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Why Be Jewish? | Judy Batalion

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For the first week of the year 5777, Jewish Book Council's [Visiting Scribe](#) series features writers who were touched by Edgar M. Bronfman, z"l, and his dedication to Jewish life the world over. Read more about Edgar M. Bronfman's vision and legacy in his final book, [Why Be Jewish?: A Testament](#).

WHY BE JEWISH?

My earliest memory of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships is from the first night, when a bunch of us adolescents draped on cots in the 92nd Street Y, awkwardly getting to know each other. “What’s your denomination?” someone posed to the group
“A crisp 100,” I wanted to joke.

But before I could, people went around the room and answered. “Orthodox, Reform, Uptown Conservative.”

Huh? I sunk back into a pillow hoping no one would turn my way. I had never even heard the word used to describe a type of Judaism—or was it synagogue? My denomination, I gathered, was “traditional Holocaust”. I came from a close-knit Polish shtetl transplant set in Catholic French Quebec, where almost all the synagogues were Orthodox even though none of the people were remotely observant. Most of us had survivor grandparents. We learned Yiddish grammar and Israeli poetry about army medics at our non-religious day school.



“I’m a Shoah-based lobster Jew,” I muttered, but no one heard as conversation had already turned to a radical deconstruction of Democratic housing policies according to Talmudic code.

And here was my first brush with American Jewry.

My Montreal Jewish community was small and self-enclosed. I had heard about the Bronfman program from an older alumna who’d attended my high school, one of the few who went to the United States for college. She dazzled me. Feeling

suffocated, suburban and inconsequential, I craved a life that was bigger, worldly. I dreamed of sophistication. My parents did not want me to go to Israel (until the last minute they had refused to drive me to the interview in Boston), but I fought for this release. At 17, their unwillingness only fueled my fleeing fire. This was my first time doing something truly on my own, knowing no one, outside my country and my comfort zone. I had just graduated from high school, and here was the beginning of the rest of my life.

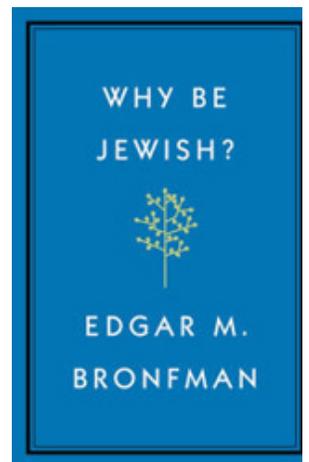
It wasn't an easy beginning. I was like the other fellows, but also unlike them. I was raised with an immigrant, working-class, conservative values, self-deprecating background, perhaps a generation behind my peers, who seemed so comfortable in their Hebraic skins, earnest and centered with strong opinions on legislative issues I only overheard on Vermont public television. I had not gone to a progressive prep school, or taken standardized tests. I could not recite even one prayer, the American National Anthem, or Walt Whitman. I didn't know the lingo de rigueur, and was intimidated by everyone's vast knowledge and skill for presentation and debate. With time, though, I picked up on terms and ideas, and made lifelong friends.

I want to say that I spent six weeks in Israel deeply moved by the trip's programming, that the impassioned lectures and poetic exchanges altered my self-concept and my understanding of Jewish history, that the *tiuls* (hikes, excursions) shaped me, inspired me, led me to become a writer. I want to claim that the proffered buffet of Jewish positions renewed my appreciation of culture and faith, taught me a love of the written word, endowed me with an awe for storytelling and the power of narrative.

But the truth is, at 17, I wasn't there yet. I was busy rebelling and running away, newly embarking on a decades-long path of self-discovery. For me, this fellowship confirmed my agency. It showed me that if I wanted something, I could go after it and get it, and could find my way (albeit shamefully fumblingly) through the challenging patches. It initiated an understanding of my difference, an ability to own it, see it, run from it or be it, and empathically accept it in others. It was the beginning of a journey to responsibility and confidence, as well as the start of a self-consciousness about who I was and where I came from, as a person, as a Jew, as a Canadian. Edgar M. Bronfman's program ignited in me the confidence to take risks, to chase dreams, to trot into the unknown, to select the communities and worlds I wanted to be part of—the traits and experiences I drew on many years later, when I began to write.

22 years post-Bronfman (GASP), with two children of my own, I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up. I still spend too much time running away instead of running toward, I still cannot envision my next steps. But I do have a clearer sense of what's meaningful. At my very first book launch I looked out to see four alums (five, including my brother); a few weeks later, four others showed up at an event on a cold night in Boston; another in Toronto; three wrote reviews; many more inspired and encouraged me, passing on practical career advice. Bronfman helped me become a writer by, decades later, offering me peers and mentors, supporters and readers, a community of people who've known me over time, who accept me even though they witnessed me through some wildly embarrassing adolescent moments, who endow me with a sense of belonging even if I sometimes don't feel it. [Why Be Jewish?](#) Bronfman asks in his last book. I suppose that's why.

Judy Batalion is the author of [White Walls: A Memoir About Motherhood, Daughterhood, and the Mess in Between](#). She is currently touring through Jewish Book Council as a 2016 – 2017 [JBC Network](#) author.



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