Opening The Tent - Episode 8: Hannah Siegel

**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 Hannah Siegel, a first-year student at NYU. She spoke with us about her experience growing up interfaith and her unique entry into Jewish community.

**Hannah:** I was raised interfaith and so I for most of my life viewed Jewishness as something that happened to people around me and it was like, I don’t know how to describe this. It happened for me in two directions. My mom is the daughter of Catholic Cuban immigrants and my dad is just from Jersey, there is no grand story there, but he's also Jewish. So I felt very much like Hispanic in that secondary connection and Jewish in that secondary connection. I’m trying to find a good way to describe it, but it was like if your brother was on the football team and you were like “yeah go Hawks” or whatever so I would take things personally if anything offensive was ever said. But I didn’t feel like I was truly part of the community; it was more like people on my team were connected to this. So, I remember not having a Bat Mitzvah and asking my parents if I could have one and them being like no (laughs) because I had been to like zero services ever in my life. And I asked my mom about it and later she was like I thought you were kidding. But, what happened is that around middle school I became conscious of the fact that I was gay and also understood how Catholicism was about that. I want to be fair to the faith so I’ll say too that there’s totally a way to be Catholic and LGBT and be accepted by your church and your community. That being said, the official church is never, in my opinion, in my lifetime, going to say anything positive in that direction. So it’s kind of like you would have to enter those spaces and know that the official line is that you’re not supposed to be there. And that’s not something that I’m capable of. I’m very much like all or nothing. And I think with any faith community you want to be included 100%, so especially in Catholicism where the sacraments are a big deal, it’s the 7 things you are supposed to do to have a really Catholic life. And one is to get married, and so it’s like how are you supposed to check all the boxes and do all the sacraments if you can’t get married, so I was like let’s check out Judaism. It’s funny because it was such a conscious process of like well that’s out, I have a backup option. So I had my dad take me to services which looking back was all so sweet of him because my dad’s family is very reform, very lax. I mean our Seder dinners could fully be live-streamed to Comedy
Central in terms of so irreverent, everyone is drinking the whole time, no one even knows the prayers. So my dad went to services with me several times and I was in the local Jewish youth group for like 10 minutes because I got scared because they were all Kosher and I didn’t know what that meant and I ordered pork from Chipotle and then I went home. I remember that was the turning point, I was like I’m going to be Jewish now. If not now, then like in the future. And now we’re living in the very Jewish future.

**interviewer:** Hannah reflected on her Jewish community back home in Orlando and what it meant for her to find a sense of belonging at the Bronfman Center.

**Hannah:** Nothing that truly struck me happened when I was getting involved with the Jewish community back in Orlando. And I only think that’s because most suburban Jewish communities are very old, they’ve seen a lot of years and it’s a little dusty and there wasn’t a lot of passion. It was like we’re elderly people and we’re going to service. But coming here has been so awesome and everything we do here in Bronfman has that kind of vibe to it. Bronfman is amazing in that it’s a really great place to be and all our friends are great and also the staff is so tenacious, they’re like “you’re coming to this thing and I’m making you go”. All the ways that I’m quote-unquote different have been an asset. I think there’s no better way to fit in at Bronfman than to be a queer Jew, you know what I’m saying, I just think there's such a space for us. Truly the reason I am here is because of the Keshet brunch during welcome week because my parents were like we’re forcing you to attend. And so I went and it was the first NYU thing I ever did. So yeah!

**Interviewer:** And Hannah is already giving back, as community service chair of Kesher: Reform Jews at NYU.

**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.