

ERR ON THE SIDE OF CAUTION

A 'new normal' for in-person seminars

After so many months of preparation and planning, being onsite with the Fellows was almost surreal



Bronfman

By [Aaron Steinberg](#) · June 9, 2021

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We did something I wasn't sure would be possible. In April we hosted a nine-day immersive, in-person retreat for our Bronfman Fellows who had spent over a year learning together solely over Zoom. It turned out to be an unforgettable experience that reminded us of how much has been missing over the last 14 months. And now our attention has turned to 4 weeks of programming this July.

With vaccinations quickly expanding and more programs bringing back in-person events, the excitement coming together can also be mixed in with feelings of anxiety both on a personal level and an organizational level. As organizations begin venturing transitioning back to in-person events in the near future, I wanted to share some of the key take-aways from our experience.

When we realized the 2020 Bronfman Fellows would not have the opportunity to travel to Israel as we had each summer for more than three decades, we decided to invest heavily in an online version of the Fellowship ultimately providing the Fellows with a 5-week fulltime Zoom Fellowship in July 2020. It wasn't the same as being in person, but it was remarkable how much they were able to learn and how close they were able to become despite never having met in person.

Our hope was always to bring them together as soon as possible, and when it became clear to us that we would be able to have their spring seminar at the Isabella Freedman Retreat Center, we invested heavily in making that possibility a reality.

We took a conservative approach to running our program. All attendees participated in a robust regimen of testing both prior to arrival and onsite, masks and distancing were required throughout the seminar, attendees were encouraged to be vaccinated (ultimately over 50% of the group was vaccinated). I'm happy to report that we had no known or suspected cases of COVID-19 connected to the seminar.

Here are some important tips we learned along the way:

1. Engage the Experts

From the very start we knew we needed expert guidance if we were going to pull this off. Between state and federal guidelines that didn't always line up, new research coming out every week, CDC guidance responding to the latest outbreaks, it's very difficult to plan for something that's months

away. We engaged [Curtis Peterson](#), a public health consultant who had come well recommended through our Israel office. Our weekly meetings with him were a fantastic combination of project planning, public health education, therapy for the staff and rabbinic style questions and answers into the minutiae of airflow, mask quality and disinfection strategies.

We created a decision matrix for determining the viability of the program, as well as specific protocols for pre-arrival and on-site expectations. All of those plans were run by a medical advisory committee consisting of two medical doctors and a member of our board of directors with experience in the medical field. Together we felt confident in the plan we laid out, and the reasonable decision to move ahead with the seminar.

2. Communication with Attendees and Families

With 26 families to work with, it was crucial that we communicated regularly around what was planned and what decisions had been made. COVID guidelines were changing constantly, so we knew there would be an element of unavoidable last-minute decision making. We laid out a roadmap for decision points and communications/meetings that would take place between the staff and the families.

We held two family town hall meetings in the months leading up to the seminar, and created a wiki with protocols and other information about how the seminar could be run successfully. Parents and Fellows were also contacted individually to talk about to various specific challenges they faced including travel arrangements, vaccination status, previous COVID infection, and more.

3. Responsibility for One Another

The calculations and decisions we each make on a daily basis to navigate the pandemic are highly personalized, and can often be wrapped up in strong emotions. In order to bring together a new community for 9 days we needed to establish an understanding in the group that we would all be responsible for one another and follow the same rules.

Some were vaccinated while others were not. Some attendees had underlying health challenges that increased their risk, and others would be returning home to family members at risk. The stakes for our protocols were not trivial.

The message to the Fellows was clear. If we didn't follow the protocols someone might get sick, and if it became clear to us that there was probable viral spread on campus we would shut down the program. It would bring an end to the beautiful experience they were having, and more significantly put people they loved at risk of illness. They took this message to heart, and we got no significant pushback to the COVID protocols.

4. Err on the side of caution

Over the course of a two-week span, our seminar attendees took multiple PCR/NAAT COVID tests. To many this seemed excessive and there's no question that we were being very cautious. There was a significant expense to this much testing, and there was the small risk that a false positive could really complicate things, but we felt that extra precautions such as this would give us the confidence to move forward with the program.

So much work went into making this seminar a reality, and to imagine that it could have to shut down in the first couple of days because we didn't do enough testing, or because we hadn't asked those flying to take on strict precautions, or because we hadn't arranged for transportation with lots of extra seats and ventilation, was something we didn't want to face.

Our approach was that we were going to do everything reasonable to create a safe environment because we knew it would all be worth it to have the group together, studying, bonding and basking in one another's company.

5. Make sure to pause and enjoy it

After so many months of preparation and planning, being onsite with the Fellows was almost surreal. Seeing the emotional moments when Fellows first met one another at Isabella Freedman was breathtaking. Of course the work of COVID risk mitigation didn't stop when the Fellows arrived on campus. The staff had a role in reminding everyone to follow the protocols, oversee the COVID testing, check on people's symptoms and so much more. The staff team (themselves all vaccinated) had their own health and safety to think about, and were working under strict COVID restrictions for a longer uninterrupted period than they had before.

Despite all that, it was crucial to take a step back and marvel at what we had accomplished. To watch the Fellows head off into the woods for a hike, or to pair off for *chavruta* text study. To

participate in a Fellow-led “mikvah” ceremony dipping our toes in the lake, or to sit around the campfire singing both classics and contemporary hits.






Whenever you first return to in-person programming it will feel weird and different. It might feel stressful and fill you with anxiety. You might be scared or giddy. Whatever emotions you have, make sure to settle yourself, look around, and enjoy what you’ve been able to accomplish.

It’s been just a couple of weeks since our seminar ended and we’re onto the next program. With the confidence and lessons gained in running our Spring seminar we look ahead to the Summer Seminar for our next cohort of Fellows. This time it will be four weeks at Isabella Freedman and I can’t wait!

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