

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 Michel Ladue, a graduate of NYU and current Ezra Experiential Education Fellow at Hunter Hillel.

Mitchell: I grew up in Riverdale which is kind like a Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx. And I went to a Jewish preschool and my kindergarten through eighth grade, and I went to synagogue. So I didn't really realize that like other people weren't Jewish, because everybody I knew to some extent kind of was Jewish, although I have like family that's not Jewish. And I was like, oh, that's cool. Because then like, I also get to watch Christmas movies. But like, one thing that I remember is like the first time I can remember praying, which is when I was six, and I was in first grade, and my Hebrew teacher was very scary. And she would like yell at us, which is terrifying. I was so small. She was like grading our homeworks, and we were all like, standing there in a line. And, you know, I was I was six years old, and I didn't really understand the world, and I thought, we were learning math in school, and I was like, counting is nuts. And I was like, oh my gosh, so the highest as high of a number as I can count to, clearly in my six year old brain, that's how, that's how long I'll live. Because clearly, look, it's 2004, I understand how life works. And I'm like this, I'm like, I'll basically live forever, as long as I can keep counting. So I'm in, I'm in first grade, the teacher is grading people's homeworks. And she's just yelling at each of them. These, you know, these, you know, it's like, it's like at this assembly line, she's just just screaming at every kid. And I look up to the ceiling, and I think in my head to God, look, if I can, like pass this homework assignment, and she doesn't yell at me, I'll give up the counting thing. So like my first Jewish memory is talking to God being like, hey, I renounce immortality, if it means like, I can pass this homework assignment. Maybe maybe there's some things about that, that say things about me as a person today. But that that's definitely the first thing I remember. The Judaism I grew up with at home was very much like rules oriented. And it was kind of all about, like, we kept full kosher and we kept full Shabbat. And like those, that was the way it was. And I was taught like, that is what Judaism is. But like, even like my friends from synagogue and middle school, like they did not do those things. And it always felt like a thing about me that was different. I always felt like a little bit weird with them, but felt kind of weird with me, because I was like, I didn't really put a lot of thought into it. It was just like a thing that was happening. You know. Like, this is what

we're having for dinner, and also, if I use my phone on Shabbat, Hashem will be mad. Like, those are like the things that you think about. I guess, like, there's no like, big moment, but there's kinda just like a lot of like passive things that happened. Like, I remember my first like Shabbat in college, I was thinking to myself, and I was like, oh, you know, am I going to keep Shabbat in college? And then therefore, in the rest of my life? Like, maybe, prob, yeah yeah. And I was like, you know what, it was Friday, I was like, yeah, you know what, I'm going to keep Shabbat, Shabbat today. And that clearly, that means that I'll just be guy who keeps Shabbat. And then it was like, my second night in my Weinstein extra large twin bed, and I was like, having trouble sleeping, ecause if anybody's ever been an extra long twin bed in Weinstein, that's the experience. And I was like, okay, I think I'm gonna listen to like an episode of The Office to help fall asleep. And like that was that. And so I think the fact that this thing that like had been kind of ingrained in me like these are the rules, these are things you can and can't do, it never really felt like it was coming from like a place that I understood or felt super comfortable with, which is why it like, didn't feel like the biggest deal to just move away from because one night I wanted to watch like, Office olympics or whatever. Definitely, when I started, you know, not going by those rules, like there's a part of you that's just like, oh, man, I like things the way that they are. So like, even if change is good, change is scary. It was definitely like a source of kind of like tension and confusion for me, especially like my first year at college, when I wasn't really active in the Hillel or anything. And so like, I went from somebody that was in all these Jewish spaces, and doing all the Jewish things all the time to, like, the only Jewish thing I would do is I would walk down the stairs on Shabbats instead of taking the elevator, and I still had to take the elevator up because like, we didn't have stair access, or whatever. But like, that was a very different thing. And there was a part of me that felt bad and there was a part of me that was like, I mean, this is how I want to live my life. But it was definitely until I kind of figured out what made sense for me, there was definitely some of that tension. I think that like kind of that moment in my freshman year was when I stopped maybe caring as much about the rules but still didn't know what to replace it with.

Interviewer: Mitchell talked to us about his experience finding community and holiness in a new place.

Mitchell: And I think a big part of like, becoming a member of the Bronfman Center community is that I like realized like, oh my gosh, like this, like kind of beautiful community that's coming together is this kind of amazing thing. And like that's the thing that feels important and meaningful to me and I don't know, I ended up like writing these like different Divrei Torah because that was the thing I like to do. And there's this one weird moment where they're talking about the shekel, and they call it the holy shekel, there's two different schools of thought about why the shekel is called the holy shekel. And one person thinks that it's because it was like this perfect thing made out of gold. And there was like a complete absence of imperfection. It was all like, made through these perfect prophecies. And one person thought that it's the holy shackle because everybody gave in a shekel, and that's how they reported the census. And because like the shekel was the thing that these people use to become a part of something that was bigger than themselves. Like that's what made it holy, and I think that that like more than anything kind of sums up maybe the Judaism I grew up in, and like the Judaism, but I feel very strongly now. It's like, I don't think that like being holy or being close to God is like the absence of imperfection or doing the wrong thing. I think it's like coming together with the community to become a part of something bigger than yourself.

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.