



Diversity and Development: The Impact of Amitei Bronfman

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by Shai Shalev

Nearly nine years ago, I arrived at my first Amitei Bronfman seminar without knowing exactly what I was joining. The description seemed clear – a year-long fellowship focused on the exploration of Jewish-Israeli identity, the North American Jewish community, and the diversity of Israeli society – but from the first moment it was obvious that these words did not adequately reflect the life-altering experience I was about to undergo. Perhaps most jarring was that at the age of 17, I was, for first the first time, in an educational setting that raised for me so many more questions than it tried to answer.

I participated in Amitei Bronfman in 2005, so many years have passed since, yet at every life milestone I find myself looking back at my Bronfman experience. Every time that pivotal year played a different role. In the pre-army academy I found it to be a balancing factor, while in the army the experience granted me self-confidence as I interacted with different segments of Israeli society, and now as a student who has just begun his studies I see how much Amitei Bronfman has provided me with a springboard in my life.

Over the years, one of the most important aspects that stayed with me was the ability to deal with complex discussions about burning topics facing our society. These are tools I acquired during our intensive Bronfman seminars and participation in the alumni community. This sharpening has proven invaluable as a soldier, a student, and a citizen.

One seminar in particular stays with me to this day. Every year, the fellows hold a joint seminar with the residents of the Feuerstein Institute, young adults with special needs. Amitei Bronfman has, from the beginning, understood the importance of its fellows experiencing many kinds of diversity. For many of us alumni, this seminar was a pivotal moment in the year as we truly grasped the challenges and rewards of interacting all kinds of people. If the previous seminars tried to create some sort of map of Israeli-Jewish society, spending three days together with people with various disabilities completed the map. Part of building a just and better society in which each person has an opportunity is ensuring that everyone, no matter their abilities, is taken into account.

Last summer, I had the privilege of taking on a more active role as an alumnus of the program by being part of the organizing team for the Feuerstein seminar. I was in charge of logistics for the seminar and I was exposed to the Bronfman fellowship year experience in my capacity as an alumnus.

I enjoyed seeing the excitement of the newest Amitei Bronfman alumni who accompanied the seminar as they tried to relive the magic which they had experienced, and it was even more of a joy to see the young fellows at the beginning of their journey, not yet fully understanding the impact of the experience. For me, it was coming full circle, being able to be a part of the team that created this experience for those that came after me. In many ways, it was the moment that I felt like an adult member of the alumni community.

Nearly a decade after the official end of my fellowship year, Amitei Bronfman is still an important part of my life. The impact the program and now the alumni community, has had on my life, the questions I ask and the decisions I make is truly special.

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Amitei Bronfman is the Bronfman Fellowships' program for Israelis. Launched in 1998, the Amitim program consists of a year-long series of educational seminars for a diverse group of 20 Israeli high school juniors, including an all-expense-paid trip to North America. The selected fellows, from varied religious, social, and ideological backgrounds, are brought together for eight seminars to interact and engage. Discussion topics range from identity and communal relationships with Judaism and Jewish culture, to social and secular relationships.

The goal of these seminars is to explore and strengthen the ties between groups of differing beliefs by fostering lasting and deep friendships between individuals. More broadly, the program aims to develop thoughtful young leaders with a sense of social and communal responsibility.

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