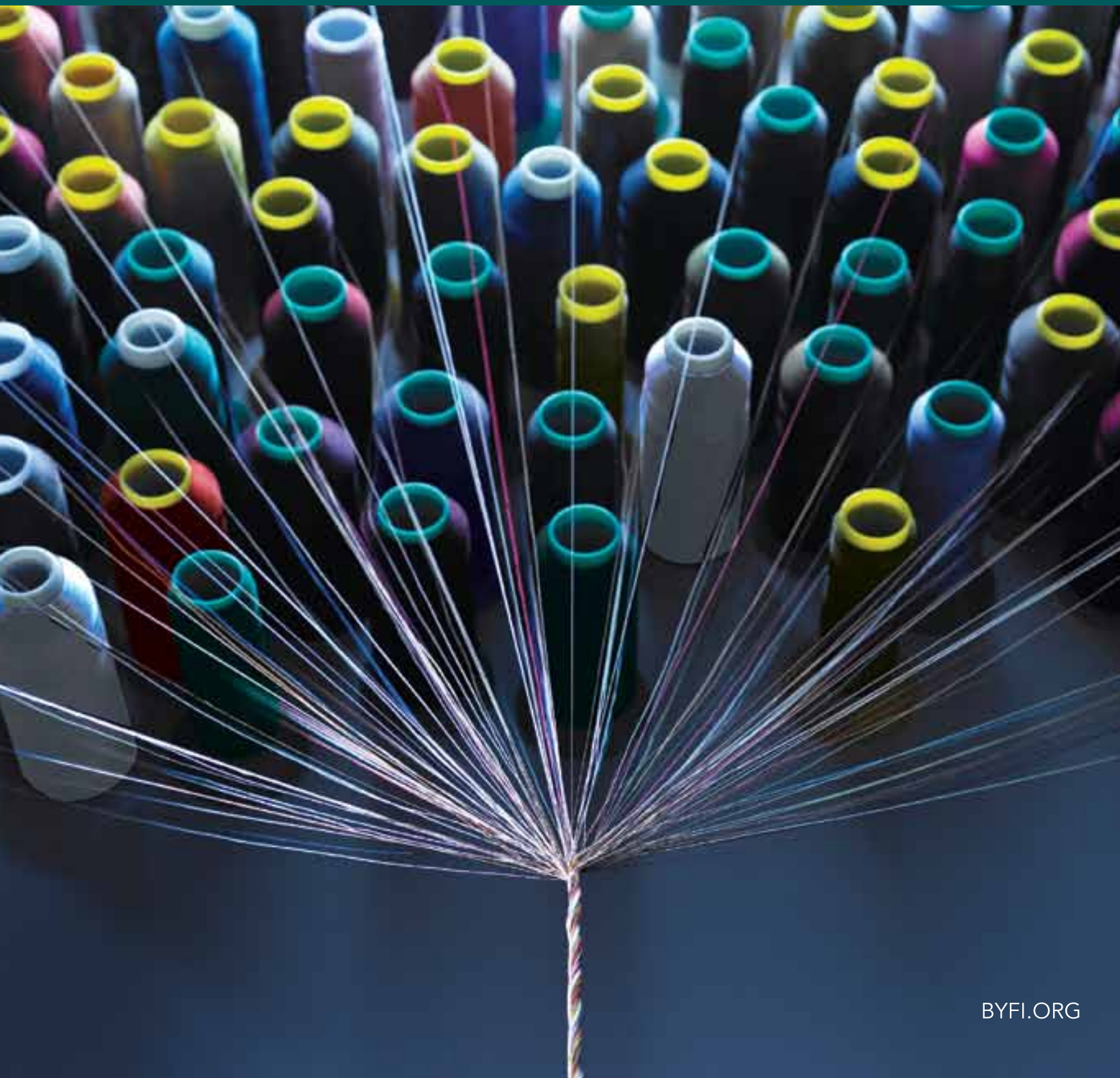


# BRONFMANIM

The Alumni Magazine of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships 2010

ברונפמנים



Opinions expressed are those of contributors or the editor and do not represent the official positions of The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel.

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## In these pages

A Letter from Rabbi Shimon Felix, <i>Executive Director</i> .....	2
A Letter from Becky Voorwinde, <i>Director of Alumni Engagement</i> , Matan Barak, <i>Director of Amitei Bronfman &amp; Wayne Jones</i> , <i>President of BYFI Alumni Advisory Board</i> .....	3
Lost and Found in Translation — by <i>Deana Silverberg</i> .....	4
“Us” and “Them” — by <i>Ben Wizner (BYFI '88)</i> .....	8
Wrestling with Tradition: Reflections from Bronfmanot, <i>edited by Matti Friedman (BYFI '94)</i> .....	10
• Grief, Obligation and the Rubik's Cube — by <i>Miriam Heller Stern (BYFI '93)</i>	
• Sanctified — by <i>Tili Fisher (Amitah '04)</i>	
• Torah from the Heavens — by <i>Ilana Kurshan (BYFI '95 &amp; Faculty)</i>	
The Puppeteer Speaks — <i>Karen Zasloff (BYFI '91)</i> , <i>edited by Deana Silverberg</i> .....	14
Alumni on the Move — <i>David Mahfouda (BYFI '99)</i> , <i>by Deana Silverberg</i> .....	16
Amplifying Impact — The BYFI Alumni Venture Fund, <i>by Hannah Kapnik (BYFI '04)</i> .....	18
• Jewish Sex-Ed for Adults – The Moishe Kavod House — <i>Margie Klein (BYFI '91)</i>	
• Bridging the Religious – Secular Divide: Datilonim — <i>Yishai Ferziger (Amit '10)</i> , <i>Elisheva Gillis (Amitah '09)</i> and <i>Nadav Wachs (Amit '09)</i>	
• Bringing Ethical Standards to the Kosher Dining Hall – <i>Tav HaYosher at Penn and Princeton</i> — <i>Ariel Fisher (BYFI '95)</i> and <i>Rabbi David Wolkenfeld (BYFI '97)</i>	
Bringing Bronfman Home — <i>Ma'aseh Action Projects</i> , <i>by Hannah Kapnik (BYFI '04)</i> .....	20
• One Feminist's Evolution of 'Choice' — <i>Shira Engel (BYFI '09)</i>	
• Fun and Games for a Cause — <i>Jonathan Schwartz (BYFI '09)</i>	
• Welcoming Interfaith Couples — <i>Allison Lazarus (BYFI '09)</i>	
Class Notes — <i>BYFI &amp; Amitei Bronfman</i> .....	22

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There is a story in the Talmud, in Tractate Chagigah, which I have taught a number of times to the summer Fellows. In it, Rabbi Yehoshua asks some younger students to fill him in on what's new in the *bet midrash*, the study hall – what new, innovative idea or law was taught that particular day. Out of what seems to be a sense of humility and traditionalism – misplaced, as it turns out – the students deny the possibility of their having anything new to teach their teacher: “We are your students, and we drink of your waters.” Rabbi Yehoshua will have none of it, and he delivers this zinger: “It is not possible to have a *bet midrash* without a *chiddush*” – without something new being said.

Those of you with whom I learned this story, and still remember it, might also remember how much I loved it. On the one hand, you have the resistance of the students to the very notion of *chiddush*. This, perhaps, is not so surprising: The religious personality is typically thought to be traditional. Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims – all of us religious folk are heirs to venerable traditions, with libraries full of impressive material we are meant to think about and ultimately, one way or another, live by. Religious communities are understood to be about continuity, respect for the old ways, and a commitment to something solid and eternal in a mutable world. Surely the students are not wrong when they point out that they are bearers of a rabbinic tradition, not innovators.

It seems to make sense, until Rabbi Yehoshua tells them they're wrong. In the Jewish tradition, study stands at the center, and study can not happen without someone thinking of something new. It is not possible, he claims, to think deeply or in a committed way about this tradition of ours and not think new thoughts. If there are no new ideas being generated, then you are not thinking, and it is not a *bet midrash* at all.

There are a few ways that this wonderful notion can be understood. It can, perhaps, be about the act of thinking. If the commandment to study is so central, then, like all commandments, we have to take it seriously, and when human beings really think about things, stuff happens: questions are asked, connections are made, inferences are teased out – it is the nature of the beast. If someone really is in a *bet midrash* and not just memorizing, or preparing for a test, then *chiddush* will happen. It must.

Additionally, one can see Rabbi Yehoshua as referring to the changing nature of the world, of who we are, and of what we bring to the text and the tradition when we think about them. Try as I might, I do not have the world view, the set of assumptions, the inventory of ideas that my grandparents had. I may not even have the world view I had a few years ago. When I read something, I do it in a very different context from those who came before me. Understanding this, Rabbi Yehoshua knows that this new way of looking at things which, consciously or not, we bring to what we study, will of necessity create new understandings and insights – *chiddushim*.

It is a cliché to say that we live in an era of greatly accelerated change. In my short lifetime – I'm 57; let me know when I have to stop saying “short” – I have seen unbelievable changes in technology, social mores and behaviors, music, art and geopolitics. I would hate to think that my connection with Judaism – its texts, traditions, and customs – has, in the middle of all this moving and shaking, stood still. I hope that I can live up to Rabbi Yehoshua's demand to bring something new to (and from) the table every time I sit down to study or discuss what it means to be Jewish. I hope I can live up to the rabbinic demand, based on the verse in Deuteronomy, which says, “On this day, the Lord your God commands you to keep these laws and these statutes”. Every day, the rabbis say, they should be new in your eyes, as if on this very day you were first commanded to keep them.

I believe the BYFI community has risen to this challenge. Many of our alumni are bringing new ideas and insights to the Jewish experience, expanding the traditional understanding of what Torah and Judaism are and do. We don't create these new, innovative expressions because we are in thrall to the cult of the cutting edge. Rather, we do it because we understand that, with or without us, the world and the people in it become new every day, and we need to make sure that the Torah we learn and live is made new right along with them.



**RABBI SHIMON FELIX**  
Executive Director

Is there hope for relations between Jews in Israel and the Diaspora? If you've read the Jewish news lately, you may have encountered the alarmist tone that sociologists, Jewish leaders, and pundits are taking. All seem to be lamenting the future of Jewish peoplehood.

In the US: Peter Beinart, an American journalist wrote in *The New York Review of Books* this June that young American Jewish liberals have shifted away from Israel. Recent studies, like one by Professors Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman (BYFI '88), indicate that young American Jews under 30 who are not Orthodox are less attached to Israel than earlier generations.

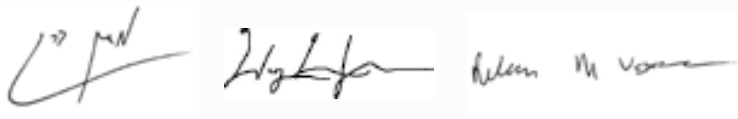
In Israel: The Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs released a survey this September that found that while 68% of Israelis feel that Diaspora Jewry is important to the State of Israel, only 42% say that Diaspora Jewry is important to them as individuals. This month, when the spokesman for the Jewish Agency Haviv Rettig-Gur spoke to our 2010 Amitim, he said, "North-American and Israeli Jewry are practically two disparate people".

By building community amongst alumni of Amitei Bronfman and the Bronfman Youth Fellowships, we focus on people, moving beyond statistics. Through intimate, personal meetings, our Fellows develop greater understanding of themselves, their local communities and each other. Our *mifgashim* (encounters) during the high school Fellowships expose our Fellows to the issues facing their peers, and in so doing, hold up a mirror for them to assess their own communities.

We are working on initiatives to extend connections within our community, both for Fellows who live in Israel or the Diaspora. This year, we opened the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund to our Amitei Bronfman community; so far, two wonderful Israeli-run non-profit projects have received grants. We're also exploring ways that technology can help us link Amitim and Americans for networking and brainstorming. In our 2011 programming, we plan to host several events in both Israel and the US on the same themes to widen conversations. In today's changing and challenging reality, our aim is relevance and impact.

It is our hope that the BYFI community of young leaders will use their talents to address the broader trends facing society and the Jewish people. The encounters and reflective discourse alumni engage in throughout our community will provide experiences and inspiration to create change and maintain connections.

We would love to hear from you with ideas about how to bring our global community together and how you would like to get involved!



Matan Barak, Wayne Jones & Becky Voorwinde



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**MATAN BARAK**  
Director of  
Amitei Bronfman





# Lost and Found in Translation

*By Deana Silverberg*

**W**hat do a firefighter in California, a translator in Brazil, an anthropologist studying dying cultures in West Africa, a cardiologist in Maine and an artist in Washington, D.C. have in common? To the naked eye, not much; however closer examination reveals a key similarity you might not expect: all of these Bronfmanim regularly act as translators and interpreters, whether literally or conceptually, to accomplish their work. It's precisely *how* they choose to interpret and translate information that determines their success.

Zev Balsen (BYFI '98), a fire ecologist living in southern California, originally planned to work as a firefighter for one summer during college. "I saw a picture of a firefighter with a chainsaw standing in front of a wall of flames and thought it looked like a cool job," he says, "so I did it for a summer and thought that would be it." Zev, whose father is a woodworker, grew up on a 10-acre property in upstate New York. By 2008, Zev had embraced the life of a firefighter, working an average of 95 hours a week for six straight months, living in barracks, with no days off. He used the second half of 2008 to travel and work temporary jobs. With no permanent address, exhausted with his lifestyle and disillusioned with the way fires are managed in the U.S., Zev realized the system he was part of was ineffective. Zev explains, "As firefighters, we often contribute to the problem by putting out small fires which creates these fuels (trees) that will burn much more later."

Zev is now working towards a PhD in fire ecology at Berkeley, while still serving as a part-time firefighter. Through his research, he investigates which fires could be left to burn rather than be extinguished – which ones don't destroy forests, adversely affect wildlife habitat or air quality and don't attract fungal diseases and insects. At the heart of the seemingly exciting job, he says, is something quite banal – communication, which he calls "the cornerstone of firefighting." "Everyone's always thinking about communication, talking about it, trying to improve on it," Zev explains. As a ground-based firefighter, Zev speaks with helicopter pilots above the fire and must imagine what they're seeing in the moment. The pilots, usually trained in the

military, often don't have significant firefighting or scientific training. They aren't able to distinguish between the different types of trees in the forest and, even if they can, they may not be able to see them from the air. Zev's view of the fire is three-dimensional, while theirs is two-dimensional. There are noisy machines running on the ground and in the air, and they're speaking over a shared radio, so he must keep the exchanges brief and simple. Zev is forced to translate his view into words they'll understand; "It's like translating into a different language," he says, with no time to prepare in advance.

Since Zev's objective as a scientist is to affect fire management policy, he regularly translates his research for policy makers and government researchers who do not work in his field and who are not scientists. He looks for words to replace firefighting jargon and reminds himself, for example, to say "trees," instead of "fuel." This art is often subjective; like a translator switching between two languages, he tries to capture the original meaning of the data while remaining aware that someone else could translate it completely differently.

As Melissa Mann (BYFI '95), a professional translator explains, "People assume that anyone who can speak two languages can translate them, but translating is not just about being able to speak two languages; it's an art." When Melissa first started as a legal translator a decade ago, she went knocking on doors to find clients. Today Melissa lives in Brazil and runs her own translation business.

Although the focus of her work is interpreting the words of others, Melissa considers herself an active participant in face to face interpretations: "You should never be invisible. You dress for the occasion, make quick decisions, and bring your personality to it." Melissa prefers consecutive translations, where parties speak for a few minutes and then pause while she interprets their words into another language, since these translations are the most exciting, dynamic, and occur in real time. During consecutive translations, the translator stands with the speakers and takes notes while they speak. These translations often involve large groups of people and can take place anywhere – walking





Hannah Sarvasy '99 transcribes in Sierra Leone; Melissa Mann '95, Rachel Farbiarz '94 creates a drawing; Zev Balsen '98 ignites a backfire to fight a wildfire; Ben Lowenstein '87 (far right)

around a city, at a farm, over dinner or in a conference room.

The setting of a translation can affect its content. During translations that take place over food, especially in Latin America, where food is so central to the culture, participants often speak more candidly and share humorous personal stories. Melissa has learned to pay close attention to hand gestures and eye movements, mimicking and mirroring parties as she interprets.

A good translator thoroughly prepares before every translation, but sometimes no amount of advance preparation can give you enough information. In one case, unforeseen ethical issues that arose during an interpretation forced Melissa into an uncomfortable corner. Melissa's client was a law firm representing a mining company in Mexico that intended to use the land of an indigenous group, destroy the land and pay the landowner a pittance. As the translation unfolded, it became clear to Melissa that the landowner was being taken advantage of, that he had no one representing him and that the mining company's lawyers were fully aware of this imbalance. Melissa panicked, but did her job: "You're a translator," she says. "Even if you think the parties are evil, your job is to communicate between them." After the translation, Melissa dropped the mining company as a client.

Unlike Melissa, whose fast paced, real-time translations facilitate 21st-century communication, Hannah Sarvasy's (BYFI '99) translations take place over long periods of time in remote and isolated mountain villages. Hannah has spent the better part of the last two years studying two near-extinct African tongues – one spoken by 150 people, the other by 30 – working

to preserve an entire culture by documenting its language. An anthropologist covered by *The New York Times*, she recently created two lengthy language primers (textbooks) to preserve what's left of the languages, known as Kim and Bom, and the culture of the people who speak them, most of whom live in the Atlantic coast villages of Sierra Leone. "People often ask me if transcribing in Sierra Leone was lonely, but it was hard to feel lonely. People there are much more connected." Seeing herself as part of the group enabled Hannah to connect to the people and their way of life.

When Hannah first arrived in Sierra Leone, the landscape she encountered was entirely unfamiliar. The villagers she came to document live in small, scattered villages, accessible only by canoe or a long hike. Cultural and communication gaps often made it hard to get the answers she needed from the locals. "Here, in America, we value straight talk; there, if you say whatever you know or think, you're considered an idiot or like a small child," she says. Communicating with the villagers meant she had to learn to speak a new cultural language as well. Hannah felt that being a young woman added to the villagers' trust in her and allowed them to open up more freely; she got to know the village women informally while relaxing and helping them gather potatoes.

In time, she learned how to interpret and understand the villagers' words within a cultural context. When Hannah inquired why Kim and Bom are dying while a third language, Mende, has become the majority tongue, one common response she received was, "Our children don't speak the language because when we told them to come and drink at the breast we

spoke in Mende, but our parents spoke to us in Kim or Bom." Hannah was able to interpret this indirect, enigmatic response as meaning that the older villagers felt responsible and remorseful over their failure to carry on the tradition of speaking Kim and Bom to their children as their own parents had to them.

In linguistic anthropology there is a concept known as 'respectful transcription,' which includes cleaning up repetitions, "umms" and false starts to ensure speakers sound intelligent on paper when their words are translated into text. But when it came time for transcription, Hannah decided "the umms were kind of magical" and chose not to edit them. She realized the transcriptions – which include stories, conversations, songs, and even arguments – were more authentic and compelling when they stayed close to the original. It was important to Hannah that the primers she created with the transcriptions be accessible to the villagers, many of whom are illiterate. When she gave them the primers, she included illustrations she drew by hand and a CD with her recorded snippets of their lives and dying language.

When it was time for Ben Lowenstein (BYFI '87) to choose a medical specialty, he knew he wanted something that involved a lot of communication with people. Cardiology fit the bill. For Ben, a native New Yorker who has worked as a cardiologist in Maine for the last seven years, interpreting medical test results is not an objective, scientific task, but a subjective one with the doctor-patient relationship at its center. Ben reads the results of cardiac tests on a daily basis but waits to interpret them until he has met each patient. "Until then," he says, "it is just an image." Once he has met a patient, he considers their age, the severity of their





symptoms, their life expectancy and their own wishes. "I'd treat a 95-year-old with a leaky valve differently than a 50-year-old. There are therapies that will improve quality of life and therapies that will improve quantity. They're different."

After devising his treatment plan, Dr. Lowenstein is faced with the difficult task of translating it back to his patients, who are often elderly and have difficulty hearing, remembering and understanding. The first question he asks is: What do you understand about what happened to you? Do you know that you just suffered a heart attack? Amazingly, people often don't understand what has happened to them or the severity of their condition. Unlike younger patients, Ben finds his older patients aren't as interested in the details of their diagnoses and aren't as likely to use technology to do research on their own, so it's his responsibility to convey anything that could be important.

Delivering bad news is one of the most challenging aspects of the job. In these moments, Ben makes sure to repeat himself and uses visuals and diagrams as aids. When patients doubt or question the treatment plan he has set out for them, he has to communicate to them and their families why this is the best course of action. But ultimately, he says, it's the patient's decision: "At the end of the day, you have to trust your patients. It's not just about them trusting you."

While a physician's role as interpreter is not immediately apparent, the act of interpretation shapes every aspect of Rachel Farbiarz's work as an artist. Rachel (BYFI '94) graduated from Yale Law School and practiced for five years

as an attorney often working to improve conditions on California's death row. When she left California for D.C., she also left her law career to create visual and conceptual art that revolves around Jewish text. "Being an artist is an effort to think, work and live creatively," Rachel says. "Creating is the central driving principle in my life."

As an American Jewish World Service Fellow writing and teaching about topics linked to Torah and social justice, Rachel is not satisfied with synthesizing commentators' opinions on the Torah; she won't rest until she has come up with her own creative interpretation. "An infinity of meanings exist. You can parse the space between two words and then parse it again and again," she says.

The majority of Rachel's works are pieces of text that she plays with and translates into drawings that have a strong physical impact and invite the viewer to engage in a new way with the words. She wants the visual impression she creates to be compelling to her audience – not necessarily pretty, but compelling. She does not plan her work and hates making sketches; it's all intuitive and usually begins with her looking at a piece of writing and asking herself, "Why is this text strange?"

To Rachel, the entire purpose of art is for viewers to interpret works and carve out their own meaning. She wants art to be a tool for people to think about how they organize their lives, approach the world and experience it. In this way, art for Rachel functions like religion. It's a constant project of how to live life, full of questions and competing interpretations, but not full of right answers. It's "the antithesis of Revelation."

Although she speaks through the language of religion and thinks through the words of Scripture as a means of being creative, Rachel does not consider herself religious. She finds Halachic concepts helpful in her art, yet creating art for her is not a particularly spiritual experience or one infused with reverence for the Divine. "Religion is probably wrong more often than right, but it's the most fascinating repository for human creativity."

We're all seasoned interpreters, whether or not we are aware of it. Many of us translate to facilitate communication and form relationships, some of us use it to carve out meaning, and others use it to preserve ties to the past, but we all translate in our daily lives. Last year, Rachel led a series of classes on art and religion at Sixth and I Historic Synagogue in D.C., with support from the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund. She found the group dynamic enriched the interpretive process. "When you make people stop and interpret with you, you will see it's constantly going on for other people too," she says. "This is revelatory not just because of the multitude of other interpretations that exist, but because this is a communal project we're all engaged in as we're living our lives."



Deana Silverberg is the Communications and Project Officer for The Bronfman Youth Fellowships. She holds a BA in English Literature from York University in Toronto where she graduated with Distinction and a JD from Osgoode Hall Law School. Deana is an aspiring novelist.





# “US” AND “THEM”

*By Ben Wizner (BYFI '88)*

**ACLU LAWYERS GET LOTS OF LETTERS**

from strangers. Some describe the innovative, exhaustive, and imaginary means by which the government has been surveilling the writer's every move. Some alert us to reality-based constitutional violations and lead to lawsuits. Some are vituperative and mildly threatening. And some are trouble.

In early 2004, I was working in the ACLU's Southern California office when I received a letter from a resident of Redlands, California, a small city in conservative San Bernardino County. Attached to the letter was a reproduction of the city's seal, which depicted a glowing Latin cross hovering over a church. The writer wanted to know: Was this constitutional? How could a seal that appeared on all city buildings, on employees' uniforms, on official letterhead, essentially be a sectarian Christian billboard?

This was what might fairly be called "ACLU bait"—an issue at once inconsequential to our supporters and inflammatory to our detractors. I played my part. I dispatched a "strongly worded letter" to the city attorney of Redlands, politely suggesting that the city either replace the offending seal voluntarily, or do so under court order after paying the ACLU's attorneys' fees. The city attorney persuaded the mayor and city council that resistance would be costly and futile; the city announced that it would unveil a nonsectarian seal within weeks.

And then all hell broke loose. Outraged residents excoriated the city council for capitulating to the ACLU's legal blackmail and demanded that the city resist, even at taxpayer expense. Church groups organized a "Save Our Seal" petition to force the city to put the matter to a voter referendum. The campaign drew national media attention. At a raucous city council meeting, a local pastor warned that if the ACLU succeeded in removing the cross from the city seal, it would next demand that crosses be removed from all the city's churches.

ACLU lawyers get accustomed to this kind of criticism, and even thrive on it; there's a special kind of protective armor comprised of the nobility of the just but unpopular cause. But this time even my friends

were looking at me with a mix of pity and disappointment. Wasn't there anything more pressing I could be doing than smacking this particular hornets' nest? And for what – a city seal? Who knew that cities even had seals?

This seemed like a fair critique. I had no doubt whatsoever that a city symbol meant to represent all of the city's residents should, in fact, represent all of the city's residents, and not just its majority. But it was hard to argue that devoting limited resources to the enforcement of that principle in this particular instance was worth the grief and aggravation it was causing. I left California soon after, with the issue unresolved.

Six years later, after our long hot summer of "Ground Zero Mosque" madness, something about the nature of the "Save Our Seal" campaign seems more significant to me than it did then. The defenders of the seal had insisted – and had appeared genuinely to believe – that the depiction of the Latin cross was in no way a religious symbol, but simply a "historical" one. (I'm not aware of a single historian who joined those protests; they were led, without exception, by evangelical Christian clergymen.) Google has taken me back to those days, and I'm struck again by the rhetoric the protestors used: "In America we should be free to reflect our history without threat or intimidation." And: "Redlands has been known as 'The City of Churches' because we are uniquely Christian in our heritage."

Our history. Our heritage. The defenders of the seal seemed oblivious that anyone might be excluded from their possessive pronoun or from their "history." We've seen precisely the same kind of definitional error in the debate over the community center near Ground Zero: "They" should be more sensitive to "us" about the trauma "we" endured on 9/11. But who are "we," and who are "they," and according to what principle should a religious minority be excluded from "us"? Even the director of an organization with the words "Anti-Defamation" in its title has made this inexcusable error, equating the efforts of Americans to build a community center near the site of an American tragedy to the attempt by Carmelite nuns to erect a convent near Auschwitz.

There's a coda to the Redlands story. The protesters succeeded in placing the city seal debate onto the ballot, and "Measure Q," which would have restored the cross to the city seal, was put to a vote in November of 2005. A resounding sixty percent of Redlands residents rejected the measure and voted to retain an inclusive city seal. I confess I was shocked when I heard the news. My own narrative of the affair had featured a bedrock constitutional principle standing between an outraged majority and a beleaguered minority, with an opportunistic national media fanning the flames (sound familiar?). But when the television trucks pulled out of town, and city residents had eighteen months to consider the competing values at stake, they embraced a "we" that represented who "we" are now, not who "we" might once have been.

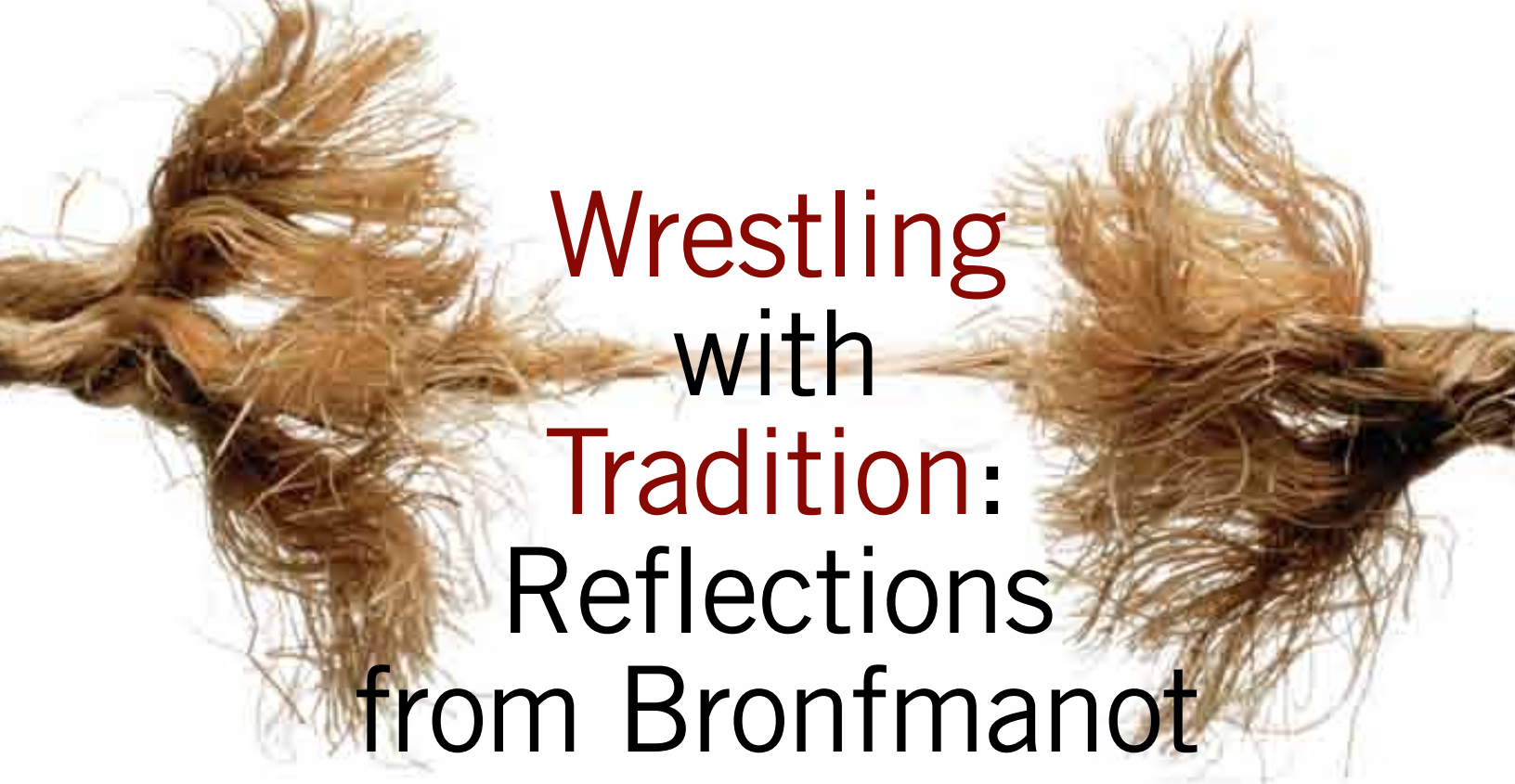
Law is a blunt instrument. It can protect us from our worst impulses, and it plays a crucial role when those impulses threaten the rights and lives of minorities. In the end, though, the deeper fissures are filled, and the lasting solutions achieved, not by force of law but by strength of community. Lower Manhattan is not Redlands, and the national media will not be pulling out of town anytime soon. But I hope that the city, and the country, can take a collective deep breath and find a way to reconnect to the truly unique pluralism that defines us – and defines "us."

.....



*Ben Wizner (BYFI '88) has been an ACLU lawyer for nine years and is now the Litigation Director of the ACLU's National Security Project. He has litigated numerous post-9/11 civil liberties cases, including lawsuits challenging the CIA's extraordinary rendition program, unlawful airport security policies, and the government's targeted killing program. He has traveled numerous times to Guantanamo Bay to monitor military commission proceedings. Prior to joining the ACLU, Ben was a law clerk to the Hon. Stephen Reinhardt of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. He is a graduate of Harvard College and New York University School of Law.*





# Wrestling with Tradition: Reflections from Bronfmanot

*edited by Matti Friedman (BYFI '94)*

Anyone trying to walk the thin line between Jewish tradition and the modern world knows the complexities and compromises that demands. But the balancing act is perhaps most challenging for women, who often find themselves struggling to tap the richness of a system not always willing to let them escape long-defined gender boundaries or accept them on their own terms. In this series of essays, three Bronfman alumnae discuss the tensions and satisfactions of wrestling with tradition to carve out a rewarding place inside.

## Grief, Obligation and the Rubik's Cube

*by Miriam Heller Stern (BYFI '93)*

In the Rubik's Cube of BYFI pluralism during the summer of 1993, I was the square labeled "Conservative rabbi's daughter." I felt I had a mandate to represent the traditional end of the movement: *halacha* but in short shorts; the best of both worlds. I returned home from that summer of making new friends to the religious right and left of me fairly convinced that the way my parents raised me was the perfect compromise. In the ensuing years, like a lot of typical kids of Conservative rabbis, my search for spirituality, a learned *halachic* community and cute boys with good Jewish values brought me to the modern Orthodox fold. I was willing to trade leadership roles as a woman for a warm community where traditional observance could be taken for granted.

Fast forward 17 years, and this rabbi's daughter unexpectedly found herself mourning her rabbi. When I lost my father earlier this year after his long and complicated fight with leukemia, I was left in a spiritual and practical quandary. How could I possibly make it to a *minyan* twice daily to say *kaddish*, with two small children at home and a full-time career? "Well, it's not a problem," said the rabbi of our modern Orthodox *shul*, trying quite genuinely to be supportive. "You're not obligated to say *kaddish*."

I keep replaying those words in my head: *not obligated*. I get it. My children give me daily, sometimes hourly reminders of why Jewish tradition exempts women from commandments that are linked to time, like prayer with a *minyan*. So I am technically off the hook. And yet, I feel that something is missing: the catharsis that countless authors have described in their ruminations about their year of saying *kaddish*. Without the obligation I feel lost, marooned without the one vehicle prescribed by my tradition for processing the pain at regular intervals. The problem with being "off the hook" is that you're left feeling unhooked, disconnected from yourself, because



Miriam Heller Stern '93

tradition encourages you to spend your time completely immersed in the needs of others.

I always thought I would be a woman like the famous Zionist Henrietta Szold, a mentor and friend of my grandmother, who made a point of choosing the obligation to say *kaddish* every day. But my life has evolved in the 17 years since those precious moments at the Goldstein Youth Village, when I had the luxury to wander outside every morning with my *siddur*, bask in God's creation and embrace the traditional liturgy to praise God, to feel humbled, centered, grateful to be alive. When I stand now at the intersection of religious obligations and choices I face the additional obligations and choices of family and career. "Doing it all" remains a false hope. Orthodoxy allowed me to take a step back from certain obligations so that I could fulfill others, but it feels like a step backwards. I suppose I could embrace a different kind of choice and invent a new ritual that might work for me, but it would feel inauthentic. Besides, my father was not one for inventing rituals.

Seventeen years ago, I harbored a typically teenage loathing for things that seemed inauthentic or inconsistent, and this sent me

toward modern Orthodoxy. Now my lifestyle still demands consistency of values, spirit and commitment, but when I stand as an adult at the intersection of *halacha* and personal choice, I rely on a more "flexidox" approach when my obligations and choices collide. My life is bounded by obligations: to my family, my community, and my career, which, because it is Jewish education, is really something closer to a calling. My religious obligations – though I

may be "off the hook" for some of them – lend rhythm to a hectic week; without Shabbat, we would never pause, never turn off our "crackberries," never just be.

I remember a time when I could be easily labeled and assigned one square on the Rubik's Cube. Now I need all of the squares just for the facets of my own identity: Modern Orthodox – or should that be flexidox? Academidox? Observant? Just Jewish? I've been accused of them all. Mother of Elijah, 5. Mother of Judah, 21 months. Wife. Daughter. Dean of a graduate school of education. I long for the days when life was less complicated, and yet perhaps it is the complicated times that are most ripe for learning, renewal, rebirth.

I am still searching for my own personal *kaddish*, one which will honor my Dad and expand and sanctify God's name, just as the prayer does. Faced with my father's mortality, I haven't found that a routine or consistent adherence to the minutiae of *halacha* will clarify the answers to life's ultimate questions. But if I can see my commitments and complications as enriching, even as they are exhausting, perhaps they can give voice to my prayer.

Dr. Miriam Heller Stern is Dean of the Fingerhut Graduate School of Education at American Jewish University in Los Angeles, and mother of two boys.

## Sanctified

by Tili Fisher (Amitah '04)

"Blessed art thou, oh Lord, Master of the universe, who...forbade to us those to whom we are engaged, and permitted to us those to whom we are married, by way of *chuppah* and sanctification," goes one of the traditional blessings said under the wedding canopy, with the word sanctification, *kiddushin*, being the technical term for the act of marriage occurring at that very moment. "Blessed art thou, oh God, who sanctifies His nation Israel through *chuppah* and sanctification."

Perhaps more than anything else, this blessing exemplifies the gap between the bride and groom in the Orthodox marriage ceremony. The engaged woman is forbidden to "us," and the woman to whom we are married is permitted to "us." But who is "us"? The continuation of the blessing seems to clearly suggest that "us" and "His nation" are the same people, the ones to whom the engaged women are forbidden and the married women are permitted – in other words, the men. The blessing equates men with the nation of Israel, and the woman is the object upon whom these acts of forbidding or permitting are performed.

Having attended dozens of wedding ceremonies in the past few years, it is difficult for me to ignore the anachronism of the Orthodox *chuppah*. Each time I attend a Jewish wedding, as I did last week, I am confronted with both the beauty of the tradition and its shortcomings.



*Tili Fisher, Amitah '04*

The motif of a man performing a *halachic* and mystical act to the woman continues through the entire ceremony. It is the groom who performs the action that singles out the bride for him alone by saying, "Behold you are sanctified unto me with this ring." And in the ceremony's last blessing – "Blessed are you... who makes joyous the groom *with* the bride" – it is the groom who is happy with his bride; the man is an active participant, while the woman is the passive object, whose only role is to make her husband happy.

To be fair, I must admit that there are some elements in the ceremony which also include the bride's side of things. Legally, for example, the bride must be married of her own free will, and be happy with her husband. In antiquity, this alone was revolutionary. But the woman does not need to sign the marriage contract, or make any commitments at all to her husband, even if she happens to be the main bread-winner. The groom sanctifies the bride, but the bride does not sanctify the groom. The person in charge is a rabbi, which, in the Orthodox world, means a man, and those who say the blessings are also men.

My friend's recent wedding was an attempt to bend, but not break, the bonds of tradition. The ceremony was Orthodox, but with elements of egalitarianism: the bride gave a ring to the groom, and, though she could not say "behold you are sanctified to me," she did recite another verse instead. Sisters, sisters-in-law, and women friends were called upon to make blessings; since they could not participate in the traditional "seven blessings," which only males say, they made other traditional blessings. There were those who looked with a cynical eye at this ceremony and at its desperate attempt to find a place for women to express themselves within the narrow Orthodox framework. But I saw it as a brave attempt to combine respect for *halacha*, as annoying as it is, with an attempt to move forward and find personal expression within the boundaries of tradition.

It is not easy to explain how I reconcile myself with Orthodoxy. Yes, even after the Amitei Bronfman program, I still have not clarified for myself why I insist on being loyal to a tradition which sanctifies so much from the past and seems to try so hard to delay the future.

I once had a drama teacher who told me that boundaries make creativity necessary. This doesn't mean that the boundary is necessarily positive, or pleasant – but it does make it bearable, and sometimes even beautiful. There is so much beauty in the tradition, and so much beauty in being a woman.

*Tili Fisher is married and in her second year of medical school at Tel Aviv University.*

## Torah From the Heavens

*by Ilana Kurshan (BYFI '95 & Faculty)*

I spotted the El Al counter right away. I don't know Heathrow Airport well, but I immediately noticed the flocks of Hasidim in black and white, flapping their garment bags in a frenzy of nervous pre-flight excitement.

Everywhere I looked, pacifiers were being dropped by drooling babies hanging over their mothers' arms. Their fathers hid behind leather-bound tomes and moved their lips in a feverish undertone. I began to feel anxious – not because the men, who resembled a waddle of penguins, were moving at a glacial pace, but because they were all standing with Masechet Chagigah, the volume of Talmud that I, too, was in the middle of learning.

About six years ago, I left my job at Random House in New York to study Talmud in Jerusalem. Thus began a love affair with rabbinic literature that has continued to this day. Although I still work in publishing, I have chosen to do so in Jerusalem, where learning Torah is considered by many to be the supreme value. Most of my days are split between the literary agency where I work and the *yeshiva* where I study, and though these activities compete for my time, they do not exist in tension with one another. I am an editor, and the Talmud is the ultimate editorial marvel, filled with excisions, interpolated passages, cross-references and intricately wrought chiasms. Although it at first appears unwieldy and overwhelming, it shows signs of careful and deliberate editing and re-editing, much like the manuscripts I work on in my professional life.

Along with many of the men at the El Al counter, I am participating in *Daf Yomi*, a program that consists of learning one page of Talmud a day so as to complete the entire corpus over a period of seven-and-a-half years. During my week at the book fair I fell a bit behind. When I see the men around me and notice what page they are on, I feel compelled to study too. I pull my Talmud out of my carry-on bag and delve into the tractate of Talmud called Chagigah, which begins with a mystical discussion of forms of prohibited knowledge.

*It is forbidden to expound upon the laws of forbidden sexual relations among [more than] three people;*

*And the story of creation among two people;*

*And the incident of the chariot among one person –*

*Unless he is a wise person and he understands beyond his knowledge. (Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 11b)*



If I looked up, I would see the men peering at me over their books, tapping one another and nodding to their wives to turn the children's heads away. If I thought a little, I might realize how I must appear to them – a woman older than many of their wives, dressed in a pants suit and traveling with a volume of Talmud. But I am absorbed – perhaps too absorbed – in those matters which are wondrous and concealed. The pages I am reading teach that these matters are not fit for study by all people at all times. As far as the Hasidim are concerned, they are never fit for study by a woman. But when I see what follows in the text, I know I must read on.



*Ilana Kurshan '95, faculty*

*Anyone who breaks from the study of Torah and engages in conversation – he will be fed the burning coals of the Rotem plant. (Chagigah 12b)*

"Excuse me, you are next. Did you pack your bags yourself?" I look up from my Gemara to find a tall uniformed Israeli man with a dark ponytail standing in front of me. It is my turn with security. He asks all the usual questions, and gets all the unusual answers: "Why are you going to Israel? You have family in Israel? No family? You live in Israel? What? You work in Israel? What? You are American? Why do you know Hebrew? A Jewish school? But you wear pants? You learn Gemara? In pants?" After about fifteen minutes, I manage to convince the clerk that I am above-board: "I am sort of an undercover religious person." I explain to him that all my Talmud knowledge comes from The Conservative Yeshiva where I study. There I do not stand out at all – I am one among many women with uncovered hair and pants and a volume of Talmud in their backpack. I am so comfortable there that I forget that I am such an anomaly in settings like this airport terminal where I am eager to lift off into the clear blue sky.

*Resh Lakish said: There are seven layers to the heavens, and these are them:  
Vilon – Where morning enters and evening exits, and creation is renewed.  
Rakia – Where the sun and moon and stars are fixed.  
Shchakim – Where the millstones stand and grind out manna for the righteous.  
Z'vul – Where Jerusalem and the Temple rest.*

*Ma'on – Where the ministering angels sing songs by night and are silent by day... (Chagigah 12b)*

The flight takes off into the seven-layered heaven soon after I find my seat. The cabin lights are off, so I learn by flashlight. It is past midnight. When I walk back a few rows to the bathroom, I see rows of men slumped over their books in exhaustion.

*All who learn Torah at night – the Holy One Blessed be He affixes to him a thread of lovingkindness by day. (Chagigah 12b)*

One black-hatted man continues to look at me suspiciously, but when I catch his eye I am astonished that he smiles, aware that we are both – at least literally – on the same page.

*As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures... Wherever the spirit impelled them, the wheels were borne alongside them, for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels. When these moved, these moved; and when those were born above the earth, the wheels were borne alongside them. (Ezekiel 1:15-20)*

The plane is still at cruising altitudes when the Talmud examines in great depth the most mystical matter of all: the chariot of Ezekiel, which rose to the heavens with wings and wheels. *These are the things that one may not expound upon*, I tell myself, keenly aware of the disapproval around me. But in addition to disapproval, I feel something else. I am suddenly light-headed. Was there a dip in cabin pressure? I look out through the window to the endless expanse of sky and the outstretched wings of the plane with wheels tucked in beneath them. The page of Gemara dances before my eyes, and I relish the lonely impulse of delight that I feel each time I learn. I am comfortable with who I am and with what I am learning. I look down at the page before me: "*These are the things that one may not expound upon*" – unless, that is, one happens to be suspended in seventh heaven inside a soaring aircraft.

*Ilana Kurshan works as a literary agent and translator. She enjoys studying Talmud, swimming, memorizing poetry, and walking the streets of Jerusalem, where she lives. For the past two summers she served on the faculty of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel.*

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Matti Friedman grew up in Toronto, was a Bronfman fellow in 1994 and moved to Israel



the next year. Since then, he has been a dairy farmer, soldier, university student and reporter. Today he works as a correspondent in the Jerusalem bureau of the Associated Press and is

completing a book about the Aleppo Codex. He is married to Naama and has twin boys, Aviv and Michael.



# The Puppeteer Speaks

*Artist profile of Karen Zasloff (BYFI '91), edited by Deana Silverberg*

**K**aren Zasloff is an artist, puppeteer and educator. For the past 15 years, she has designed, built and performed original shows in museums, theaters and public spaces. She earned her BA at the University of Chicago and is completing her MA at NYU, where she



has studied stage design at Tisch and performance at the Gallatin School. Her repertoire of shadow shows, toy theater and giant papier-mache masks and figures, differs from commercial puppetry

geared for children. Here, she comes forward to share thoughts on a life spent performing behind the scenes.

## From Play to a Means of Expression

As a child, I spent hours behind a wooden puppet stage my parents had built, creating

quiet scenes with a Punch-and-Judy set made by my mother, or with our strange and fearsome collection of Indonesian rod puppets. During college summers, I found my calling in a network of political puppet theaters – first interning with Chicago’s RedMoon Theater and then with the renowned Bread and Puppet Theater. On my first day with RedMoon, I was fitted with a giant head on a pole to perform in “The Hungry Man”, a piece about privilege and inequality that we performed for a glamorous crowd at an exclusive nightclub at 1 in the morning.

My summers with Bread and Puppet crystallized my affinity for puppetry, particularly in the way it merges several art forms and isolates and heightens aesthetic moments with simple materials and forms. I learned to wrangle cardboard, papier-mache and wire into any kind of creature I could imagine. I acquired a new language of gesture, narrative structure and

experimentation in performance. Beneath the Bread and Puppet stock characters, the puppet masks and bodies supplanted my own.

An audience watching puppetry is asked to participate in an ironic game by recognizing parts of themselves in the puppets while being distanced by the raw unreality of the spectacle. The flimsiness of a puppet taps another source of its power – its poignancy; obviously made by human hands, it is fragile and destructible, making it more human and sympathetic to the people watching.

Much of my work takes the form of shadow puppetry. Using an antiquated classroom overhead, the projector magnifies tiny paper cutouts that appear on a large screen in dramatic silhouettes, and can then be deconstructed and transformed into new images and ideas. It is like freeze-framing moments in a film and represents my desire



*Karen Zasloff's Regarding Shadows on the Grass performed*

to do the same with my life: to capture and savor the elements that compose moments (if not to fully understand them), then to move on with a measured transition to the next moment.

## Grief and Shadows

In July 2007 I joined a group of thirty students, artists, educators and other professionals in a study program in Rwanda. We gained exposure to the horrible events of 1994, when the Hutu population was incited to massacre their Tutsi neighbors, and more than 800,000 were killed in the span of three-months. Among Tutsi Rwandans, I encountered an affinity with Jews, a sense of comfort and solidarity in connecting with another people whose past was marked by genocide. And I was struck by their stoic approach to living as neighbors with perpetrators; many expressed the view, "Forgiveness is impossible but we must forgive." With generous support from

the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund and the Jim Henson Foundation, I am creating and directing *Regarding Shadows on the Grass*, a performance of giant puppets, shadows, dance and video that conveys a visitor's impressions of post-genocide Rwanda today.

The show explores the conflict between the pressure to "reconcile" or forgive and the moral demand to pursue justice. In June, I performed a work-in-progress at Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse for the puppet festival, *Labapalooza*. The piece featured my recorded phone conversation with Emery, who in 1994 spent two months hiding in a ceiling crawl space. While the phone call plays, a giant figure on the stage hangs laundry, including the standard pink uniforms of prisoners. As the western voice probes, a woman pulls from within the puppet's illuminated torso, a string of silhouettes of men in cramped or frenzied poses, and hangs this scene on the laundry line with the clothes.

My puppets are often vehicles for social or political messages. Like dreams, puppetry provides two seemingly contradictory ways to absorb experience. At one level, the puppets' blatant artificiality may provide space and distance from the ugly particulars of violence and avoids the necessarily flawed attempts by actors to realistically portray (but really only imitate) genocidal trauma. At the same time, the experience of watching a symbolic display interpreting genocide, may allow an audience to respond instinctually to the subject matter and to *digest* it – to take it in whole, corporeally rather than intellectually. It is this dream-like dimension of the human psyche that I am trying to reach.



# Alumni on the Move: David Mahfouda (BYFI '99)

By Deana Silverberg

David Mahfouda's resume is eclectic; he has worked as a cook, orchestrated performance art pieces and even successfully built a hot tub in his own backyard. Now he can add entrepreneur who's trying to save the planet to the list. David, founder of Weeels, the world's first social transit application for smart phones, is re-conceiving the way we use cars.

Weeels is a ride-share program that matches empty seats in taxis with people looking for rides. Based in Brooklyn, NY, it makes transit more effective and efficient by saving time, energy, money and space. Riders can use the Weeels app to enter their location into their phone and wait to see if there are cars with empty seats in the area. Weeels searches for others traveling a similar route. If it finds

a match, both riders are sent the match for review and if they agree to share, they receive a meet-up location. The average wait time for a ride is 10 minutes. The application can be downloaded for free at [weeels.org](http://weeels.org). David credits his Bronfman summer with planting the seeds for Weeels. In the summer of '99, the Fellows grappled with the concept of belonging to a group. While BYFI focused on belonging in the context of Jewish peoplehood, it sparked David's thinking about what it means to belong to all communities and people and, according to David, "how to create positive, enlivening, productive communities."

David's BYFI connections have proven important for Weeels; five other BYFI alumni are involved in the venture. Judd ('99) and Ryder Kessler ('03) who are brothers serve as strategic advisers for Weeels; Brett Lockspeiser ('99) provided technical advice on how to create the data model for the app; alumni Rachael Wagner ('99), David Plunkett ('99) and Josh Foer ('99) introduced Weeels to investors and industry professionals.

David has always been interested in restructuring communities. After his first year at Harvard, David took time off to attend Deep Springs, an all-boys college in California, where he cooked two meals a day for 50 people, gardened and read books. When he returned to Harvard two years later, he designed a series of events for his senior thesis that included performance elements,

combining political activism, relational aesthetics and movement. At one of the events he organized a silent outdoor dance party. With the same music playing on 200 pairs of headphones, 200 students danced silently in a variety of public spaces. According to David, power on campus felt inherited and hierarchical; performing these projects helped students reclaim their space and remind them of their power. They changed the space around them without adjusting the actual infrastructure. For David, "engaging community changes the way space feels."

The idea for Weeels first struck David in 2006, when he took a trip on the trans-Siberian railroad. Trains allow for increased mobility and more fluidity between social classes. David began to re-imagine the way Americans commute. He wondered if cars could operate more like trains: "Rather than saying cars are bad and scrapping them, we can introduce positive practices that act like invasive species, transforming cars into social vehicles that move populations around in an eco-friendly way." David wanted to empower people to creatively make their environment work better and reconsider their relationship with cars. One year later the iPhone came out and Weeels was born.

The greatest challenge facing Weeels is how to inspire people to change the way they live.

"This takes a lot of patience because I know it will take another 10 to 20 years for people to really change the way they dispose of waste and use vehicles. Real change can take a long time," says David. That hasn't prevented David and the team at Weeels from dreaming big. They are talking to yellow cabs in Manhattan about supplementing their existing shared ride program and eventually plan to expand Weeels across the country.



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# Amplifying Impact

## The BYFI Alumni Venture Fund

by Hannah Kapnik (BYFI '04)



The BYFI Alumni Venture Fund enables alumni of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships to support their peers' cutting-edge initiatives with funding and technical assistance. Since launching our fundraising campaign in 2005, donations from alumni and their

families have enabled us to award **\$113, 775** in grants to **61** innovative alumni-led projects that are helping to shape the Jewish community and the wider world.

2010 gleaned the Alumni Venture Fund significant internal and external recognition:

- We were recognized by *Slingshot, A Resource Guide to Jewish Innovation*, as one of the 50 most innovative programs in the North American Jewish community today.

- We received a generous matching grant from Repair the World, a foundation dedicated to inspiring American Jews and their communities to give their time and effort to serve those in need.
- We saw a 57% increase in the number of BYFI alumni who donated to this year's fundraising campaign.

All members of the BYFI alumni community are eligible to apply. Grants support projects that seek to promote BYFI's core values of Jewish learning, pluralism, engagement with Israel, social responsibility or a combination of the above.

### Jewish Sex-Ed for Adults – The Moishe Kavod House

Though most people think sex education is for teenagers, the people at Moishe Kavod House's Jewish Adult Sex-Ed program understand that the importance of learning about sexuality and Jewish sexual ethics does not end with high school.

The Moishe Kavod House in Boston – part of the international Moishe House network of residential communities for Jewish young adults – is a religious and spiritual community for Jews of many backgrounds, a place where the organized efforts of residents focus on social justice through a Jewish lens. This year, community members expanded their conversation from broader societal issues to more personal ones, through the creation of a Jewish adult sexual education course – the first of its kind "Our class grappled

with these issues as Jewish issues," says Margie Klein (BYFI '96), one of the house's resident coordinators. "The Jewish community has been extremely proactive in developing resources around domestic violence, largely through call-in hotlines, but we believe that our work can serve as necessary 'preventative care' – promoting models of healthy Jewish relationships and creating community-wide ethics around our personal and public behavior."

The fourteen-session class, geared at a co-ed group of adults in their 20's and 30's, was devised by a team of house volunteers using a range of texts, not all of them Jewish. *Our Whole Lives*, a secular program developed by the



Mimi Arbeit leads a sex-ed session



Unitarian Universalist Association, served as the basis. Mimi Arbeit, a member of the house who has worked in sex education in public schools for more than a decade, oversaw the development of the Moishe Kavod House curriculum and taught the classes. Margie, a rabbinical student at Hebrew College, guided the incorporation of Jewish texts and ideas. The materials cover topics such as consent, relationships and communication, gender identity, sexual orientation, family, violence, body image, health and advocacy.

Nearly forty people attended at least one class in the series, comprising a diverse group of learners with varied relationships to traditional *halacha*. The course allowed them to discuss how, as Jews, they approach controversial issues where tradition and contemporary liberal belief often clash. "We found an ethic in the (Jewish) texts that took sex seriously as a moral and spiritual act," says Mimi. "I think the process of grappling with Jewish sexual ethics is leading many of us to think about our own sexual choices."

After a successful series of classes lasting from January to May, the house has received a second BYFI Alumni Venture Fund grant to develop a Jewish adult sexual education curriculum that will reach a wider audience, including local synagogues, Jewish organizations and campus Hillels. Members of the Boston house also shared their materials and resources with other Moishe House leaders from across the country at a recent retreat.

*For more information about this project and ways to get involved: email [sexdatmoishekavod@gmail.com](mailto:sexdatmoishekavod@gmail.com) or visit [kavodhouse.com/about/current-programs/social-justice/sex-ed/](http://kavodhouse.com/about/current-programs/social-justice/sex-ed/)*

## Bridging the Religious – Secular Divide: Datilonim

In Israel, it's unusual to see young religious and secular adults chatting casually over pizza in someone's home, and Datilonim, a project founded by two Amitei Bronfman alumni, believes that if something as seemingly small as that can change, the gaps in Israeli society can be narrowed. "The name is a merging of the words for religious, *dati*, and secular, *hiloni*, words that today signify polarization and mutual dislike in Israeli society," says Yishai Ferziger (Amit '10), the program's coordinator.



*Secular and religious Israelis meet in Tel Aviv*

This year, for the first time, the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund awarded grants to two projects run in Israel by alumni of Amitei Bronfman, and Datilonim was one of them. The program uses social gatherings to help young Israelis from disparate backgrounds recognize one another as individuals.

Inspired by the pluralism of Amitei Bronfman, Nadav Wachs (Amit '09) and Elisheva Gillis (Amitah '09) founded the program and developed it to offer opportunities for their own friends and peers to meet other Israelis from across the religious spectrum. The group started by inviting friends who, in turn, invited their friends, to a pluralistic gathering.

"When Elisheva and I started the program, we thought of getting a permanent place in a community center, but thought if we really want to meet each other, we should see where the others lived, and how similar each others houses were," explains Nadav. They realized that hosting events in people's homes increased exposure to, and understanding of, 'the other'. "When secular kids walked into religious people's houses they expected to see two fridges and ovens, and were shocked when they didn't and saw that it was just like their homes," he says.

Each gathering is open to anyone who wants to attend, and there have been new people at each session. Nadav and Elisheva both mark the success of the initiative by the fact that participants now independently organize informal gatherings in addition to those arranged by Datilonim. "That's our best achievement," Nadav says. "We've created a group of people who want to meet people who they wouldn't otherwise meet on a daily basis."

## Bringing Ethical Working Standards to the College Dining Hall – Tav HaYosher at Penn and Princeton



Hundreds of students eat every day at University of Pennsylvania's kosher dining hall, which also happens to be the only one of the college's four dining halls where

workers are not unionized. Ariel Fisher (BYFI '05), a senior at UPenn, is collaborating with the Modern Orthodox Jewish social justice organization Uri L'Tzedek, with funds from the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund, to institute just working conditions for the people who make and serve kosher food at the college.

It is vital, Ariel says, to "provide religious language and thought structure to the relationship with the people serving our food."

"A lot of them have very tough lives. It's important that we (the Jewish community) have a fuller understanding of what it means for them to be part of our community," he says. This sense of responsibility for the dining hall workers as members of the extended community has led Ariel and several other BYFI alumni, including Danny Cohen ('04), Rachel Cohen ('05), and Samy Belfer ('07), to advocate for implementing Uri L'Tzedek's program known as *Tav HaYosher* – the "Ethical Seal" – in the dining hall.



*College students learn about Jewish workplace ethics*

The standards for *Tav HaYosher* are based on federal, state, and city laws that focus on worker rights. The students working with the Hillel dining hall to adopt the program want the catering company running the facility to guarantee that all workers are paid at least minimum wage and time-and-a-half for overtime, and that they have access to a safe workplace and the right to unionize.

Another project funded by the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund in conjunction with the *Tav HaYosher* program is taking place at Princeton University's kosher dining hall, where a team of students, including William Herlands (BYFI '06), are leading a task force to bring the program to Princeton. According to Rabbi David Wolkenfeld (BYFI '97), who is working on this initiative, "The University is very responsible; this isn't changing very much for the workers, but is about raising awareness among students. Launching the program will raise the profile of the *Tav HaYosher* and hopefully students will bring it to their home communities."

The educational impact is clear at Princeton, where about a half-dozen undergraduates have participated in retreats or internships with Uri L'Tzedek, the group behind the "ethical seal" program and where educators from the group have made two visits to campus, addressing around seventy students and faculty members.

Activists at both of these campuses are raising awareness of opportunities to pursue social justice, defining themselves as Jewish communities where the rules of *kashrut* extend beyond the technicalities of the way food is prepared to the lives of the people preparing and eating it.



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*Hannah Kapnik (BYFI '04) graduated from Wellesley College in 2010 and is currently a fellow at Yeshivat Hadar in NYC. She plans to pursue nursing-midwifery.*

An illustration of a simple house with a chimney and a tree on a dark brown hill. The background is a bright orange and yellow sky with a sunburst pattern and two small birds flying.

# Bringing Bronfman Home – Ma'aseh Action Projects

*By Hannah Kapnik (BYFI '04)*

Bronfman Fellows returning from their intensive summer in Israel are asked to contribute something they gained from BYFI to their local community during their senior year of high school, while simultaneously honing their leadership skills.

Each Fellow creates an initiative that puts into action the values, questions, and ideas explored during their Fellowship summer, identifying an issue that resonated most powerfully for them and then applying their unique skills and talents to further explore the same topic back at home. Fellows are assigned BYFI alumni as advisors to support the development of their projects.

The Ma'aseh Action Project is a supported opportunity for Fellows to bring their talents to bear on strengthening and serving the Jewish community and wider world.

Here you'll find three examples of the impact our 2009 Fellows created through their Ma'aseh Action Projects.

## One Feminist's Evolution of 'Choice'

Shira Engel, New York, NY



Before her fellowship summer, Shira Engel (BYFI '09) says she hardly identified as Jewish. "I viewed Judaism as an ideology, not a religion. I thought

I had to live by one ideology and if I had to choose one, I chose feminism," she says. On Bronfman, Shira saw the confluence of Judaism and feminism and was relieved to learn that she did not need to choose.

"I would have never seen the intersection between Judaism and feminism, let alone considered the Jewish part of the equation, if not for Bronfman," explains Shira. "The pluralism of Bronfman allowed me to see that multiple ideas can coexist and create new ideas."

For her Maaseh project, Shira created a Jewish feminist blog, *From The Rib?* Her inspiration came from meeting with Jewish feminist activist Anat Hoffman, who heads the group Women of the Wall, during the fellowship summer, and hearing Hoffman explain the way her group's own blog galvanizes support and opens dialogue. On *From the Rib?*, Shira and her co-blogger explore biblical inequalities and women's untold stories, the current injustices Jewish women face, the successes Jewish women have had in obtaining equal opportunities across denominations, and the complexities and ambiguity surrounding gender roles in Judaism. "How can we define Jewish feminism?" Shira asks. "How can we define two indefinite 'isms' that fuse together, when everyone defines each differently in terms of their own individual identities?" With up to 2,000 visitors to her blog a day, Shira's exploration of important Jewish and feminist questions appears to be hitting home with others.

Visit her blog at [fromtherib.wordpress.com](http://fromtherib.wordpress.com)

## Fun and Games for a Cause

Jonathan Schwartz, Dobbs Ferry, NY



In the beginning of his freshman year of high school, Jonathan Schwartz (BYFI '09) set out to find a compelling volunteer project and discovered the

Edenwald Center and Pleasantville Cottage School, a coed residential treatment center that cares for 150 emotionally troubled youth. He volunteered there for the next three years, serving as a peer mentor and tutor.

At the campus, where residents live in cottages, staff and volunteers work with residents and their families to help them resolve the problems that made it necessary to come into care. "I bonded with the kids who lived in Cottage 4, most of whom suffered from parental neglect," said Jonathan. "Most volunteers transfer to a new cottage at the beginning of each year, but I and my friends who volunteer with me insisted on continuing with Cottage 4 in the hopes of cultivating a lasting relationship. We felt that it was crucial to establish the continuity necessary to foster the trusting relationships these kids so desperately need."

Jonathan felt the Ma'aseh Action Project offered a perfect opportunity for him to take on a leadership role at Edenwald and make a lasting contribution. After speaking with the director of volunteering to identify key needs, Jonathan led a bike and helmet collection and fundraiser. The drive is still ongoing; so far, he has collected 10 sets of bikes and helmets and raised \$1,000.

"The most important effect on Edenwald was to energize a new set of volunteers from my school through an interactive presentation," explains Jonathan: When classes resumed this fall, five freshmen at Jonathan's high school, Solomon Schechter of Westchester, started volunteering at Edenwald. For this Thanksgiving break, Jonathan is organizing a day of service featuring snacks and sports at Edenwald, led jointly by the new volunteers and Jonathan's college-age peers who used to volunteer. For Jonathan, it's a way of "passing the torch."

## Welcoming Interfaith Couples

Allison Lazarus, Terrace Park, OH



When she returned home after her Bronfman summer, Allison Lazarus (BYFI '09) was interested in making her Jewish

community more inclusive of interfaith couples. For her Maaseh project, Allison worked with her rabbi, Lewis Kamrass, to develop a brochure containing advice for interfaith couples who have decided to raise Jewish children.

"I really wanted to make young families feel more secure, and to open a place for conversation with no agenda of a certain level of Jewish literacy," she says. Allison conducted extensive research to produce the brochure for her Reform synagogue, the Isaac M. Wise Temple, reading books about intermarriage and interviewing couples who belong to the synagogue. Coming from an interfaith family herself, Allison was able to sensitively interview interfaith couples, hoping to better understand what they might have found useful years earlier when they were considering joining a synagogue. "Hearing the life experiences and challenges that real families had faced was eye-opening," says Allison.

She was surprised to find a good deal that she had not read in books about intermarriage or interfaith couples. "Books talked about conflict, but a lot of the time, people let disagreements lie. All of the people I interviewed expressed some regret at not resolving conflicts, and many were surprised to hear even what they themselves had to say when they talked about it," she says.

Careful editing and conversations with Allison's rabbi enabled her to produce a professional brochure that is now available to members of her synagogue.



## North American Summer Fellowship

January 20, 2011

Summer Fellowship application deadline.  
For more information: [www.bronfman.org](http://www.bronfman.org)

June 28, 2011

Summer Fellowship begins, through August 3

## Amitei Bronfman Fellowship

January 2, 2011

Fellowship application deadline.

For more information:

[www.amitei-bronfman.org/](http://www.amitei-bronfman.org/)

March 21, 2011

Opening Amitei Bronfman Seminar

July 25, 2011

Summer Miigash: Amitim and  
North American Fellows

## Venture Fund

May 15, 2011

Deadline for BYFI Alumni Venture Fund  
applications

October 15, 2011

Deadline for BYFI Alumni Venture Fund  
applications

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Check [www.byfi.org](http://www.byfi.org)  
for calendar updates  
as new events are scheduled.

## Stay Connected

Suggest event ideas – Naamah Paley  
(BYFI '02), Events Committee:  
[Naamah@byfi.org](mailto:Naamah@byfi.org)

Share your good news with the BYFI  
community – Ava Charne: [news@byfi.org](mailto:news@byfi.org)

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