



OPINION

LET'S TALK

Bridging divides: Why young American and Israeli Jewish leaders must learn from each other

By [Rebecca Voorwinde](#) · March 19, 2025

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A few months ago, I sat in a room with young Israeli and American Jews who were engaging in the kind of conversation that has become increasingly rare: one that was unscripted, unfiltered and deeply honest. As six Israeli alumni of the Bronfman Fellowship, now in their 20s, met with over 500 people at American synagogues, day schools, Hillels and community gatherings, we heard the same thing over and over: *This is the conversation we've been waiting for.*

Since Oct. 7, Jewish communities worldwide have been grappling with profound pain, fear and division. In Israel, young people are shouldering the burden of war, both on the battlefield and the home front. In the U.S., young Jews are experiencing an alarming rise in antisemitism — particularly on college campuses, where conversations about Israel are often framed in starkly simplistic terms: pro or anti, for or against.



Bronfman Fellowship CEO Rebecca Voorwinde (far left) with visiting Israeli alumni of the program. Courtesy

But for many young Jews, these frameworks don't fit. They are searching for something deeper: an opportunity to understand, to ask hard questions and to build relationships with Israeli peers that go beyond the headlines.

This is exactly what the Bronfman Fellowship has always been about. For four decades, we have brought together young Jewish leaders from North America and Israel to engage with Jewish texts, each other and the complexity of our world. What we saw during our Israeli alumni's recent visit highlighted five critical truths about the moment in which we find ourselves.

1. We must push beyond headlines and soundbites.

The young Israelis we brought to the U.S. did not come to offer polished talking points. They spoke candidly about their experiences, their grief, their anger and their fears for the future, and they offered a wide spectrum of political views and ideas about what their country needs to move

forward in safety. Because the young Israelis held varying views, it gave their American counterparts permission to express their own diverse views and questions about the war and Israeli politics. These conversations offered a space beyond stereotypes — to see one another not as symbols or arguments, but as real people navigating an incredibly difficult moment.

Perhaps most strikingly, the Israelis felt heard in a way they hadn't before. They gained strength in these exchanges because their American Jewish peers truly listened and shared their own range of views, questions and feelings. It reminded them that the Jewish story is not just an Israeli or an American one; and that both distinct communities remain invested in the future and can bolster each other.

2. Young American Jews are hungry for real, open conversations with Israelis.

At nearly every event, we witnessed young American Jews lean in, eager to engage with Israelis in ways they had been struggling to find elsewhere. Many told us they felt there was no safe space to ask honest questions, express uncertainty, or talk about Israel in a way that acknowledges complexity. One student put it plainly: *This is what I needed*. They named their confusion, their frustration, their fears — sometimes for the first time — because they finally had a space where it felt possible.

But this was not a one-way exchange. Our Israeli alumni, too, left with a new perspective. Some admitted they had written off American Jews because of what they saw on social media: anger, judgment, or perceived abandonment. Being in the room together, talking not just about the war but about life, aspirations and struggles, reframed those assumptions. The divide, they realized, was not as vast as they had thought.

3. Young people may be struggling — yet they are also leading.

One of the most fascinating moments in our discussions came when American and Israeli alumni talked about the U.S. presidential election, which reinforced American polarization. To our surprise, the younger generation said they were the ones comforting their parents' anxieties and hand wringing. *We've lived through constant upheaval*, they told us. *This isn't new for us*.

This generation has grown up knowing that instability is a fact of life, whether it's war, climate change or political turmoil. They are clear-eyed about the world, and incredibly strong. That does not mean they are not suffering — far from it — but their suffering and their strength are intertwined. They do not want to simply name what is broken; they want to be part of building what comes next.

4. This is not just an Israeli or American crisis. This is a Jewish challenge.

Too often, we think of Jewish life in Israel and the U.S. as separate, parallel realities, but this moment has made it clear that we are deeply interconnected. The trauma of Oct. 7 reverberates across the Jewish world, just as the surge in antisemitism in the U.S. matters beyond America's borders. The divides we see — between generations, between communities, between political perspectives — are not just local problems. They are existential challenges for the Jewish future.

If we want to move forward, we need new ways of engaging. We need spaces where young Jews — American and Israeli — can come together not to debate but to listen, to challenge and to build a new future.

5. Pluralism and nuance create the conditions for courage.

In a world increasingly shaped by shallow discourse, where social media rewards outrage over understanding, this is what we must rebuild: the skills to listen, to care, to sit with complexity, and to hold space for one another. Our young people — both Israeli and American — see through the public discourse. They are frustrated by the dishonesty, the posturing, the lack of real engagement. They are looking for something deeper.

At The Bronfman Fellowship, our fellows and alums share a commitment to positive pluralism – the deep understanding that we can, and must, learn from those who are different from us. This means creating space for open dialogue, even when we don't agree. Standing in our convictions while respecting our shared humanity. This takes practice – and courage.

If we are to build a Jewish future that is resilient, thoughtful and connected, we need to invest in the emerging leaders who are already doing this work – and inspire others to join them.

What comes next?

Bringing our Israeli alumni to the U.S. reinforced what we at the Bronfman Fellowship have always believed: When you create space for real conversations — without scripts, without agendas, without predetermined “sides” — something transformative happens. In that spirit, we are planning a tour of young adult American alumni to Israel in June 2025 to share their stories, just as the Israelis did; and we continue our core youth fellowships for teens (both American and Israeli) to engage in deep Jewish learning and leadership training in Israel and the U.S.

The next generation of Jewish leaders does not want to be told what to think. They want to engage, to wrestle, to ask difficult questions and to find their own paths forward. They understand that complexity is not a weakness but a strength. And if we are willing to listen — really listen — to their wisdom, we may just find the solutions we so desperately need.

We are at a critical crossroads. By investing in more conversations between young American and Israeli Jews, we can do the harder and more meaningful work of building something new together.

The choice is ours. And the future of the Jewish people depends on it.

Rebecca Voorwinde is the CEO of the Bronfman Fellowship.