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 Avital Krifcher. Avital is a sophomore at NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study. She spoke with us about the summer experiences that clued her in on the ways in which her peers perceived her religious identity.

Avital: I think there have been a lot of moments where I've been placed in contrast with other Jews and my practices have kind of been exposed as being different, so in many cases, the moments that I realized my like Jewish identity or expression was when I realized what it isn’t. But I would say that the first time was probably my first summer at Jewish summer camp. I went to a pluralistic Jewish Day School where I was there seen as the most religious or observant coming from a modern orthodox family and then I was put in Bnei Akiva modern orthodox camp, and for the first time, I was seen as the least religious or least observant because I wasn’t going to a modern orthodox day school and I wasn’t in a homogenous community back home of people who all practiced the same way. I was more secular than everybody else because I wasn’t in all Jewish studies or I was able to kind of socialize with people who practiced very differently than me or didn’t practice at all. I think that was the first time people asked me about my practices because they didn’t understand them. They didn’t know what they meant, and I think that was really the first time that I was like 'oh you’re something and I’m something different, which means I’m going to have to explain it', and that process of explaining was really when I guess I came to understand my Jewish identity and expression. That’s happened so many times since then, and I think that the second moment which I think is now more impactful, and that moment was when I was Szarvas my summer after sophomore year, which was a pluralistic Jewish summer camp in Szarvas, Hungary. I was in a fellowship with 25 Americans, and I was really, at that moment, really challenged and pushed to redefine my Jewish identity and expression, and that’s kind of the last point I think, I stayed kind of stable and sturdy in my expression, and that had changed drastically from my first summer at my summer camp.

interviewer: Avital remembers feeling lost in a religious rut, and finding new ways to practice with intention.
Avital: I think the first thing that sticks out to me was my last summer at camp, where I was feeling very lost for many many reasons and kind of the way that I resolved that feeling was I started to really rely and depend on Jewish practice and custom. I really dedicated my last summer at camp to learning about what I was doing every day. At camp we prayed three times a day, we had very long Shabbat services, and I never really knew what was going on. I knew the words and I knew the physical motions, but I didn't know why, I didn’t understand where it was coming from. So, I started doing my own kind of learning practices of reading through the English of the siddur on my own time. I started doing my own text studies. We were, that summer, during camo was Tisha B’av, so I read through Eicha and did this really intense commentary of Eicha that filled up a whole notebook, and for the first time when I went to davening in the morning, I really felt a connection to what I was saying, and I felt myself being different because I was still surrounded by all the girls on my side of the mechitza who were still just going through the motions. And that stood in such contrast to my first summer when I got there and everyone saw me as the least religious or least observant because maybe I wasn’t as rote as them, I wasn’t a robot, I wasn’t just going through it, and I really felt a true sense of kavanah, of intention, from it, that felt very different from my friends who objectively thought they were more religious or observant than me, and I think that that intention is really something that has stayed with me since. I really try in all my Jewish practice to feel more intentional. Jewish youth anything is such a bubble, and really being intentional in my praying and my practices got me out of that bubble of that small, insulated, Jewish sphere, but I felt so much more connected to just the larger world. I felt adult, I felt like I was joining this league of people who had gone through their journeys and were finally getting somewhere, and I felt like I was finally getting somewhere. I felt so confident in what I was doing, because in that bubble I was in, I was taught that there’s one way to be Jewish correctly; it’s reading from the text, it’s believing in the texts, it’s wearing skirts, it’s being shomer negiah, it’s not touching the opposite gender. There’s one way and if you can attain that practice, and believe in it, you’re golden. I thought that I had attained that practice and was golden and I was doing Judaism correctly. It wasn’t until I was at Szarvas, that I had, just, it was a mindblowing two weeks. I realized, if I look up from this book, there’s all this Judaism around me that has nothing to do with the text. It’s the community, it’s the love, it’s the pluralism, it’s the
acceptance, and that became my new conduit. Yes, the prayer book and the text is a way to do it, but there’s so many more ways.

**closing:** 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.