opening the tent - episode 7: Jordana Meyer

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 Jordana Meyer, a senior at NYU studying creative writing. She spoke with us about an early friendship that taught her a powerful lesson about finding common ground.

Jordana: Because I was in Jewish day school until I was 12 and I went to Zionist summer camp and grew up with a parent who had grown up in Israel, although I knew that wasn’t the norm it never occured to me that was in anyway unusual. It’s difficult to say because I never really had any non-Jewish friends until I was 12 and when I did the first friend I made was a Palestinian girl from East Jerusalem. So, my first foray out of my conservative Jewish world of the bubble of Washington, DC was straight into the heart of something that I wasn’t prepared for politically. In a lot of ways we had a lot more similarities than a lot of the regular waspy kids that I went into public school with. We ate similar foods at home and we had similar practices of prayer and similar linguistics. There were a lot of words that overlapped that we used in our homes that were both arabic and hebrew. We could talk about common places in Jerusalem, so in a way it was actually more familiar and more comfortable for me than stepping right into the heart of a pretty conservative white town. My introduction to this world of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict aside from having traveled to Israel many times in my childhood and having been there during the second intifata and having family there in the army and everything, my personal first foray into it was through the lens of friendship and not something else so I think that has really heavily influenced the way I’ve navigated it up to this point.

interviewer: Jordana reflected on her experience coming to college and seeking out an Israel centered community.

Jordana: When I was picking NYU, I did look into its previous BDS activity and because it had lain somewhat low that was a factor in my coming here. Then getting involved with Realize Israel was an absolute blessing. I found a community that had grown up similar to the way I did - similar in belief and values, but in very different places in the world, speaking different languages with different political beliefs, and different levels of practice. The fact that
there was one thing that held us together so closely and that has held us together for four years, I think is really beautiful and speaks to this transcendence of belief and value that is more than these identifiers that we put on SATs and college applications. It’s more than where we’re from and the language we speak, and what our interests are academically. It’s a common history and it’s something that we can’t run from and we understand that. Last semester, a friend of mine Mara who is also on the executive board of Realize Israel, she and I sat with Linda Sarsour, who has been accused many times of anti-semitism and definately of anti-zionism. She also was one of the leaders of the women’s march and was also doing amazing progressive things. Our decision to sit down with her came from a place of common humanity and affirming each other’s belief that what we were each doing was right even though it didn’t always line up. The backlash from that was so ugly. I had been used to hate mail from people who hated Israel. I was not used to hate mail from people who I thought would support me because we came from similar backgrounds. I was told I was a traitor to Zionism, I was told I was duped, I was told I was stupid and naive about the conflict. On the one hand it really hurts to be attacked by my own community, but on the other hand there is something affirming in the fact that what I was doing was so irritating to both far left and far right that, you know, the best compromises leave nobody happy. I think I was pushed a little out of the tent at that point, but it forced me to reconsider the tent and re-enter it with some type of confidence and knowledge. I think there are two ways to answer the question of what I wish people understood better about my Jewish identity. One is that it is inexplicably entwined with Zionism. They are one and the same for me. I think, the line that I come from, my family has always been Zionists, but that we are a diasporic people that has cherished and held this idea of Israel in the hardest times and now to see it realized is so deeply entrenched in the idea of Jewish yearning and the idea of Jewish longing. You can’t separate those two things. If you take out the sense of yearning and longing for Jerusalem there goes half our liturgy. To separate those things, to divide something would make a really unnatural division. So I wish people understood that about my identity. If one goes the other goes.

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