just it is. I mean no matter where we are in life and and life takes us all kinds of places. Part of what prayer is, the way I see it is, is settling on something that is an Ark, a sacred Ark, within the context where you are in the moment. And so for me during the pandemic, it was that window. But for, for me at a different point in life, it might be something else. I'm here today what feels like a great day. I just walked through Washington Square Park, and the trees are blooming and the grass is green and the flowers already coming up. And there is not a single parking lot that had a spot. And so, if anything, it's the parking lots in New York City that tell you how the city is doing. And it's the city is coming back, New York City is really coming back. And it will be stronger, let's hope, but I think there's good reason for people to anticipate that these will be a roaring 20s, that there will be, for many people, a strong appeal of materialism, hedonism, self focus, kind of for that to be the channel of revenge on the pandemic, where many people felt like so much was taken away from them - time, community, family, individuals. So I think we have a real spiritual challenge ahead of us as a community, a collective challenge, which is to not see recovery and coming back in individual terms, but to really see it in collective terms, to always think that we are recovering only as well as the most vulnerable among us. And we, you know, forget others at our own peril. And I think there's, we have to return to ethics, you know, return to an ethics of care, and to really be committed to each other as we move forward. And I think, if anything, this is the challenge that I

hope students will lean into the most. I'm drawn to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which talk about the Hebrew, Shivat Zion, or the return to Zion. And when Jews have been exiled, lived in Persia, and then a band of them decided to come back to Jerusalem. So to come back to the city, and they find in the city some residents who had kind of stuck it out. But that are also committed to rebuilding, the rebuilding the walls and, and rebuilding the temple, and rebuilding, just rebuilding and repopulating the city. And they're faced with, with many big questions, because rebuilding the city is not just about the city, it's about the society. So it's not a there's no specific text. But it's kind of that moment in, in Jewish history. And in particular, in the book of Nehemiah, there is a re-establishment of the covenant where and in every society's is established on some kind of Covenant. And I think we need to figure out, we in New York City, need to figure out what are the premises of our coming together, coming back together. There's gonna be a lot of new faces, New York City, and there's going to be a lot of faces, sadly, that we are not going to see anymore. And then we have to figure out what is it? What is that bond between us?

I think it took me seven years to become a New Yorker. I still feel connected to many, many places in the world. Over those seven years in New York it made me realize that the only way to really be a New Yorker is to leave as often as you can. And so you know, I continue to visit Montreal several times a year and and Israel most summers and and and have some camp experiences, especially for my kids. But there is something that New York gives to the world in a way that no other city gives. And there's a way that New York City leads in a way that that no other city can lead. And it's, it has something to do with the wild mix of people who come from all over, and are here to make themselves the best version of themselves, whatever that means. And sometimes they come to do that for a year or two, or sometimes for longer. But for so many people around the world, New York represents the dream and that's what it's become for me. It's been a place where I've had you know, thanks to NYU, and to the community and to the great staff at the Bronfman Center. It's been it's become a place where I felt like I've been able to do things that were beyond my wildest dreams, and somehow that to be my life, so there aren't really words for that. But New York is home.

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