

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 Rebekah Thornhill Tokatlilar, Managing Director of the Bronfman Center.

Rebekah: The first time that I felt Jewish. My family is not Jewish, but we grew up celebrating Jewish traditions and holidays. And because I was living in a suburb of Austin, Texas, and I went to public school, so I really didn't interact with other Jewish people. My parents, the reason that they raised my four younger siblings and celebrating Jewish traditions, is because they grew up as religious Christians and got to go to Israel when they were newlyweds, and just became not just fascinated, but actually really drawn to Judaism. I think that had there been more resources for conversion in Austin at the time, you know, we're talking about 30 years ago, more, then I think they might have pursued a conversion process. But also being in the South where the sort of Christian mentality of approaching your spirituality, you just do it. Like, if you want to be a Christian, you can be a Christian. And if you want to be a Jew, you just, you know, start doing Jewish things, whatever that means. My parents actually did have a couple of like Jewish friends who helped them like in that journey. And so, like I said, we grew up celebrating some Jewish holidays and keeping some form of kashrut in our house, not the most strict. So I had like, some sensibility, but knew there was something, I won't say missing, but just like we were not exactly Jewish, but we also like I definitely didn't grow up feeling any sort of connection to any other religion. I would stay home on Yom Kippur. And I remember in high school, getting in trouble actually from the attendance office for missing a day of school for a Jewish holiday. And I don't know if it was Yom Kippur, or if it was, if it was Passover or something. And I was really upset about it, because I had like a perfect attendance record and my IB psychology teacher, I was going to her class, and she saw that I was upset and she asked me about it, and she like walked me down to the attendance office. She was one of the more like, progressive people in my high school in Texas. And, and I remember she was like, visibly angry. And she went down to the attendance office with me, and she was like, "You need to correct this now. Rebekah this is an excused absence. This is unacceptable, you should not have made her feel this way". And that was like my first time feeling like different I guess. But then when I moved here to go to NYU, I came to the Bronfman Center for a Welcome Week event. I was totally intimidated, you know, I'm 18. I literally knew nobody, no one from my high

school came here. I didn't know anyone. And I came here looking for friends and just some comfort and familiarity. And I confided in this rabbinic intern like, look, I'm not really Jewish, like but I've, I feel very Jewish. And I just am looking for like community and resources, and I think I would like to convert to Judaism. I just don't really know where to start. But he was like, you know what, I'll follow up with you. And he wrote me an email and was like, "Maybe you should check out the Kabbalah Center. I'm not sure if the Bronfman Center is the place for you". And I was devastated, you know. So I left the Bronfman Center promptly and never like tried to engage again. But then when NYU opened its campus in Tel Aviv, I felt drawn to go study there, also because Israel had so fundamentally changed my parents like view of religion, spirituality, the world, how they wanted to raise their children. And this felt like a really incredible opportunity. I was a Jewish Studies major, and it just like felt very natural. And I had, I had like many NYU students, I think missing community and connection. I had friends, I had, you know, like, I was on the dance team, but I was a little lonely. It's New York City and somehow like you're still lonely. And I think a lot of NYU students experience that. And it was the first semester that it was open, and I just remember feeling like more at home in Tel Aviv than I had anywhere else. So at that point, that was really that was also like transformative for me that was when I decided that I feel very Jewish, I just need to like make this like a real thing. And when I got back, a friend of mine, she connected me to Rabbi Sarna and so I gave the Bronfman Center a second chance. I got it I had a much more much warmer reception from there and yeah, and so then I and then I did yeah, I did an Orthodox conversion process and this became this place became my home.

My parents were very against Christian holidays. No celebrating a Christian holidays and our home, which was hard for the rest of my extended family, like my grandparents, I think that was a challenge for them. But yeah, everybody was very supportive and that most of my friends loved coming over for Passover Seder, loved that. So that was always very, it was always good fun. I mean, like in terms of, you know, Shabbat observant, I was on, I was a dancer. And so, Friday nights were spent at football games, and my siblings were all involved in sports and things like that. So we really didn't do, it was mostly around like holidays, when we would feel that sort of like difference between, you know, us and others, and not so much on like the week to week Shabbat stuff. I mean, even still now, believe it or not, even though I have a family of my own, and I'm not new to the Jewish community,

I'm still relatively new in terms of like, my Jewish journey. I don't think that most people that I talked to tried to alienate me, but they are curious, like, you know, why would anybody do this. And so I do find myself like, explaining that, but I'm, I'm open about it, and that's okay. But I have to say, like, my first time, you know, coming into the Bronfman Center, when, when that rabbinic intern who was in a position of power or authority, like basically telling me like, you don't belong here, that was that was really challenging. And it's one of the things that has informed my approach to our work here, because I really can't stand the thought of any student, you know, walking in here and feeling like they don't have a place, you know, that was really a transformative moment for me. In terms of, sort of my approach to community building and bringing together so, you know, like, are we are we like, are we practicing what we preach, which is, we want to be a home for Jewish students, we also want to be a Jewish center for all of NYU. Doing pluralism is hard. Pluralism is really, really hard. And also, it's important too to make space for everybody to explore their identities within spaces where they feel like, I can be unapologetically myself. You want to make sure that people feel like they you know, if they can be proudly Jewish, like you could you have a space for Jewish students. And it should be and like that, that's fine, you know, a home for Jewish students. And within that there, like, obviously, many different approaches to what that looks like. But just from the get go, expressing to people in lots of different ways. It's both like how we talk to people, but also in our external communications and what we offer here and we value diversity, we value difference of opinion and difference of expression, and we welcome all different backgrounds. And so are we actually achieving that through everything that we're doing? Like, are we making people feel like they can come to this place as their full selves? That's really what a home is, right? Like being able to be your authentic self? It doesn't always happen. I mean, how many times have you ever felt or have, I'll speak for myself, have I felt like with my own parent, am I gonna say this to them or is this gonna break their hearts, are they going to be mad? So of course, like, there's, we don't always get it right. But basically, to just make sure that we are making that space. I think one of the best ways to do that is by taking an interest in who they are, and what motivates them, what inspires them, what makes them anxious, what what what frightens them, you know, what are they worried about and just letting them build, making sure that we're building that trust. That's really how you build a community.

There was a there was a program called Chutzpanit at the Bronfman Center, started by my good friend and colleague and business partner now Dana Levinson Steiner. And it was at the time called Chutzpanit: From Campus to the C-Suite. And basically, the aim was to equip women-identifying Jewish college students with tools, skills, confidence, give them in network and a mentor, somebody who was in the working world, to basically help them learn how to advocate for themselves in the workplace. If they were in the workplace, if were in an internship or had a job like dealing with, unfortunately, you know, things like harassment, or if not harassment, how to really like, be a woman in the workplace, and as as people were just starting out, you know, doing that. And it was great, it was awesome. But we stopped running it after a while Dana actually moved on to another organization. But so a year ago, Dana came to me and to another, our other business partner, Nessa, and said, I really want to start a consulting business that is aimed at equipping early and mid career women-identifying professionals who work in Jewish organization. They don't have to be Jewish, but like working in Jewish organizations, and they have to be women-identifying. So and she said, will you do this with me. And we were like, yeah, why not start a business doing a pandemic, that sounds like a good idea. First of all, this has already been an idea before, even before the pandemic, we had talked about it off and on, it had been an idea to like, take it out of the college space and move it into like the early mid career professionals. And when things really, you know, hit the fan in March, April, and Jewish organizations started laying off a lot of staff we were noticing, because it is this is this is true, we can look up the statistics on this, a majority of the workforce in Jewish organizations are women 70%, but 70% of the leaders of Jewish organizations are men. And so what we're seeing early mid career people being laid off, tons of women, mostly early career, but some mid career too. So we thought, okay, this is an opportunity for us to try to help them as they look for their next steps. In the case of some some people, you know, who did get to keep their jobs, they were now doing a much bigger job and wondering, like, how do I advocate for a promotion for myself during a pandemic, you know, whatever. So basically, we're doing one on one consulting, but we're also about to launch a boot camp, which is a four week intensive, and it's sort of the best of our training. And we're basically trying to train early in mid career professionals in salary negotiation, you know, how to go from early to mid career or to try to get a managerial role, or how to, you know, distinguish yourself in the workplace, how to gain visibility in the workplace. There are unique challenges that women experience that I

don't think that men do, in today's world, maybe someday will be different. And so yeah, so that's what we do. And it's very much a side hustle and a passion project. All the three of us who work on it, none of us do it full time. But we've had a lot of clients and it's really fulfilling. I mean, like, I'll do like, I do a lot of Sundays or a lot of nighttime, or sometimes like an eight in the morning, before I come here and I it's always, it's very, very fulfilling.

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