



Are You Part of My Story? Becoming a Community of Interpretation

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Photo courtesy Emily Faber and The Bronfman Youth Fellowships

[This essay is from The Peoplehood Papers, volume 16 – *Developing Teen Leadership with a Peoplehood Orientation* – published by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education.]

By Rebecca Voorwinde and Mishael Zion

A December *Shabbat* was waning in the Connecticut countryside as almost fifty young Israeli and American Jews – the Bronfman Fellows of 2012 – sat in a circle to discuss whether they actually cared about each other. “Are you part of my story?” they asked, boldly, critically, lovingly. Over an Israeli summer and an American winter, they had become friends and study partners, seeing with their own eyes the successes and challenges of each community. Now, they were ready to ask the deeper question: Are you part of my “we”?

The facilitated conversation was impacted by recent events in the news. A day prior, twenty schoolchildren and their teachers were murdered in Sandy Hook Connecticut. And, a month earlier Israel faced Operation Pillar of Defense. The Israeli Fellows felt under attack and were surprised that they didn't hear from their American counterparts during the violence. "Did you forget about us?" they asked, "are you only willing to love Israel if it's a place of sun and history, not if it's a place of messiness and danger?" Similarly, for the American Bronfmanim their own grief in response to the school shooting opened new questions about their role as passionate participants in the American public sphere and about how best to convey their commitments to their Israeli peers. The Israelis were taken aback; wasn't this just another violent American news story without direct relevance? As one American fellow tried to explain, "we saw the worst face of our own country, and we are embarrassed. We want to honor those lives by making this country a better place." For both groups, experiences of tragedy on their home soil were deeply felt and deeply personal. For Jewish peoplehood to make sense to these young people, each group needed to know that their friends living an ocean away respected and appreciated their own narrative as equally valid to their own.

The Bronfman Fellowships has over two decades of trial, error and creativity in bringing together Israeli and North American Jews. Each year we convene two "*mifgashim*" for the 26 North American and 20 Israeli seventeen year olds selected to become Bronfmanim. The *mifgashim* – a quarter of each group's overall programming – are grounded in values of mutual respect, equality and openness. The blemishes are shared, as are the blessings; the creativity alongside the apathy. For the generation we work with, it is an encounter between two communities that are "at home" in their respective countries. On Bronfman, we don't wipe away differences between the two communities under a shiny lacquer of peoplehood, but give room for their contradictions. It is an encounter that for most Fellows will still lead back to two separate paths, thus raising the question: If we are not one tale, how are we nevertheless part of each other's story?

The conversation is often tested through the question of solidarity. At the core of our programming is the assumption that Israeli-North American discourse needs to fix the imbalance where American Jews are expected to feel solidarity with Israel and Israeli struggles, but Israelis are rarely educated to understand the concerns and values of the large Jewish community of North America. Yet a discourse centered in solidarity reduces the Jewish conversation to a lachrymose and alarmist place. It seems to be the "last bastion" of communality for a people that no longer share a binding land, practice (*Halakha*) or God. Is there anything left beyond solidarity?

Back at the Bronfman Winter *Mifgash*, it was Hanukkah and we re-convened ourselves as a "*Beit Midrash*," sitting down for a joint text study about the holiday. The learning centered on how various Jewish communities, from secular Zionists to American liberal Rabbis, reinterpreted the holiday in radically divergent ways during the 20th century. Through text study, we offer the Fellows new tools for creating a different layer of "peoplehood" a way to understand Judaism as a *Beit Midrash*. We are more than a community of dogmatic solidarity; we are a community of interpretation. The ancient Jewish pastime of rival reinterpretation

takes place through moments of vibrant and passionate discourse. The beauty of *mifgash* is that these encounters enable us to see ourselves, our homes, and Judaism through a lens broader than our own. Centering *mifgashim* in text study is our way for young Jewish leaders to feel part of the same story. We are part of each other's story not only in moments of solidarity, but also in our retelling of joint stories in divergent ways, and in coming together to share these divergent ways, argue about them – and celebrate them.

Rebecca Voorwinde and Rabbi Mishael Zion are the co-directors of The Bronfman Fellowships, a community of over 1000 young Jewish leaders from Israel and America. Beginning with a highly selective fellowship experience at age seventeen, grounded in Jewish text study and a pluralistic approach, “Bronfmanim” take part in a vibrant alumni community which inspires action and reflection among a new generation of Jewish leaders.