



The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel: Wise Investing in the Jewish Future

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BYFI Community

by Professor Joseph Reimer

In January, 1987 I received a call from Rabbi Michael Paley asking if he could come to Brandeis University to consult on an idea he had for a new Israel program. Michael had been given the challenge by Edgar M. Bronfman to propose a bold new concept that they would consider funding. They had been funding a program called the Israel Friendship Camp, but were ready for a bolder step.

A few weeks later I was invited to a consultation in New York to consider Paley's proposal. I remember offering an impassioned plea that this was not a time for caution, for what the field of Israel programs needed was an initiative that would break new ground in creating a group of talented teens united not by their affiliation with existing movements, but by a wish to reach beyond old divisions to create a pluralistic Jewish community. To my delight, the foundation bought that argument and asked Paley to lead the new program that would eventually be called the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel (BYFI). I was honored when Michael asked me to be one of its first faculty members.

This week, alumni of the many years of the Bronfman Fellowships will gather in New York to celebrate its 25th anniversary. This seems an opportune moment to ask why this Fellowship has flourished over a quarter-century. What went right with this philanthropic investment? *What can this case teach us about wise investing in the Jewish future?*

In the intervening years I have been involved in both starting up other exciting programs in Jewish education and evaluating such initiatives. What I offer here is not a formal evaluation, but an informed participant's perspective on how this philanthropic investment went right. I believe there were five crucial steps that this family foundation took to insure that this particular philanthropic investment would yield handsome returns.

1. **Seeking a vision.** In 1987 Michael Paley was a young rabbi with limited professional experience. Yet he had a coherent vision of what was possible which this foundation took seriously. To re-read the proposal that Paley wrote is to see that the major elements of this fellowship were envisioned there. He called for selecting a small cohort of highly

talented Jewish teens from across North America and offering an expense-free summer program in Israel that would combine a seminar with an Israel experience. They would be led by a faculty that would help them ask big questions about Israel and the Jewish people. They would study Jewish texts – both classical and modern – and derive perspectives they could bring to their encounter with Israel – the land and the people. They would form an intense pluralistic Jewish community in which they would need to work out how Jews from all the denominations could together celebrate Shabbat. The faculty would model civil discourse and help these future Jewish leaders learn that more important than what divides us is what unites us as builders of the Jewish future. To an unusual extent, Paley's vision became a flexible blueprint for how this fellowship would develop.

2. **Engaging Edgar Bronfman's personal involvement** I remember the meeting in 1987 when the first group of 17 year old fellows met Edgar Bronfman. They were so excited to meet the man who made possible their Israel experience. They had imagined him, but now the great benefactor would step into their world. And that is exactly what Edgar did. Something clicked between this eminent philanthropist and these wide-eyed teens. He had questions for them and they had much to say that he wanted to hear. I could see a bond forming and would guess that this philanthropic investment began to take on added personal meaning for him. Were that not the case, how can we explain Bronfman's faithful participation in and unwavering support for this Fellowship over these 25 years?
3. **Creating elite networks.** There are programs like Birthright Israel that invest in a wide range of Jewish youth. Their glory is their inclusiveness: giving virtually every Jewish youth a chance to experience Israel or attend a Jewish summer camp. But BYFI pursued a different strategy that many would call "elitist." Paley's vision called for attracting and cultivating a highly selective group of teens who would experience their participation as a tap on the shoulder for future Jewish leadership. They would feel honored to "be Bronfmanim" (which is how they call themselves) and delighted to make these new friends. Many would attend the same colleges and form bonds and networks that would last for years. Much like the Wexner Graduate Fellowship, BYFI sets in motion an informal process of creating elite Jewish social networks which, it is hoped, will seed future Jewish leadership. The vision of leadership is broad and includes Jewish intellectuals, authors, journalists, business people as well as rabbis and educators.
4. **Fostering a special faculty.** In conventional parlance, schools and universities have faculty, but not informal programs. BYFI, however, chose a different path. From the start this program was led by its faculty – rabbis, educators and professors who accompany the fellows to Israel to teach Jewish texts and model Jewish pluralism. Here I would credit Rabbi Avi Weinstein – who succeeded Paley as director – for developing a coherent faculty who plan and work together and see the fellowship as a second home. I remained on faculty for four years, but others have remained much longer. Yet the faculty also grows and changes as younger teachers – some of them alumni – join the mix. They teach texts, but more crucially, engage the fellows in continual conversation about Israel, Judaism and their lives. It is that charged engagement between faculty and fellows – as well as among the fellows – that makes this Bronfman experience so

special.

5. **Involving and investing in alumni.** Paley's vision included reference to building an alumni network, but what has developed far exceeded the initial plan. It was clear to us after the first summer that these teens were not finished with 'being Bronfmanim' and welcomed every opportunity for staying connected. They and the faculty started inventing alumni events and activities. A few years later an alumna was hired to join the program staff which began the precedent that the alumni could become future leaders of the program and foundation. Other alumni turned to the Fellowship for help to pursue noble pursuits of their own – some in the Jewish community and some beyond. The alumni taught the professional staff that they, as alumni, viewed this fellowship as an on-going relationship. To their great credit, the Samuel Bronfman Foundation got the message and transformed what began as summer Israel program into "an on-going covenant" that declared, "We will invest in our alumni when they actively pursue the ideals of this fellowship."

The alumni *are* the handsome rewards of this fellowship. By investing so heavily in a selective group of Jewish youth, the fellowship aspires to shape the Jewish future by seeding its leadership. I would not say the fellowship "creates" leaders, but rather that it points very talented young people in the direction of Jewish leadership and supports their development. It would take a rigorous empirical study to know to what extent this strategy is working. But in the absence of that study, let me offer one illustrative example of how this strategy unfolds.

Yehuda Kurtzer was a Bronfman Fellow in 1993, attended Columbia as an undergraduate and went on to do a doctorate at Harvard in Jewish studies. While a graduate student, Yehuda with his wife Stephanie and several of their friends had the idea to start a new *minyán* that would be traditional enough to attract Orthodox Jews, egalitarian enough to attract Conservative Jews and lively enough to attract anyone who loves Jewish music. It takes some money to get a *minyán* off the ground, and as an active alumnus, Yehuda applied to Bronfman's Alumni Venture Fund, a peer-to-peer grantmaking initiative led by and for alumni. The decision to support this alum's dream was beneficial not only to local Jews (including me and my family) who have loved this prayer experience, but also to the development of Yehuda's leadership potential. From leading this *minyán* Yehuda went on to become an author of a book on Jewish thought and the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America.

Yehuda was probably destined to become a leader whether or not he had become a Bronfman Fellow. But perhaps this experience opened his eyes to the value of Jewish pluralism and to the belief that if you dream Jewish dreams, there are donors like Edgar Bronfman who might support that dream. In my view that is a kind of investing that is likely to yield rich Jewish dividends.

Professor Joseph Reimer is an Associate Professor in Jewish Education who splits his teaching and advising time between the Education and Hornstein Programs at Brandeis University.

This post is part of a special series in recognition of the 25th Anniversary of The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel.

