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. JJ Adler talks to us about the pressures associated with labels in the Jewish community

JJ: One of the things that I very much struggle with, in Judaism as a whole, regardless of specific branch, are labels, because I think the way I identify with my Judaism is very complex and it’s very dynamic. I mean, I identify as someone who is Modern Orthodox Jewish, but that’s also not really encompassing, so I think with myself specifically, if people could really try to understand that the way I identify is, it’s very unique, and it’s often hard to explain, because it’s not something that I truly or fully have answered myself. So, sort of that journey that in many ways we’re all in, in college, if people could understand that it’s something that’s very much still developing. There’s definitely a tendency for people to look at me and say ‘okay, you know what, he’s this, he’s that’ and they just make their decisions for themselves, and occasionally I do get a fair amount of people who turn to me and say ‘I see you doing these things and I see you doing those things, so like how does this all match up? How do you describe yourself as a Jewish person?’ and while I love those questions and I love discussing it, it’s also not something that has a short answer. Often people ask me that, and they’re looking for a label, and that’s kind of frustrating because I don’t really identify with a label.

interviewer: JJ explained to us how his experience leaving Jewish Day School provided him with new perspectives on his own Jewish identity.

JJ: Growing up, I went to a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school through the middle of sixth grade. And then, over winter break of sixth grade, I switched to a different private school that wasn’t Jewish. It was very much the first time that I wasn’t surrounded by a Jewish environment. I was one of probably the only people in the school who were visibly and openly Jewish, walking with a Kippah. There were many times when it was not easy to be doing a lot of things and it very obviously would’ve just been easier to change the way I practice Judaism. When I got back to high school, I went to a modern orthodox high school, it was a time that was really difficult for me because I had spent so much time outside of the Jewish community that I very much felt like I was sort of missing out on something in a way that like for the past
two and a half years of my life it felt in a way that sort of things had been on pause and so now I'm coming back into things and somehow I'm behind. Which, you know, doesn't really make sense, but was definitely the feeling I was getting. My ninth grade year, for many reasons, was quite difficult. One of those reasons being facing that transition into a Jewish environment. So, that year, as a whole, was very much a transition back into it. And then I went off to the summer and everyone does whatever they do over the summer and then 10th grade I come back and things sort of seem to be a bit more in place. I think that was also a very important learning year for me in that it introduced me to the concept that just because someone identifies in a way that's similar to you in regards to Judaism doesn't necessarily mean that they have the same experience as you and it doesn't really mean that they practice the same way. That's a message that I've sort of kept with me throughout high school and making sure that I, myself, am very open to whoever and whatever they said was okay with me. I think labels as a whole, they're both really helpful but also really dangerous. They act as a way to sort of help us begin to figure out who we are where we sit where we lie and what our feelings are. They're also really dangerous though because they're so easily overused and misinterpreted. I think if we could, as a community, come to a point of recognizing that labels are sort of one word and brief descriptions, then they might even be of more value than they are now. But, we sort of have to work to get to that point, because I don't think we're there yet

**closing:** Thanks for listening. This episode was produced by the **b|hive story collective**. Follow @bronfmancenter on Instagram for new episodes.