

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 me, Rachel Bell, a senior in the College of Arts and Science, studying sociology and child mental health, and the proud host of your favorite podcast.

Jacob Fertig: Could you share with us your name, your, your, your year, and what you're studying?

Rachel Bell: What? For me to write my own intro? My name is Rachel. I am a senior. And I'm studying sociology and child adolescent mental health.

Rachel Bell: Really, until I got to college, I didn't have a Jewish identity. I lit candles on Hanukkah, 'cause it made my grandma happy. And I had a Passover Seder that we skipped through and was silly and wasn't didn't was not because we felt religiously obligated to do so, it was because we wanted to be with our family and feel some sort of connection to ancestors, but it was all under this, like, tent of knowing your history in relation to the Holocaust, relation to trauma, not in relation to Judaism as a religion. Being clear having trauma to have dealing with disability things, all of these things to me felt really in opposition to any religion. And I had no distinction between Judaism and Christianity and anything else, they were all just religion and not something for me to be a part of. The first time I had any sort of Jewish identity was in college, I went to Shabbat services for the first time. And the first time I went, I really didn't actually want to go at all. I had no concept of Reform or Conservative. I knew what Orthodox was and I knew that wasn't me, but I didn't know anything else. But I went to Reform service because that's just where people I knew were coming from were going to and I was so uncomfortable and cried a lot and left very abruptly. Went again, started, still felt super uncomfortable, literally cried the whole first year that I went, but I still didn't have a Jewish identity. I still was like, Okay, do this Jewish thing sometimes, in the Jewish Center. But I think just moving through the Bronfman Center and going to more services and more I went to High Holidays, I started to feel like I was Jewish for the first time and sort of have to come up with a Jewish identity because it's such a, like, identifier when you meet people. I didn't go to the Reform community, I'm Conservative, I'm this and I, honestly, I'm a senior and still don't know if I can confidently say I have a Jewish identity. I have, I have a Jewish identity. I don't think I could label it. But

yeah, the first time I was conscious of my Jewish identity was maybe never, maybe in college when I felt like a Jewish person. It was really confusing to me when I came into an adult Jewish community where very few people are descendants of Holocaust survivors or have Holocaust survivors in their close family and felt such a deep connection to the Holocaust and such a deep trauma and feeling a- like, not feeling, like, in a way that it's not true. Feeling, like, really feeling the marginalization was really weird to me. I didn't understand. I understood if someone told me I've experienced antisemitism, then I said, that makes total sense. You experienced the thing, you feel this identity, people who I knew had never experienced antisemitism, really feeling marginalized by their Jewish identity, was not a thing I understood until very recently, so I didn't feel any sort of kinship. I also was being marginalized by Jewish people my whole life. The people who treated me poorly, who were homophobic, who caused trauma, who did these things, were all Jewish people, because that's just who I was around. So I didn't feel any sort of kinship to them. I felt like you are the person causing this marginalization. Now, I understand and I feel much more tied to the Jewish community because I feel like a Jewish person, and I think because the people I love experience this and they feel this marginalization, I feel it honestly for them more than for myself. I feel it, like, in an empathy, like, in a we're in this community to do together, we're holding these things together. I, when I move through the world as Jewish person, I wear a Star of David and I don't feel fear, maybe it's because I'm so conscious of my other identities that are causing me fear that I don't have the ability to hold all these things, but I feel much more tied to Jewish people because of it now than I did growing up.

Coming out to my mom as Jewish was harder than coming out to my mom as queer. She was really distraught by it, not because she has any negative anything about people who are religious, like her brother's a Hasidic Jew, like, they're super, super close, it's not a judgement, it's, I was so fervent in my, like, anti-religious-ness, in my, like, intense atheism growing up that it was like, "Who are you? Why did this thing happen? I don't understand." Like, our parents were happy about it, which I was really surprised by it 'cause they don't really do anything religious, they, but they were like, "Oh, you're gonna now marry a Jewish boy, it's gonna be beautiful." and they liked that I had a community. My dad really was happy about it. I think a lot of his happiness

came from I never really had any community before college. I had a lot of friends. I had people that I spent time with, but I didn't have a community I had. Like, I didn't, I wasn't a part of anything. And I think he doesn't s- wouldn't say this, but I think he was mostly happy to be like, "Oh, she's a part of a thing." And my mom was kind of like, "How did this happen?" Kind- she didn't call me a hypocrite, but it's kind of like, "You're being so how? Like, how is this a thing?" I'd always see in Judaism as this is an institution. I had been to a synagogue, growing up that I really hated that was really problematic, that didn't b- honor, like, interfaith marriage and my parents or my mom was interfaith married, like, that's a problem, just generally problematic. And any encounter that I had with Judaism was through institutions. So I just like, okay, the church, just like the church is a thing, the synagogue is a thing. It is the institution of Judaism, and it's just of Judaism has no room for me. So I have no room for it. Not until I was taught Judaism is like, is you. You are your own Judaism, you're creating your own Judaism. It is so separate from any institution. It lives outside of institutions everywhere. Did I understand, oh, I can be this I can be this I can have these ideas and thoughts and communities. I think anytime, like, anyone in your family life just changes fundamentally is complicated, so working around that has been weird. There's every year, people, mostly queer people, just 'cause those are the people that I'm around the most, doing things with Keshet and just being me, that come in really hesitantly into the space and I can usually spot them out because they usually cry at Shabbat and I say I "Mmm! Get coffee with you!" And it is, for so many people, the first time they get to experience themselves fully going to college, no matter what their identities are and seeing someone just become like a free version of themselves is so beautiful. And it's not for everyone. I talk to someone recently, who came their freshman year was like, no actually really hated it, I really hated Jewish life, I didn't feel connection to it, I have my own spiritual practices, I really don't feel Jewish community. But I never would have been comfortable saying that having not tried everything and I think that's something that's really important. But it's actually not for everyone and I am conscious and I don't always do a good job of making that clear when I talk about this being a space for everybody. I think it is a space for everyone wants to be here, it doesn't have to be a space for everybody because I think that can also be off putting to people who are like, "I don't know if this is for me, why, why do I need to be here? Why is this where Judaism lives?" And I think being a senior now and thinking about where my Judaism is gonna live after this year, I've been thinking about that a

lot more and seeing all the other Jewish things the world has to offer and I've been so nervous and been so scared that there's not going to be Jewish community, I mean, Jewish life. And I said to someone recently, "How am I gonna be Jewish after college?" And they said, "'cause you're Jewish!" Is that, I don't understand. But no, I do. I think that is something that took me four years to really understand, like, I'm a Jewish person, regardless of what community I'm in, there will be Jewish community, like, regardless of where I am in life, there will be Jewish community because I will create it around me and I will find places, little corners of other Jewish spaces to fit into. And also, if you don't have Jewish community, if you don't want Jewish community, you don't have to have it. And I, I think knowing that has made me want it more. Knowing that I don't have to be here. I don't have to do Jewish things. I don't have to be at the Bronfman Center. I don't do any of these things. And I'm here anyway is, like, the thing that reminds me, oh, supposed to be here. If I was talking to my stubborn, atheist, hating religion teenage-self, I would tell her that it sucks. That it really, really sucks. And things are terrible. And sometimes the world is really bad. But you're gonna find community because of those things. You are going to find yourself because of these things. I wish that didn't happen to you. I don't wish it to happen to anybody. But I spent so long looking for like, how could I have stopped it? How can I undo this? How can I change things? When is this reason gonna come? Why do good things happen- why do bad things happen to good people like what is going on? I don't think anyone has any answers for any of those questions, um, but I think knowing that, like, knowing that your identity is gonna come from it and there's going to be an identity that you really cherish and other people will find strength in you. Because you carry these things with you. Doesn't mean it happened for a reason. It means there, you can make a reason because it happened. You can like turn this into something that has a purpose, that makes other people feel like they have a reason.

Outro: Thanks for listening. This episode was produced by the b|hive Story Collective at the NYU Bronfman Center. You can listen to all four seasons of Opening the Tent on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. I hope you've enjoyed this glimpse into the Jewish stories of our community.