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Why Be Jewish? | Matti Friedman

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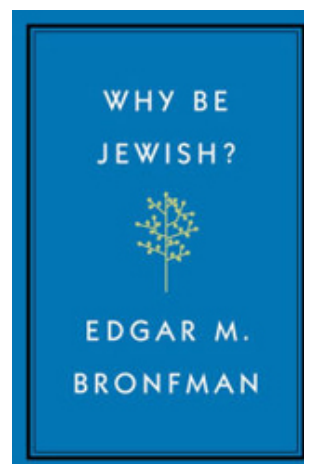
For the first week of the year 5777, Jewish Book Council's [Visiting Scribe](#) series features writers who were touched by Edgar M. Bronfman, z"l, and his dedication to Jewish life the world over. Read more about Edgar M. Bronfman's vision and legacy in his final book, [Why Be Jewish?: A Testament](#).

WHY BE JEWISH?

When I was 16, along with two dozen other kids who had just finished 11th grade, I went to Israel on the Bronfman Youth Fellowship. I spent that summer of 1994 laughing, arguing, and talking, talking, talking with the others, including some who are still my dearest friends today. We shut up only to sleep for a few hours every night, and to sit still as a small cadre of sensitive teachers, people gifted with patience for the tiring and tiresome 16-year-olds we were, carefully inserted some very good ideas into our unformed brains, showed us some valuable texts and places, and generally treated us with more respect than we deserved.

This was one of the crucial occurrences in my life, but that wasn't clear to my 16-year-old self. For all I knew, maybe when you grew up every summer was like this. Of course there hasn't been anything like it since.

The thinking that brought me to Israel as a teenager originated in, of all places, the mind of a tough Canadian-born baron of commerce, Edgar Bronfman, who died in 2013. It was the result of a long and strange journey for Edgar, the conclusions of which are laid out in his last book, [Why Be Jewish?](#) Reading the book as an adult, I appreciated anew that the ideas I now take for granted actually came from the program he created and the teachers he chose—the idea that that “tough questioning, skepticism, and outright rebellion are at the very heart of Judaism,” that Jewish life is a tapestry with many threads, and that faith isn't the only one or even the most important one, and that ignoring this tapestry would be a grievous loss not for Judaism, whatever that is, but for me.



When I was 16, or even 26, I didn't devote much thought to the fact that someone like Edgar would think that teenagers he'd didn't know were worth his time and money. Now that strikes me as incredible, and as one possible response to the challenge in this book's title. Why be Jewish? I'm not someone who has a good answer to that question. But one might be found in my discovery at 16 that Jewish life was a kind of life where some distant person who had never met me—someone like Edgar Bronfman, or a rabbi who lived in Egypt or Germany 1,000 years ago—cared for some reason about what I thought, and who I'd grow up to be.

The full name of Edgar's program was the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel. Edgar was a New Yorker and wasn't interested in Zionist indoctrination or *aliyah*; his program could have been in the Catskills. But it wasn't, and for me the last word ended up being the most important, my escape hatch from the question of Edgar's title and its existential anxiety. That summer I found a living, shouting, cursing society where Judaism—or some hybrid version livelier than any I knew—had somehow become a mainstream culture, where Jewish life had been disconnected from money and class and intellect, where that tiresome hyphen (American-Jewish, Jewish-American) had been annihilated. It was a place where “Why be Jewish?” was a question that made no sense, or as much sense as “Why be Chinese?” would make in China. Why would people in China not be Chinese? After that summer I made a brief visit home to finish high school, came back to Israel when I was 17 and stayed.

[Why Be Jewish?](#) displays Edgar's restless mind and his concern for young people who are grappling with angry questions, as he did in his unhappy synagogue in Montreal as a child, and reaching the wrong conclusions as he did. The book makes clear his determination to make a difference in the world, and reflects his fear that without good answers to the question of the title, the days of non-Orthodox Judaism in the Diaspora are numbered. At the book's close, the author, aware that the end is near, offers thanks for a life lived in conversation and argument with Jewish ideas. But he doesn't leave it there, because the book isn't about him or for him. He would be even more thankful, he writes, if the reader finds a way into a shared tradition that “champions the questioner and doesn't scorn the doubter,” and picks up where he left off.

Matti Friedman is a Jerusalem-based journalist and the author of [Pumpkinflowers: A Soldier's Story](#) and [The Aleppo Codex: A True Story of Obsession, Faith, and the Pursuit of the Ancient Bible](#), which won the 2014 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature.



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