



Choosing Amongst the Chosen People: The Challenge of Selection

ejewishphilanthropy.com/choosing-amongst-the-chosen-people-the-challenge-of-selection/

eJP

by Rebecca Voorwinde

Spring seems to be the traditional time for selection in the Jewish world. In the past month, Wexner selected their Graduate Fellows, Return on Investment 120 (ROI 120) picked one hundred and twenty young Jewish innovators from across the globe, Mechon Hadar identified their full-year Fellows, to name just a few of the many selective Jewish initiatives in our ecosystem. At the Bronfman Youth Fellowships (BYFI), we, too, just chose our twenty-six summer fellows from North America and twenty Israeli fellows from a candidate pool that would make Yale's admissions officers blush. Leading a selection process means feeling equal responsibility to the applicants we choose *and* those we do not choose for our programs.

With all of our careful deliberations and complex selection processes, it is easy to lose sight of one important fact: every applicant represents the Jewish future. We must treat all applicants with kavod (honor) and respect. How can we ensure that applicants who are not 'accepted' do not feel 'rejected' by the Jewish community? How do we make sure they continue to carve out a path for themselves as Jewish adults? Here are some ideas:

1. **Recognize strengths** – Candidates have profound gifts to offer the Jewish community. The individuals we are introduced to while sifting through applications are diverse and extraordinary: the young man who brings cheer to an ailing congregant each week, the book worm who has gotten her hands on every Jewish publication she can and is hungry for a teacher, the student leader who revived a youth-run film festival, and many other talented young people. Though it may be labor intensive, taking the time to provide personalized feedback and affirmation of strengths to applicants, whether by letter or in person, lets each candidate know they are valued.
2. **Offer referrals** – Jewish programs are not in competition; we offer complimentary opportunities for learning and growing. Identify programs or networks to share with applicants. For many years, BYFI has proudly linked applicants, who opt-in to referrals, with information about programs that share our values like BIMA/Genesis at Brandeis and Nesiya. Nesiya has made it seamless for our applicants to apply to their program by accepting BYFI's application in lieu of their own and providing additional financial aid.

When we share the goal of enhancing Jewish identities, we must find ways to help applicants access enriching Jewish experiences that are the right fit for them.

3. **Connect to mentors** – For those of us who have existing networks of alumni, consider ways to link applicants to mentors. In a few instances we have introduced applicants to alumni of the Bronfman Fellowships who are willing to have a one-on-one conversation about Jewish life and learning. These role models can help inspire applicants to more clearly see their own pathways. When applicants talk about an interest or affinity we can help raise their awareness about Jewish resources. At an interview with a finalist who talked about their work with their school's Gay-Straight Alliance, we provided them with information about Keshet, an organization that advocates for GLBT inclusion in the Jewish community.
4. **Build new programs** – If the application numbers of BYFI and other programs are any indication, we have more individuals seeking ways to grow as Jewish learners and leaders than we have programs to support them. It is healthy to question whether the Jewish community's focus on 'leadership' is excessive. Yet, the truth is, demand exists for quality programs and it outstrips supply at the present moment. Creative expression will flourish if we increase the diversity of programmatic options, approaching leadership development through the arts, the environment, or through intensive Jewish text study. We welcome the growth of other experiential Jewish programs and fellowships for interested young Jews and look forward to opportunities to partner and share best practices.

After participating in our Fellowship selection process, I am even more confident in the Jewish future. We work hard to recruit a mix of applicants, not all of whom are aware of the plethora of resources and non-profits that exist in the Jewish world. We can serve as a conduit to future engagement. As a Jewish community, we have everything to gain by taking the time and care during our selection and notification processes to support and encourage the growth of every applicant's Jewish citizenship and ongoing sense of connection to community. There are talented people in our midst, ready to be welcomed.

Rebecca Voorwinde is the Director, Strategy & Community Engagement for the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel.