

**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 Tzivia Appelman, a senior in the College of Arts and Science studying politics and philosophy.

**Tzivia Appelman:** Do I remember the first time that I was fully cognizant of my Jewish identity or expression? Yeah, it was a bit of a weird example, though, but here's a fun time. So I grew up modern Orthodox, my dad is a son of a rabbi. So I kind of grew up in that sort of mold, but it was very much like a kiruv oriented community, and kiruv means like, outreach and like trying to be inclusive of all different types of Jewish people. But I think there might have even been like mixed seating because back in the day, like in the early like, 50s, you know what I'm saying, like, Judaism in America was just something else, especially Orthodoxy. I think that something my grandfather would always say when he ran the shul, he would be like this is not an Orthodox space, like we're a space for Jewish people. Like that's, like stop calling us Orthodox like it's not. It's okay, listen, we follow halacha we keep Jewish law, but at the end of the day, like, we're all Jewish people. So for me, that was like, I guess, the background and the mold that I came through, but also understanding that my mom converted to Judaism from Catholicism, so half my family's not Jewish. So at the time, when this moment happened, this realization happened that, oh, my goodness, I'm Jewish, and there exists something called the non-Kews. I remember I was, I was very young, I was maybe like five or six. And I was at my non-Jewish cousin's wedding. And we were in a because the wedding was on Saturday, my mom and I were in a hotel the whole day, and we were going to go to the wedding afterwards. And then I remember, like, my mom said that grandma and grandpa are going to be driving over to pick us up before the wedding. And all of a sudden, I said, oh my God, grandma, grandpa, don't keep Shabbos? And that's when my mom realized, Oh, no Tzivia, let me explain to you something, so I converted to Judaism. And I'm like, oh, what does that mean? And she said, Hashem spoke to me and I decided to become Jewish. And I was like, okay, cool. And my mom every time my mom tells that story, she's always like, Tzivia was so fine with it, she was so normal as if that's like a normal thing to say to a six year old and I was like okay. I guess I thought you know, I so again, I grew up in a modern Orthodox Jewish school went my whole life K through 12 to yeshiva day school. And I also went to seminary for a year and a half in Israel. And being in college was what I like to call, you know, the bursting of the

bubble, right? Like some people, especially where I came grew up, a lot of them just go straight to you know, Queens College or Yeshiva University or Stern College for Women and just like to stay within that Jewish bubble and within the, especially the Orthodox bubble. And I specifically told myself in high school that I don't want that, I want to see the world I want to meet all different types of people and not be stuck in my own worldview, you know. I want to see be exposed to all different types of worldviews while still holding mine to my own. But then I also remember, when I got to college, it was, it was a bit of a shock, in certain respects, because I thought, oh, yeah, I'm used to like hanging out with non Jews, because I'm Tzivia and like, half my family's not Jewish. But then when I saw what, like in classes and whatnot, I found it very easy for myself to make friends with people who are not Jewish, but I felt that my own Jewish friends at NYU didn't always have that experience, especially the more Orthodox ones. So it was always a bit interesting to me, where I would like feel comfortable hanging out with my non-Jewish friends outside of class or inviting them to birthday parties, or even inviting them to Shabbat sometimes just like to hang out with them. And I saw that some of my own friends, Orthodox and not, didn't always feel that way. And I guess like, I've been reflecting on that a lot and especially thinking of it, you know, almost as you know, I love Hannah Montana. So my own "best of both worlds" kind of situation of, you know, on the one hand, I am very involved in the Bronfman Center and especially Shalhevet, the Orthodox community. On the other hand, I do a lot of things in this university that sometimes I'm the only Jewish person in the room, and I found I've been able to find community in both kinds of spaces, right, like one space it's that almost the Rav Soloveitchik, who is the founder of Modern Orthodoxy talks about this like existential loneliness almost right? Where sometimes even if you were to rent a room like surrounded by 1000 people, you still can feel completely and utterly alone. And I've definitely felt that especially being the only Jew in the room at certain times, or the only Jewish person in the room at certain times. But even in my own Orthodox spaces, or even in my own Bronfman Center, there are times where I've also felt that loneliness. So I think it, you know, different expressions of my own identity have developed in either space that I've been in, so I found that to be really fascinating for me.

So lots of times, I've been using the words Modern Orthodox, Orthodox, Jewish, whatever it is, you know, like, what is this? So I feel like within, I've

found myself primarily through, but for most of my life, within Orthodox spaces, and again, like similar to the synagogue that my grandfather, my grandparents ran, although they didn't, you know, like, at the end of the day, it was like, Orthodox, you know, but Modern Orthodox within itself can mean that, oh, like, you keep Shabbat, you keep kosher, but like, maybe you wear pants, or maybe you eat out dairy, or maybe you, you know, don't pray in the morning, or whatever it is. So there's quite a variety or a variance, I guess, of levels of observation within orthodoxy, and other labels as well. Like there's Modern Orthodox machmir, which means like, you're more stringent or YU machmir, which means like, you're more into the Yeshiva University kind of world and you hold more to their stringencies. And same thing with Zionism and how that fits in. But personally, I guess I, in when people ask me what my denomination is, my answer my explanation of it will differ depending on who I say it to. So I like to say I like to say Modern Orthodox machmir near because the initials for that spelled out "MOM". And I feel like that's just a great denomination to have the part of that that's a little hurtful to me, that that name of Modern Orthodox machmir near indicates that Modern Orthodoxy on its own, is not machmir meaning that it's not stringent. And that it's like the base level, and that, you know, people who are Modern Orthodox aren't really frum and like frum is the word used, it's not even a real good translation of a just a word that people throw around to say, like, oh, like more religious, or more, whatever. But at the end of the day, I think, you know, like, like we were saying before, a lot of these labels tend to divide us more than helping our own self identity. So I guess the way I like to describe myself is, you know, somebody who keeps Halacha, the Jewish law, some to the best of her ability, and who also believes in Torah Umadda, which is the phrase meaning Torah and secular works, right, who holds that we're not, the way I like to phrase it is that God created a universe not a shtetl, like we're not just here to exist within ourselves. We're here to exist and understand our own Torah values and understand our individuality as Jewish people, but also recognize that we're part of a larger world, and seeing how we fit into that mold and seeing how we can connect with others who are different than ourselves.

**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.