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*BronfmanTorah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community*

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# Secular Religion: My Judaism in 21st-Century Maine

Sammy Potter ('17) | BronfmanTorah | Vayigash 2017

***Sammy Potter** ('17) is a senior at Yarmouth High School in Yarmouth, Maine. He is planning to study public policy, product design, and computer science in college, and hopes to work on a startup while a student. He loves entrepreneurship, Maine, being outside, positive-impact projects, and politics. To relax, he enjoys reading, seeing friends and family, and as pictured, playing with his dog.*

I wrote down a few statistics as I flew from Portland to meet my cohort in New York on June 27th.

Number of times attending synagogue: 15

Number of Hebrew words I understand: 9

Number of prayers I can recite by heart: 4

Despite my instant friendships among my fellow Bronfmanim in Israel, I felt disconnected to the foreign nature of text study, chevrotah, and Beit Midrash. Frankly, I had difficulty finding something about Judaism that felt like it was distinctly *mine*.

“Am I really Jewish?” I wondered to myself, “and if so, why?” I kept waiting for a certain text to speak to me. I even thought I experienced a religious epiphany at the Western Wall, until I realized said epiphany was propagated solely by my

desire to feel connected. The notorious “Bronfman moment” of revelation just didn’t hit me. Time after time, I felt more like a curious journalist than a long lost Yid home at last. Settling for an intellectual truth rather than a personal one, I broadened my question tenfold: what is the modern purpose of religion? Of course I didn’t locate the answer, but I found a speck of truth in searching: religion is *hope*. Hope for salvation, hope for an end to oppression, hope that our children will live better lives than we do. Hope that it’s worthwhile to ask for things to be better, and to work for things to be better.

While I have some qualms about calling myself “religious”, I am unequivocally on board with the project of building hope. Living in a homogeneous, default Christian but mostly secular town, I knew I couldn’t perpetuate hope effectively in my community through Jewish wisdom or practice. Was there another way that I could bring hope to my town, outside of a specific religion? It occurred to me to organize a conference, quite aptly named the [Day of Hope](#).

For this event, I invited seven Maine leaders to give TED talks at my high school about where they find hope and how they use hope to make a difference. With speakers such as the Mayor of Portland, a few “Maine-famous” civic and entrepreneurial leaders, and a local musician, we attracted a crowd of over 250 community members and raised over \$2,000 for a local homeless shelter. Speakers discussed topics such as women running for office, valuing diversity of thought, and personal experiences with immigration, all with a culminating focus of how to improve Maine. Most meaningful to my team and me was the overwhelmingly positive feedback and the feeling that we helped fill a void in people’s hearts with hope. The Day of Hope is now becoming an annual community event in my town, with chief planning responsibility passed down to a senior from my high school every year.

Ironically, I had my “Bronfman moment,” a paradigm shift in the way I think about religion, on December 2nd as the Day of Hope ended, nearly four months after returning from Israel: If a major component of religion is hope, and data conclusively shows that the world is becoming increasingly secular, will hope become more and

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more scarce? As a Jew living in Maine – an exacerbation of what it means to be in the Diaspora – spreading hope through (solely) religion doesn't seem sustainable.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “the Jewish story ends, as Moses’ life ended, with a glimpse of the land not yet reached, a future not yet realized.” As Jews in North America, that unrealized future inevitably includes non-Jews. We have to do more, as the Jewish people, as the chosen people, and simply as people, to engage our larger communities and supplement the role of religion for those less observant.

While my “Jewish stats” might not drastically improve anytime soon, I now know what about Judaism feels distinctly mine: I view our best society as something not yet realized, and I feel a duty to spread hope to others.

This is how I choose to be Jewish in 21st-century Maine.

*Continue the conversation. Send Sammy your thoughts:  
[y2018sampot@yarmouthschools.org](mailto:y2018sampot@yarmouthschools.org).*

*P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact [stefanie@byfi.org](mailto:stefanie@byfi.org). We look forward to hearing from you.*

Applications for the 2018 [Bronfman Fellowship](#) are closing in two weeks! Help us spread the word. If you know any talented Jewish high school juniors (or people who might know them), please tell them about this opportunity. Application deadline is **January 4, 2018**.

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