

# BRONFMANIM

The Alumni Magazine of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships

2008



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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The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel  
163 Delaware Ave. Suite 102  
Delmar, NY 12054  
Email: [ava.charne@byfi.org](mailto:ava.charne@byfi.org)  
Tel: (518) 475.7212

For more information about The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel summer program visit:  
[www.bronfman.org](http://www.bronfman.org)

For more information about BYFI alumni news visit: [www.byfi.org](http://www.byfi.org)

For alumni related inquiries contact us:  
Becky Voorwinde, Director of Alumni Engagement  
The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel  
375 Park Avenue, 17th Floor  
New York, NY 10152-0192  
Email: [becky@byfi.org](mailto:becky@byfi.org)  
Tel: (212) 572.7148



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Rabbi Shimon Felix,  
Executive Director

“BYFI remains committed to this wonderfully dynamic and diverse community.”

**The Jewish community has always been** one with some unique features. Back in Egypt, when the Israelites were first organizing themselves into a nation, Moses asked Pharaoh to let his people go into the desert for a few days to worship God. Pharaoh initially refused, but — after a few plagues — came around and asked, “Who are those who shall go?” Moses responded: “We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters...”

Not used to such inclusivity, Pharaoh doesn't get it: “Not so; the men may go and worship God, for that is what you request.” Since then, in a world that did not usually include everyone in the community as a real member of that community, the Jewish people have insisted on welcoming everyone into the tribe:

- You are standing today, all of you, before the Lord your God: your leaders, your tribes, your elders, your officers, all the men of Israel. Your children, your women, and the stranger who is within your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water. (Deuteronomy 9; 9).
- Assemble the nation; the men and the women and the children, and the stranger within your gates (Deuteronomy 31; 12).

Again and again, whenever the Torah wants to assemble and address the entire nation, it includes everyone: men, women, and children, rich and poor, young and the old, the Jew and the “stranger within your gates.”

The Jewish people have not always lived up to this standard of inclusivity. Often, we have behaved more like Pharaoh, excluding the women. We sometimes forget the old and ignore the poor, overlook the young, and ostracize the stranger. We do not always behave in the way the Torah demands of us, by failing to include all elements of the Jewish people in our plans, our concerns, our hopes, and our dreams.

Since its inception in 1987, The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel has tried to model a community that lives up to the words of Moses and to the inclusivity demanded by the Torah. This has been true every year in our choice of a diverse group of Fellows, our pluralistic faculty, and even more so in our expanding network of alumni.

Our community becomes more multifaceted every year. If once you were all 17 year-old high school students, you are now 18, 28, and 38 year old scientists, artists, academics, doctors and lawyers, rabbis of all denominations, writers, musicians, comedians, dancers, teachers, businesspeople and so much more. You are single and married, urban and rural, living among Jews or as the only Jewish person for miles around. You're in San Francisco New York, Haifa, London, and Buenos Aires, and voting for Obama or McCain (OK, maybe I've gone too far with this diversity thing, but you get my drift).

BYFI remains committed to this wonderfully dynamic and diverse community. We have recently hired BYFI alumna Becky Voorwinde ('97) as Director of Alumni Engagement, to help keep the community connected, coordinated, and, (most importantly, active as a force for the good of American and world Jewry and for the world beyond. It is in this spirit that we bring you this magazine, which provides an opportunity for you to read about what your fellow Fellows are doing, hear what they have to say, and, through the written word, come together as a community.

We hope you enjoy.

Rabbi Shimon Felix

**This is an exciting time for the** Bronfman Youth Fellowships as we work together – the BYFI Alumni Advisory Board and professional staff, our funder, the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, and our alumni, 573 strong and counting – to identify initiatives and programs that can maximize the impact we make, individually and collectively, in the Jewish community and the wider world.

BYFI means participation in a lifelong Fellowship. We are a pluralistic group that can, in Edgar Bronfman's words, "model a different quality of discourse for the Jewish community." The BYFI summer program offered a Jewish lens through which to view our worlds. It immersed us in stimulating text study, connected us with the people and stories of Israel, and encouraged us to take seriously our responsibility to society and the Jewish people.

Many of us have found our Bronfman experience meaningful to our adult lives, not only because of the way it shaped us as thinking people and Jews when we were impressionable teenagers, but because of the personal and professional opportunities afforded us by participation in the BYFI alumni community.

This magazine provides a perspective into BYFI's greatest strength: the diverse and talented people it can bring together. We hope the stories contained in these pages will inspire by offering engaging perspectives and insights from alumni and faculty.

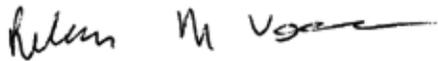
The BYFI alumni community is an outstanding place in which to find Jewish meaning, connection and value in our lives. We invite each of you to join us in any way you wish to move this vision forward – via comments on our website, listserv or by email.

We are grateful to the Bronfman family for their commitment to the BYFI summer program and their investment in the ongoing work of supporting our alumni as they work to make a difference.

Best,



Elijah Dornstreich  
elijah@byfi.org



Becky Voorwinde  
becky@byfi.org

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BYFI is conducting an important survey of our alumni. For instructions on how you can participate, check your email inbox or make sure it didn't go into your spam folder. Contact [becky@byfi.org](mailto:becky@byfi.org) with any questions.

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Becky Voorwinde,  
'97, BYFI Director of  
Alumni Engagement



Elijah Dornstreich,  
'92, President of BYFI  
Alumni Advisory Board



# Picking Sides: Bronfman Alumni Canvass Voters, Dissect Obama's ★ Jewish Problem ★ in 2008 Presidential Race ✪ *By Joshua Goodman (BYFI '93)* ✪

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**Anyone who thinks** Barack Hussein Obama doesn't have a Jewish problem hasn't checked their e-mail in over a year.

Whether it's false allegations he attended an Indonesian madrassa, outrage over racial hatred spewed by a former spiritual advisor or references to the praise heaped on him by Middle Eastern terrorist groups, Obama has transfixed Jewish voters like few Presidential candidates have before. For Jewish voters, small in number but traditionally among the Democrat party's staunchest liberal base, the controversy and hope he has inspired has exposed hidden fault lines that cut across generational, political and religious lines.

One Bronfman Fellow who has watched this trend from a front-row seat is Adam Magnus. The 1996 Fellow is a partner in Shorr Johnson Magnus, a Philadelphia-based advertising firm that creates advertisements for Democratic candidates.

"Because of my involvement in politics, I get a constant flow of e-mails from friends and family asking me things like whether it's true that Obama went to a madrassa," Magnus said. "Quite frankly, I find it disappointing that Jews would believe, much less help spread, rumors that are clearly false."

As Election Day draws closer, debunking the myths about Obama is getting easier, despite their persistence in the blogosphere and around the pinochle table at Jewish retirement homes across the country.

An on-line straw poll of Bronfman alumni ranging in age from 16 to 39 mirrored broader Jewish voting trends overwhelmingly in favor of Democrat candidates. Of the 116 respondents, 75 percent described themselves as Democrats, and 87 percent said they planned to vote for Obama. If the alumni poll is any indication, Obama's relative inexperience in foreign affairs or allegations he would endanger Israel appear to have lost traction. In fact, 57 percent of Bronfman alums think

the Democrat candidate's Middle East policies would be good for Israel, compared to 35 percent in John McCain's case.

Among the broader Jewish community support for Obama is more tenuous. A September poll of Jewish voters, by the American Jewish Committee, found Jews supportive of Obama over John McCain by 57 to 30 percent with 13 percent undecided. For some, especially Jewish Republicans who have conducted polls of their own, the lower numbers for Obama--compared to 80 percent support for Al Gore and Bill Clinton, as well as 76 percent votes for John Kerry in 2004--point to a credibility gap among Jewish voters. Partisan groups like the Republican Jewish Coalition have tried to capitalize on lingering doubts, real or invented, by canvassing retirement homes in the swing state of Florida, where Jews make up 5 percent of voters.

Anat Maytal, a 2000 Fellow, has found herself reluctantly supporting Obama. During the primaries, she hung posters and badgered friends into attending a speech by Hillary Clinton at Boston University, where Anat is attending law school. When Hillary bowed out, Maytal's strong views in support of a woman's right to choose and ending discrimination led her to Obama.

Maytal, who worked as a legislative intern for New York Democratic Senator Charles Schumer after graduating from Harvard, called Obama "unknown" and McCain "unacceptable." She explained, "I know that doesn't portray Obama in a favorable light, but I'm not very happy with both choices."

Maytal's political conversion, albeit forced by circumstances, has been anything but tepid. This summer she was on a host committee of a Jewish Young Professionals for Obama fundraiser event in New York, successfully soliciting several young friends to make a "double-chai" donation of \$36 to the candidate's campaign.

Isaac Doveve, a 1997 Bronfman Fellow who edits two monthly papers on New York politics, praised Obama's attempt to tackle Jewish anxiety head-on.

The candidate made headlines when he clumsily declared to members of the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC that he supported an undivided Jerusalem, a more hawkish stance than is

Middle Eastern policy the most important factor in their voting choice.

The tidal shift is generational, believes Doveve, who has an MA in American intellectual history from the University of Chicago and interned on Capitol Hill as a high school student.

"My mother, she loved it when John Kerry's father was discovered to be Jewish in 2004. Or that Hillary had Jewish relatives," said Doveve. "I'm 28, and though I'm certainly involved in the Jewish community, those sorts of things don't register with me. I'm concerned about issues that affect me as an urban, middle-class resident."

Margie Klein, a fourth-year rabbinical student at Hebrew College in Massachusetts, also rejects using a candidate's views on Israel as a litmus test. But that doesn't mean her Jewish identity isn't a core part of her political activism.

In 2005, she started the non-partisan Righteous Indignation project, seeking to mobilize progressive Jews around issues such as the environment and fighting poverty. A book and a national conference later, the project -- supported, in part, by a grant from the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund -- has morphed into

a small army of 200 Jewish activists registering and educating voters in low-income, minority neighborhoods.

"Jewish voters, in large part, remain committed to the same social issues they've always been and will rally behind Obama," says Klein, a 1996 Bronfman Fellow. "Most of those who don't are single-issue voters on the right who wouldn't take a look at Obama anyway."

Even if the early anxiety caused by Obama's candidacy has subsided, the question persists: Which candidate would be better for Israel?



(Clockwise from left): Eric Trager with former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney; Anat Maytal with General Wesley Clark; Edward-Isaac Doveve, editor of City Hall and The Capitol

avored by the Bush administration and many Israelis. He also jokingly referred to e-mails circulating about him, saying, "let me know if you see this guy named Barack Obama, because he sounds pretty scary."

Doveve said that was "exactly what everyone concerned about Israel issues wanted to hear."

U.S. support for Israel appears unlikely to change anytime soon. But the intense concern for Israel held for decades by Jewish voters may be fading. Only 19 percent of Bronfman alums said they considered a candidate's

Obama's statements on Israel so far have been in line with the pro-Israel lobby, Klein said. "Nevertheless, most progressive Jewish voters think the hawkish stance of the last eight years hasn't done so well at creating peace in the Middle East. Because Obama is more accountable to progressive Jewish voters who will have helped put him in office, there is a hope he will be more open to recommendations coming from progressive pro-Israel groups like Brit Tzedek v'Shalom and J Street PAC."

For Eric Trager (BYFI '00), who took time from his PhD in Mideastern politics at the University of Pennsylvania to canvass for McCain in Republican-hostile West Philadelphia, Obama's stance on Israel is less than reassuring.

Writing for Commentary's "Contentions" blog in January, Trager said Obama's "whispering of sweet Zionist nothings" to Jewish voters underscores his naïve acceptance of the pernicious thesis that the U.S.-Israel relationship is a product of power politics rather than strategic interests.

Then there's the question of Obama's advisors, among them Samantha Power. Before resigning as a senior foreign policy advisor from the Obama campaign in March -- for calling Clinton a "monster" -- Power advocated ending military aid to Israel in favor of economic development for the Palestinians. Sound Middle Eastern policy would require "alienating a domestic constituency," she was quoted as saying in a 2002 interview.

"These are the sort of things I'd hear in a mosque in Cairo, not what I'd expect from a U.S. political advisor," said Trager, who studied in Egypt in 2006 on a Fulbright scholarship.

Deby Kanner (BYFI '88), a self-described pro-choice Republican, said Obama's affiliation with Reverend Jeremiah Wright is also worrisome. "It doesn't make me a racist because I'm uncomfortable over Obama's

20-year membership in a church that gave an award to Louis Farrakhan, a man who praises Hitler," said Kanner, who was the target of obscenities while participating recently in a pro-McCain march in New York's very Jewish, very liberal Upper West Side. The church later clarified that it was an affiliated magazine, and not the church itself, that granted the award.

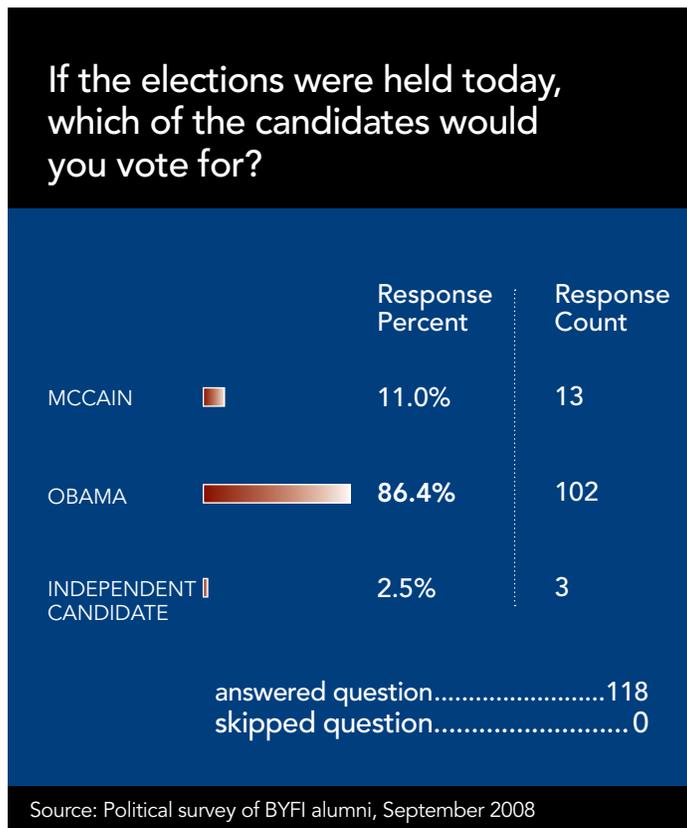
try to impose their will in the sputtering negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

"What can any president do with a Palestinian authority beholden to Hamas and an unpopular Israeli government holding onto power?" said Trager.

If McCain is elected, at least one Bronfman Fellow may have an important say in how that policy is drafted. David Adesnik (BYFI '94), spent four months in Iraq as a civilian analyst with coalition forces before joining the McCain campaign as a foreign policy and national security adviser. He's unable to discuss his work for the campaign, however.

Whoever wins, the emotions stirred by this election won't easily fade. Jews long ago stopped being a homogenous group whose vote was determined on the bima (pulpit). Still, ingrained in the American Jewish psyche is the image of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Martin Luther King Jr. and the sacrifices made by many young Jews during the civil rights battles of the 1960s. Jews of both the left and the right believe our role is to fight discrimination, not fuel it. Obama's historic campaign, depending on your viewpoint -- young or old, hawk or dove, religious or secular -- is either a fulfillment of longstanding Jewish values or a threat to them.

Never have our differences seemed starker. The wounds may take time to heal. ■



Trager is sanguine about his own candidate's chances of matching Ronald Reagan's feat in 1980, when he secured 39 percent of the Jewish vote, the highest tally since Dwight Eisenhower in 1956. George W. Bush captured 22 percent of the Jewish vote in 2004.

McCain, Trager said, is a "run-of-the mill" pro-Israel candidate, buoyed by his close association with former Democratic vice presidential candidate Sen. Joseph Lieberman. Although Gov. Sarah Palin displays an Israeli flag in her Alaska office, Trager said her commitment to Israel was largely unknown. He and Dove believe both McCain and Obama are unlikely to



Joshua Goodman, a 1993 fellow, will be mailing his absentee ballot to his swinging, home state of Ohio from Rio de Janeiro, where he writes about

Latin American politics and economics for Bloomberg News. Prior to moving to Brazil in May, he worked for The Associated Press in Colombia and covered Argentina's 2001 economic collapse for Business Week.



# The Blessings and Burdens of Raising Jewish Children: Reflections from BYFI Alumni and Staff

*Compiled and edited by  
Matti Friedman (BYFI '94)*

With the Bronfman program getting on in years and more and more alumni dutifully fulfilling the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, parenthood has become another experience tying Bronfman Fellows together. Even if they're changing diapers and carpooling in very different places and circumstances, many alums likely find themselves dealing with some of the same questions. One example: *in what ways is raising Jewish children as part of a Jewish community a blessing? In what ways is it a burden?*

The essays below emerged when we posed that question to four very different members of the Bronfman family: to a father who finds himself raising a pair of identical Israelis, a rabbi looking for new meaning in old traditions, a woman who married a non-Jewish man and brought up Jewish children, and a woman with a Jewish family beyond the boundaries of how Judaism traditionally defined family.



Matti Friedman and his family live in Jerusalem  
(Bottom right): Leah Oppenzato and her family live in Brooklyn, NY

## The Communal Uterus

By Matti Friedman (BYFI '94)

"Excuse me, one placenta or two?" asked the grinning stranger from her car. She had just stopped beside me on the Jerusalem street where I was pushing Aviv and Michael, my 15-month-old twins, in a stroller. "Two," I told her, having become used to such questions, "but they're identical." After a few inquiries about amniotic sacs the woman seemed satisfied, told me her daughter was expecting twins, and drove off with a friendly wave when the light changed.

This was early this summer, and it was – except, perhaps, for the "excuse me" – a classic Israeli moment. My wife, Naama, and I are regularly asked nonchalantly by strangers whether our twins are the result of in-vitro fertilization, whether they were born via C-section, and when we're planning to have another child. We are also regularly told by people who stop us on the street how beautiful our children are, how lucky we are, and how we shouldn't worry because it will get easier soon.

People here are genuinely interested in children, and in your children, and expect you to be interested in theirs. It's all taken in stride in a way that manages to be simultaneously annoying and endearing. The kibbutz movement may have faded, but in some ways children here remain communal property. Some of this is the nosiness and empathy inevitable in any group that sees itself as sharing a history and a fate. Some of it is more visceral and specific to living in Israel. The latter type was expressed in its rawest

form by a frail woman we met outside a hospital in the northern town of Afula when our kids were a few weeks old. She looked approvingly at the two babies in their little red slings and said: "Twins – that's very good." Then, gesturing vaguely but ominously with

her hand, she dropped her voice and explained why: "They're going to outnumber us," she said, meaning our Arab neighbors, the ones who made up half of the hospital's patients and half of the unfailingly competent and patient doctors and nurses who had just treated her.

I am used to belonging to this raucous and problematic place, and when I moved here from Canada 13 years ago it was my choice. But being a parent means making a choice for someone else, which, it turns out, doesn't make me feel entirely comfortable.

This uncertainty must exist for most Jewish parents, and for every parent raising children as part of a community, an experience that always means walking a line between comfort and suffocation. The pressure cooker of life in Israel is simply an extreme case that makes the pros and cons starker.

Here, especially for boys, belonging has darker implications. It is assumed they will grow up to be soldiers; if the collective is to survive, our sons will have to serve. This is joked about: "straight to the Navy Commandos!" someone will say as a child crawls ferociously or vaults onto the dining room table. Naama likes to say that by the time they're 18 things will work out here and they will serve as peacekeepers on Cyprus. But they won't, and it's not funny. The detail I remember most vividly from the curriculum of my summer as a Bronfman Fellow is a poem. It was by the Israeli writer Haim Gouri, and it described Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, the ultimate moment when a Jew realized his son was not his alone. Abraham had a covenant with God, which wasn't bad -- it's nice not to be on your own. But it turned out early on, atop a hill in the Promised Land, that linking your life and that

of your family to something bigger can also be unbearable.

God stayed Abraham's hand and Isaac survived, as we know. But since then, the poet wrote, we have been born with a knife in our heart.



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. He is married to Naama and has twin boys, Aviv and Michael.

## Raising a Jewish Child

By Leah Oppenzato (BYFI '91)

My Catholic wife first suggested raising our children Jewish. We were at a wedding of two friends in which the wife had converted to Judaism. For the previous year or so, we'd been dabbling in Unitarianism, thinking that perhaps its ecumenical approach would blend our traditions in a comfortable way. On the contrary, the Protestant feel of Unitarianism left us – a Catholic and a Jew – both feeling alienated.





*Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow with son Yadid, pre-Upshurin*

So Colleen looked at me across the flower arrangement and said, "Let's raise the children Jewish." We weren't yet married (religiously or legally; we have yet to be married legally, as we live in New York State) and we certainly didn't have any children. But that conversation was recognizably the start of our path.

We joined a small congregation that meets in a church nearby. The shul is nondenominational and accepts – welcomes – non-Jewish partners, even allowing them to be board members. Our son has been attending Kolot Chayeinu since he was a bouncy little polliwog in utero, where he danced to nigunim. He still loves the singing, and crawls in the aisles. We had his naming there and have felt the encompassing welcome of Jeremy's Jewish community.

Our Reform rabbi (the congregation itself is nondenominational) said that, ironically, according to the doctrine of patrilineal descent, she considers Jeremy a Jewish child. I function as the Jewish father, and we plan to raise him Jewish. However, we wanted to ensure that he would be accepted as a full Jew in the wider Jewish world, so we chose to convert him. Our first hurdle was finding a mohel who would not write "ben Avraham v'Sara" on his bris certificate – however, as it turned out, our Reform mohel agreed with our rabbi that Jeremy didn't even need to be converted, and his certificate reads "ben Colleen v'Leah." His conversion won't be accepted everywhere, given that the Bet Din was a trio of Reform women rabbis, but we feel we have done what we can to give him a solid base in Judaism.

Jeremy's Judaism has forced me to grapple with my own understanding of what makes a Jew. I see my child as fully Jewish. And yet, I come from a family of "full-blooded" Jews. I still have a nagging sense that there is a racial aspect to

Judaism, that I am Jewish not only because of my upbringing, beliefs, and practices, but my curly hair, my Jewish mother, my Eastern European lineage. I look Jewish; Jeremy looks Celtic. I am glad for this challenge, to be pushed past my own stereotypes.

And yet Jeremy may find himself in places where he is not accepted as a Jew. I struggled in my own adolescence with different forms of Judaism that were less than accepting of my own Reform/Reconstructionist background, or my lesbian identity, but no one can ever dispute my Jewish heritage. It's my job to pass on my strong sense of Jewish identity, just as my mother passed hers on to me; but unlike my mother, I can't give him the security of the bloodline.

Being a non-biological mother comes with a host of challenges (different, in my situation, from adoption because Jeremy does have a biological parent). I need to pass my Judaism to him from my heart, not my blood or my genes or my curly hair. That is my challenge. And I accept it fully.

.....

*Leah Oppenzato '91 lives in Brooklyn, New York with wife Colleen and 9 month old son Jeremy. She teaches 7th grade at progressive charter school in Hoboken, New Jersey. She is a member of Kolot Chayeinu/Voices of Our Lives, a non-denominational Jewish congregation in Brooklyn.*

## Down with the Upshurin

*by Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow (BYFI '91) as told to Matti Friedman*

When our son Yadid approached the age of three, I began to think about the Jewish tradition of upshurin, when a boy's hair is cut for the first time on his third birthday. I grew up in a family where this was not practiced. But in my own home, where an Orthodox rabbi (me) and a Reform cantor (my wife, Adina H. Frydman) are raising children in a loving Jewish mélange, it started to look like a potentially amazing and meaningful ritual.

Research into the halakhic roots of the tradition got me even more interested. I discovered the links between upshurin and the agricultural laws of orla, which forbids harvesting from a fruit tree within its first three years, and pe'a, which requires a farmer to leave a corner of his field aside for the poor. Parallel to this, a boy's hair is left uncut for the same period of time (three years), and when it is cut we are required to leave pe'ot, corners (sidelocks). At three years of age, like a fruit tree, a Jewish boy is considered to have reached a landmark. With diapers out of the way, and with his consciousness developing, he is considered ready for learning, wearing tzitzit, and his first haircut.

But I felt that interest alone in the custom was not a good enough reason for us to perform it. Would we even consider this if we had a daughter? But then we began to think about how we could make the upshurin into a full-blown mitzvah that we would want to perform for our children regardless of gender. For us, mitzvot are not just doing what is right or not doing what is wrong according to some other worldly law. Our ideal is to model commitments that are personally meaningful, universally relevant, and distinctively Jewish.

That is how we got the idea to have Yadid wait past his third birthday to get his hair cut. Yadid was going to wait until his hair was long enough to donate. Instead of a strange tradition performed by rote, it would become a religious experience of giving.

I am not sure if he understood at first. But at the time he was undergoing the shift from mere repeater to understanding being and Yadid began to develop a language of altruism. At the party we finally had for him when he was three and a half, his grandmother gave him a tzedaka box, which he began to fill. I asked him why, and he said that when he had hair he gave it to someone who needed it, likewise when he had money he would give it someone in need.

If I have to put my finger on what raising children as Jews means for us, it is this. The community, its history and laws are not just a backdrop to the bedlam of parenting. In this case, they provided a way of getting Yadid to think, before he was even aware he was doing so, about what it means to live a halakhic moral

existence. We look forward to repeating this ritual with his brother Yishama and some day if we are blessed, also with a daughter. Our upshurin has provided us with a platform for a discussion with a three-year-old about what it means to be a mensch.

.....

*Rabbi Avi Orlow '91 is a Jewish Educator for the Foundation for Jewish Camp. For the past four years, Avi was the Campus Rabbi and Assistant Director of St. Louis Hillel at Washington University. Prior to this experience he held numerous positions as Rabbi, educator, and youth leader. Avi spent 17 years as a camper and then educator at Ramah Camps in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and YUSSR camps in the Former Soviet Union. Avi has a BA in religious studies from Columbia. He was ordained in the charter class at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox rabbinical School. Avi lives in White Plains with his wife, Cantor Adina Frydman, and their sons, Yadid and Yishama.*

## Growing With My Children: A Mother's Reflections

By Ava Charne (BYFI staff)

Before my daughters were born, I remember being in synagogue with my father on Rosh Hashanah. The rabbi was talking about how intermarriage will be the demise of the Jewish religion. I could swear he was looking straight at me, and I felt like I was wearing a scarlet letter.

Tina and Robyn are adults now. Their father, Vince, is Italian. My children are a product of intermarriage.

As the rabbi spoke, I remember thinking that if and when I had children, I would go out of my way to make sure they were Jewish, and that I would not single handedly destroy the Jewish people.

Tina went to nursery school at our temple. One Shabbat, she came home and said that she had flowers for our Shabbat table. I asked her where our Shabbat table was, and she told me she thought it was downstairs in the basement. It amazed me that at her young age, she was okay with whatever traditions we did or did not have.

When Robyn was 4, I began to teach kindergarten at our Sunday School. Tina and Robyn would come with me without fail every Sunday morning. They continued to accompany and "assist" me until Robyn graduated from high school. I never imagined that they would go to a Hebrew day school, yet Tina began kindergarten and Robyn followed, and eight years later they graduated.

We became more and more involved in Judaism, and as the years went by, Vince asked me if I made up Jewish holidays -- each year there seemed to be more that we were observing. Tina and Robyn got involved in Israeli dancing, danced with their Israeli dance troupe through high school, and even taught Israeli dancing when they got older. They came with me to Israel for many of the summers when I was there with the Bronfman Fellows. The winter retreats and reunions were so meaningful to them.

Today, both of my daughters are very active Jews. Both took part in Avodah, the Jewish Service Corps, after college. Tina is a special education teacher in Maryland, and Robyn just got a job at the Jewish Community Center in Newton, Mass. as a Social Justice Youth Coordinator.

I think my experience reflects both something of the price of living in a community, and its benefits. The rabbi's harsh words that Rosh Hashana showed to what extent Jews believed they must be exclusive to survive. The community excluded people like Vince, who aren't part of it, and rejected the life choice I made when I married him.

And yet at the same time, our community offered my children so much, and made them the Jewish people they are now. I am very proud of Tina and Robyn, and very grateful for the support of the Jewish community in which they grew up -- their synagogue, their day school, and BYFI. ■

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*Ava Charne is the Administrative Director for The Bronfman Youth Fellowships and has been part of BYFI since the fall of 1987. Ava is very proud to say that she personally knows all 573 Bronfmanim. Ava is also the Executive Director of the Capital District Women's Bar Association. Prior to 1987, Ava was the Training, Safety and Equal Employment Opportunity Specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Veterinary Services. She holds her BA in political science and her Masters Degree in Public Administration from the State University of New York at Albany. She was born and raised in Brooklyn, but has lived in Albany, New York since 1973. In recent years she has developed a strong passion for playing tennis.*



*Ava Charne with daughters Robyn and Tina and their father Vince*



# A Pluralistic Jewish Stance

*By Professor Joseph Reimer*

Once, when teaching at Stanford, I befriended a local Reform rabbi. When he learned that I taught for the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel (BYFI), he told me he was angry at the program. I asked why, and he said it was because on BYFI a young man from his congregation had been taught to put on tefillin. What was wrong with that? His response: it was an effort by Orthodox rabbis to discredit the Reform movement.

That claim was disturbing. I was present when this young man had asked to learn to put on tefillin. He did feel badly that he had never been taught about tefillin. But do tefillin belong to the Orthodox movement? Is wishing to learn more necessarily a negative comment on one's past learning? Is embracing an age-old Jewish tradition a rejection of Reform or any other religious movement?

I thought of this conversation last week as I was listening to Aliza Kline describe how she, the author Anita Diamant, and other pioneers built *Mayyim Hayyim*, the pluralistic mikveh (ritual bath) in the Boston area. Aliza is a product of the Reform movement and yet has devoted her career to building a mikveh that is used not only for conversion ceremonies and traditional rituals

relating to niddah, the menstrual cycle, but also for many healing rituals as well. Aliza talked of her growing fascination and dedication to use of the mikveh and her delight at seeing hundreds of Jewish women discover the power of these traditions for themselves and their daughters. Is Aliza using the mikveh to discredit liberal Judaism? Hardly; her clientele and supporters are overwhelmingly liberal Jews.

Last year I sat on the doctoral committee of Orit Kent, who has completed a stunning study of chevruta learning – a traditional method of studying in pairs – among non-Orthodox university students. Orit grew up Orthodox and has dedicated her career to promoting serious Jewish text study among all Jews. Her theory is that the yeshiva-based interchange of a pair of students working over a traditional Jewish text has great power, when used wisely, in an array of learning contexts. Like Aliza, Orit sees the potential of unleashing the spiritual power hidden in this traditional practice for the benefit of Jews who have never and would never venture into a traditional yeshiva.

A hundred years ago modern Jews were busy reforming Judaism by letting go of many of the traditional practices they associated with old-

world religion. They sought an American Judaism that could proudly take its place alongside its sister religions. No beards, Yiddish accents and, for God's sake, no ancient practices like mikveh or chevruta. We've clearly outgrown that need for rational reconstruction. In a post-modern world mikveh and chevruta can proudly take their place alongside back-to-nature health practices and learning methodologies. We are free to reshape the great modern reforms.

We are also free to think past conventional denominational boundaries. The denominations are outgrowths of those modern reforms and have played important roles in giving organizational shape to 20th century American Judaism. But their capacities to play future shaping roles will depend upon their adaptive strengths in responding to what we see every day: seeking Jews in search of deeper meanings who do not care a whit about the labels. They seek Jewish quality and meaning wherever they can find it.

Jewish pluralism, to my mind, is not a movement but a stance exemplified by Aliza, Orit and other outstanding Jewish teachers such as Rabbi Danny Lehmann. Danny grew up in the Conservative movement, was ordained as



an Orthodox rabbi and was the founding head of the pluralistic Gann Academy in the Boston area. A few years ago Danny, a talented musician, felt the Jewish community needed a serious summer arts program that was kosher and Shabbat observant. He began BIMA at Williams College and pioneered something new: not a Jewish camp with a subsidiary arts program, but a serious arts program for Jewish teens. It is perhaps not surprising that BYFI and its alumni were involved from the beginning, and that the Samuel Bronfman Foundation supports BIMA through the Foundation for Jewish Camping. Two years ago BIMA moved to Brandeis University and has taken its place alongside its sister program, Genesis, a summer program for high school students combining Jewish studies, academics, the arts and humanities.

Watching those two programs closely and comparing them to the great denominational Jewish camps has been instructive. I know Jewish denominational camps that have arts programs and learning methods of which we can be proud. But they are not as strong in two crucial components that flourish at BIMA and Genesis. First is the opportunity for Jewish youth to get to know people who have grown

up in other movements. Second is the freedom to explore –intellectually and artistically – beyond the boundaries of any one movement.

The first point seems obvious, but the second deserves more explanation. I have seen participants who have discovered a new approach to Judaism. They entered thinking their religion was a circumscribed system embodied by their synagogue, rabbi and youth movement. They left seeing alternatives beyond those limits; they began to explore the nooks and crannies of our traditions and discover therein hidden treasures not known to their parents and grandparents. We can explore these treasures and learn from them without rejecting our roots. We can expand our Jewish horizons by reclaiming practices and ideas that have fallen away under the rush of modernizing Judaism.

Beyond that, in a pluralistic stance we are free to explore the wide oceans of knowledge and the depths of artistic possibilities and bring those riches to bear on our Jewish lives. Jews have nothing to fear from developing their artistic talents and exploring their intellectual curiosities. Indeed, the Judaism we are seeking is one that is more deeply rooted in its full past and more

devotedly open to the insights that await us in this radically new and unknown century. The Judaism that emerges will likely look very different from what we have known. I suspect it may look more like BYFI, BIMA and Genesis than the denominations of the 20th century. ■



*Joseph Reimer is associate professor and former director of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University. Dr. Reimer served as a faculty member*

*on the Bronfman Youth Fellowships summer program for 4 years. His book Succeeding at Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made it Work won the 1997 National Jewish Book Award. Dr. Reimer has served on the staff of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America and on the boards of the Covenant Foundation, the Rashi School and the New Jewish High School. He currently chairs the education policy committee for Birthright Israel, North America. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts with his wife Gail Twersky Reimer and their daughters Tamara and Ziva.*



# Turning the Outside In: Bronfman Alumni Comedians Discuss American Jewish Humor

By Judy Batalion (BYFI '94)

The husband said: Close the window, it's cold outside.  
The wife replied: And if I close the window, will it  
make it any warmer outside?

- Old Jewish Joke

I began performing stand-up comedy in London at a time when my Jewish identity was not on my mind, and certainly not in my set, which is why I was so surprised when it was the first thing industry folk picked up. At early auditions, they would say, as if helping me: 'Go back to New York.' Um, OK, I thought, but I'm Canadian. Or, 'Don't worry, stick it out – the British public is slowly getting used to Woody Allen.' Or even, 'You should really marry a non-Jew - your kids will be much better looking'. I had to face the fact that some element of my yiddishkeit (my pronunciations? gesticulations? attitudes? face?) must have been inadvertently leaking onto the stage. I smacked of Jew. What until then I had taken to be mainstream, as my unremarkable background – I actually did grow up speaking Yiddish – was suddenly my main feature. Jewish meant difference, even in, or especially in, the comedy world. I was being placed as an outsider, viewed as 'playing a character', and told to get out.



This reaction, aside from making me aware of my Judaism (doing a better job than most Jewish organizations ever had), also got me thinking about the ways that outsidership might be integral to the very Jewish humor that I was being accused of using. All humor might be seen as coming from an alternate perspective, but Jewish humor has traditionally been known as the humor of the outsider. Among their many attempts to characterize Jewish humor, scholars consistently refer to it as the humor of members of an underclass making jokes in order to feel better about their position, to feel solidarity, to give their nebbish psyches confidence, and, eventually, to overthrow the Tsar.

In America, a well-known brand of outsider-Jewish-neurotic humor emerged in the 1960s, embodied by comedians like Woody Allen and Joan Rivers. Their senses of humor were based on self-deprecation and the discomfort of fitting into one's own skin as well as into society; it's a humor of neurosis, insecurity and assessing position. Allen and Rivers are originally Konigsburg and Molinsky.

But my hunch was that things had changed since the 1960s. Is current American humor post-Jewish? And if so, how has the Jewish humor of the outsider been accepted into and perhaps altered by America, the land of the immigrant outsider par excellence?

I turned to some Bronfman alumni who are also in the comedy industry to find out if and how being a Jew had catalyzed and affected their careers and their senses of humor, and whether Jewish comedy – the humor and the business – could still be considered that of the outsider.

## Hip-Hop, Beavis, and Oysters

With a completely serious face, eyes facing straight ahead and making no contact with the audience, stand-up Dan Mintz (BYFI '97) says into the mic: "My grandfather was actually a Holocaust survivor. And you can tell that it really affected him. Because, to this day, he still will not walk into a gas chamber."

Dan is known for his dead-pan delivery of non-sequitur one liners, and his absurd twists of logic. Dan's is an intellectual comedy, with a logical, clear and concise writing style, and in which the passion is under-wraps, in tension with the calm of the performance. Regardless of the content (this is one of his sole Jewish jokes), I wondered if he felt his writing and

delivery style were Jewish in any way. "Well, maybe," he thinks. "If there's a brand of Jewish humor that is based in structural playing, and an emotional remove, a dryness, a Talmudic twisting.

"You get Jewish comedians for the same reason you get Jewish lawyers," Dan says. "We like to play around with laws, see things from different perspectives."

The probing attitude of Jewish study, where every point is re-questioned and re-interpreted, and in which one is always taking on 'outside' positions, also came up in conversation with comedy hip hop artist Eli Batalion (BYFI '97), who – among his many accomplishments – also happens to be my brother. Eli recognized that elements of a Jewish childhood had an impact on his comedy writing. Biblical stories, Freudian tales, self-deprecation, major tonal changes in the delivery of lines, and twists of logic that occur in Talmudic reasoning all influence his lyrics. Eli and his writing/performing partner Jerome Saibil often work in a dialectic way, taking on different sides of arguments which are later embodied by different characters.

Hollywood scriptwriter Etan Cohen (BYFI '91) says his experience of 'difference' came not from the studios but from the Orthodox Jewish community where the idea of writing for raunchy cartoons was a touch suspect. His own insecurity about committing acts that were asur, forbidden, and writing for treyf showbiz is what led him to major in Yiddish at Harvard, where he began freelancing for the MTV cartoon Beavis and Butt-Head. "The famous Yiddish writers also grappled with ethical contradictions involved in being religious and writing for the popular market," he says. Etan found confidence in these stories, in feeling he was part of a tradition that tussled with tradition.

Etan was, however, influenced by the Orthodox community's distrust for some elements of American culture. Indeed, perhaps the intense examination of the rest of society by the Orthodox community is at the heart of Etan's comedic perspective. Some of Etan's earliest comedy work, he jokes, was scribbling parodies of commentary in the margins of his Talmud books at school, adding another humorous layer to the endless Judaic discussion.

Israel-based comedian Yisrael Campbell, who has done shows for the BYFI summer program, also comments on feeling excluded from the Jerusalem Orthodox community because of his career. He grew up Catholic in Pennsylvania and converted to Judaism three times, each with a more stringent rabbi.

Not having been raised Jewish, is his sense of humor Jewish? Yisrael replied that he was brought up by a family of immigrants that used to drive around and point out all the country clubs they weren't allowed into. "I also didn't feel like the world was my oyster – or, actually, I felt like it was, but I couldn't eat it," he explains. In that sense, Yisrael says, he may have always had a Jewish sense of humor.

## In the Out Culture

Yisrael's experience might demonstrate the palpability of Jewish humor for Americans, and why it was so readily adopted – partly because everyone was and is an outsider, a recent-ish immigrant. Indeed, I wondered how Jewish humor might have been absorbed into the American culture of outsidership – how easily was it taken up, and how much has it affected and been affected by the mainstream.

Dan says there isn't a new generation of 'Jewish' comedians on the stand-up circuit. "Woody Allen already did Woody Allen; you can't repeat that," he says. "Jewish humor is so absorbed into the culture that everyone does it.

"Jewishness is normal in the USA, you don't have to be neurotic about it. Really, who could still talk about being Jewish on stage? What would you say?"

Eli agrees: "Jews are more integrated, but consequently, I think they have less Jewish-oriented material. To a certain extent, the Jewish stereotypes and jokes to harp on are somewhat clichéd – how many more jokes are you willing to sit through about Jewish mothers, or Jewish guilt?"

But Eli thinks that though Jewish content might be less overt, American comedy preserves some of its Jewish roots in different guises – Larry David's nebbishyness, Seinfeld's style and the characters created by the Stiller/Rogen/Apatow cabal.

"Watching Eugene Levy in the 'American Pie' films suggests to me that America is prepared to handle certain Jewish-isms like mazel tov greetings as part of the American

cultural institution," Eli says. "Unfortunately, it is probably the most boring Jewish elements which are received in this way, but that only means there's an opportunity for greater Jewish comedy out there, to be exploited by a Jewish filmmaker capable of spinning a classic scene out of a tashlich sequence."

Some American comedy characters are still Jewish, but it appears they've gone from



*Dan Mintz performing a stand-up routine*

the neurotic to the parodic. Current Jewish Hollywood characters like Adam Sandler and Judd Apatow's Israeli hairstylist Zohan have traded the nebbish personality for sass and punch. (Albeit, I add, as a caricature of an Israeli, just as Sarah Silverman, unlike Joan Rivers, plays a caricature of a Jewish princess confident in her sexuality and position.) Etan, who is currently writing a Sherlock Holmes film for Apatow, to star Sacha Baron Cohen, says Apatow's productions have Jew-heavy staffs, and they're frank: No one is worried about being Jewish, and Jewishness is not the punchline.

## In the Industry

Then it seems that Jewish humor, coming from the outside, has found its way to the inside of American culture. But has it also made it to the

inside of the studios, stages and boardrooms, in a way that it hasn't in England? Did today's American Jewish comedians think about their Jewish identity on a daily basis, as I had started to?

Dan is flummoxed by the question. While growing up in Anchorage, he felt exotic being a Jew. But since his Bronfman Israel trip – his first immersion into saturated Jewish culture – he has spent time at Harvard and lived in New York and LA, and has been surrounded by Jews. His Jewishness, he says, has "become a background element of my identity."

Eli's main experience of Jewish identity outsidership came from working in his particular genre – hip hop. He is, after all, a Jew in a do-rag. Though he never indicates his religious background in press releases, many critics address it. Eli, however, doesn't feel awkward about it at all. He takes the art form seriously; his comedy is in his (Jewish-ish) lyrics.

To Etan, being a Jew – even an observant, kippa-wearing one – is not a big issue in LA, where there are kosher groceries at every gas station, and TV station. Not only does it seem to him that Jews work in all aspects of the entertainment industry – writing, directing, producing, acting – but Jewish humor has so pervaded the

American comedy industry that around the writers' table the only way Etan knows if a colleague is Jewish is by their last name. He never feels self-conscious about his Jewish practice, he says, except a tiny bit during Pesach, when at lunch he pulls out a suitcase filled with matza and Diet Coke.

But isn't writing with Jewish collaborators, like Ben Stiller, a little different than writing with non-Jewish ones, like his mentor Mike Judge, with whom he co-wrote the film Idiocracy and episodes of Beavis and Butt-Head and King of the Hill? No, Etan claims: He sees no difference in the writing, the sense of humor, or the ways of working.

Yisrael, however, says it was his religious observance and his sense of being an outsider in Hollywood that led him to Israel in the first

“Jews are more integrated, but consequently, I think they have less Jewish-oriented material. To a certain extent, the Jewish stereotypes and jokes to harp on are somewhat clichéd - how many more jokes are you willing to sit through about Jewish mothers, or Jewish guilt?”

—Eli Batalion '97

place. Unlike Etan, Yisrael faced problems being observant in LA in the late 1990s, especially when he didn't want to film a commercial on the eighth day of Passover. His agent thought he was crazy: “It's cute when you put on a kippa, but not cute when you turn down work.” In 2000, Yisrael went to Israel for a short reflective break. He ended up studying at the Pardes Institute for several years, and the re-emergence of his stand-up career happened by accident: Pardes asked him to talk about his personal experiences during a program on conversion, the audience cracked up, and next thing he knew he was performing this monologue to crowds in his living room. It soon became a touring piece in Israel and back in the USA, and he's now preparing for the Off Broadway run of his show 'You Can Never Be Too Jewish' – an encouraging title that seems to summarize the American industry.

### Stars of David

In Joan Rivers' 2008 West End show, the finale included an enormous cheese plate covered with Israeli flags. The plethora of blue Magen Davids made me gasp (as did the plethora of blue stilton). Wow, I thought, never in my life would I use Israeli flags in a show. But, the reason behind this 'never' has changed dramatically over the past years. In my previous North American life, I wouldn't have placed the blue-and-white on stage because I wouldn't have had much to say about it, despite (or perhaps because of) having gone to a Zionist high school. On the other hand, in my current life in England, the

Israeli flag is a loaded symbol, pungently political, and I'm already English enough to feel self-conscious about showing it. I would now not wave an Israeli flag unless I was trying to make a statement - and one akin to appearing on stage holding a Starbucks cup, wearing a red-white-and-blue T-shirt from Wal-Mart, and beating up the infirm. (But, if I did this, it would be as a parody of these typical statement-makers...).

Though I haven't yet employed the I-flag, I have started to address my Judaism in comedy shows. Having been marked and excluded because of it, my Jewishness has become something I want to talk about, and there seem to be audiences who want to hear about it as well. When there's something at stake in Jewish identity, when it is a topic of taboo and tension, it also becomes one of jokes.

Rivers' show, in which she mentions being told early on that she was too Jewish to play anywhere outside New York, makes it pretty clear that her younger self probably wouldn't have used Israeli flags either. But her comfort at doing so now (and how I envy it), seems to be the comfort of Dan, Etan, Eli and Yisrael playing in America; it attests to how much the American comedy industry and mainstream culture has changed in the past four decades.

With outsider Jewish comedy now comfortably insider, I wonder where it will go from here: Will it turn in on itself? Will post-Zohar Jewish characters be blond supermodels doing tashlich in picturesque brooks? And will 'Jewish' humor now emerge only from cultures outside the land of free refills? ■

*Etan Cohen on the set of Tropic Thunder which he co-wrote with Ben Stiller*





# Amplifying Impact— The BYFI Alumni Venture Fund

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 grants to 33 innovative alumni-led projects that are helping to shape the Jewish community and the wider world.

The \$74,850 distributed in small grants is only part of the story. More exciting is the way the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund brings alumni together to share their technical skills and expertise. In the coming years, we will continue to create opportunities for grantees to share successful strategies with one another and for alumni working in all disciplines to offer guidance that helps grantees grow their initiatives and organizations.

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.

Projects that meet the funding criteria have included community service programs, support for innovative Jewish communities, conferences, publications and grants to not-for-profit organizations where alumni serve as formal and informal leaders.

Below are profiles of five Bronfman Fellows who are making an impact.



**Randi Cairns  
(BYFI '87)  
Home Front  
Hearts**

Randi Cairns (BYFI '87) is an expert multitasker: A

mother of four children ages 3 to 13 who works freelance jobs while her husband, Captain Ian Cairns, is stationed in Afghanistan training the Afghan National Police. At the same time she is studying full-time towards an MS in Human Services and working to run and expand her not-for-profit organization, Home Front Hearts.

For Randi, Home Front Hearts is literally a labor of love. "My heart has belonged to a soldier for almost fifteen years. Supporting his career, managing things in his absence and working with the families of his soldiers, I've become personally acquainted with the challenges faced by military families," says Randi. Home Front Hearts provides support and resources to the families of deployed service members, especially those from the New Jersey National Guard or Reserves. It works to increase public awareness of the struggles and sacrifices of military families and engages individuals and businesses in building a more military-friendly community.

Home Front Hearts has connected military families in a support network and found businesses to offer them, pro-bono, services they need. It has also sent over 300 boxes of school supplies to needy communities in Afghanistan at Randi's husband's request.

The money from a BYFI Alumni Venture Fund grant enabled Randi to secure official 501c3 status as a public charity. With this in place, Randi can focus on increasing the breadth of her organization and serving the needs of military families. "The BYFI alumni community offers a sense of belonging, a diverse set of skills and experiences, and a connection the likes of which I have not experienced in other communities to which I've belonged. Twenty-one years after a summer trip to Israel, it is still a community that I turn to and know that I will be supported."

In Hebrew school, Randi learned about ideas like tikkun olam (repairing the world) and tzedakah (charity). But her understanding of the importance of viewing our responsibilities for each other through a broader lens, one that extends beyond the Jewish community, deepened as a result of being part of an interfaith relationship. "My husband and I are deeply committed to teaching these values to our children," explains Randi. "The best way I can do that is through my own actions in advocating for others."

For more information visit [www.homefronthearts.org](http://www.homefronthearts.org)



**Idit Klein  
(BYFI '89)  
Keshet**

Idit Klein (BYFI '89) is working towards a day when Jews will not fear

they will be rejected by their community based on their sexual or gender identity. Since late August 2001 Idit has worked as executive director of Keshet, a grassroots organization striving for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender inclusion in Jewish life. Under Idit's leadership, Keshet has flourished.

Based in Boston, Keshet first reached a national stage with the release of a documentary the organization produced, titled Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School. The film tells

the story of a girl at a Jewish high school who campaigns to establish a gay-straight alliance. The film and accompanying curriculum have been used across the U.S. and internationally. Since its premier, the film has been screened in several hundred communities, including a GLBT film festival in Guyana.

Idit's work is highly personal. When in college at Yale, Idit experienced a sense of isolation and vulnerability when deciding whether to talk about her sexual identity with leadership at the campus Hillel. This anxiety was generated, she says, by the "complete absence of any signs of GLBT life in the campus Jewish community." When she did come out, Idit was supported by friends and staff at Hillel particularly Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld and Rabbi Jim Ponet (BYFI faculty). But it concerns Idit that fifteen years later there are still many young people who have the same experiences of marginalization.

The desire to create welcoming environments is what led Keshet to develop the "Hineini Education Project." Part of this project entails training and peer support to Jewish educators and lay leaders throughout the country to create safe schools and supportive communities. Keshet is also working to strengthen the capacity of Jewish GLBT organizations in other cities. Rather than replicate what Keshet created in Boston, they work to transmit curriculum resources and what they've learned about organizing, coalition-building, and facilitating difficult conversations with other groups.

Being awarded a BYFI Alumni Venture Fund grant is important to Idit on a symbolic level – the funds provided come with the support of the entire BYFI alumni community. "It really means a lot to me to be supported in this work by fellow Bronfmanim," Idit affirms. Keshet's mission of inclusion reflects BYFI's ethos of pluralism and open dialogue. With Idit's involvement, BYFI hopes to bring programming on GLBT issues to alumni.

One of Idit's proudest moments was a quiet one, sitting alone at her desk, when she received an e-mail from an 83 year old Jewish lesbian who had just watched Hineini. Her e-mail read, "I have never felt welcomed in the Jewish community. I couldn't find a shul to say kaddish in for my partner of 60 years after she passed away a couple of years ago. Thank you

for showing me that another kind of community is possible."

For more information visit [www.keshetonline.org](http://www.keshetonline.org)



**Ari Lipman  
(BYFI '95)  
Faith Vote  
Columbus**

Ari Lipman (BYFI '95) is an activist and organizer.

As founder of Faith Vote Columbus in Ohio, he is leading an interfaith coalition of religious congregations, neighborhood associations and labor unions committed to increasing voter turnout in urban precincts.

Faith Vote Columbus connects to 130 precincts, mostly low-income neighborhoods, where voter turnout in the 2004 presidential election was below 50% of registered voters. Right now, they're working with Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner to ensure that the November 2008 election runs smoothly, without the long lines in urban precincts that marred the 2004 vote. His non-partisan organization hopes to maximize the political power of disenfranchised communities.

Ari first developed a passion for social justice as a student at Harvard, where he helped start the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. "All of a sudden," he says, "I moved from a nice D.C. suburb to Cambridge. Twenty yards away from my dorm, people were sleeping on grates." Working with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, Ari helped build a coalition of religious leaders advocating for social change in Massachusetts. With the support of over one thousand volunteers from Boston's religious communities, GBIO successfully pressured the Massachusetts government to enact state-wide universal health care. In May of 2007, the progressive alliance Take Back America acknowledged Ari's role in this work with its Maria Leavy Tribute Award.

Ari believes that activism is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. "The one thing that exists in Torah that did not exist in any contemporary religious code was the exhortation to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger," says

Ari, whose grandfather and great-grandfather were labor organizers. "It's a role of the Jewish community to critique governmental and religious authorities, and to bring them toward a more just vision of the world."

Ari, who now holds a master's degree in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School, credits his BYFI summer for helping him develop the strong Jewish identity that guides him in his work with religious leaders. "If I walk into an African-American Pentecostal church, I need to know their tradition, and more importantly, who I am and where I came from. That was a big part of what BYFI did for me."

With an election year approaching, Ari hopes to build a significant voting bloc around social issues. Faith Vote Columbus has already seen success, working with Governor Ted Strickland to expand health insurance programs to low-income Ohio residents. "If you can claim to hold 20,000 votes in Ohio," Ari says, "that's a big deal."

For more information visit [www.ohio-iaf.org](http://www.ohio-iaf.org)



### Elizabeth Ochs (BYFI '01) *Street Sights*

Elizabeth Ochs (BYFI '01) is dedicated to advocacy for the homeless.

Elizabeth is the coordinating editor of *Street Sights*, a monthly Rhode Island newspaper written by people who are homeless, or were in the past. The newspaper serves as a forum for the homeless and for advocates, students, state officials, and the general public to share accurate and honest information about what it means to live in the streets and how to help the people who do.

The newspaper was defunct until a little over a year ago, when Elizabeth took charge. Since then, under her direction, it has grown to distribute 2,000 copies a month to Rhode Island's senators and representatives, all major news sources, and every major homeless shelter and service provider in the Providence area. It also goes to bookstores, libraries and community centers. The paper includes writing, art, news stories, and opinion pieces.

*Street Sights* strives to build a community of people who, Elizabeth explains, "are not defined by what they lack, but what gifts they bring to the production." The newspaper aims to empower its reporters. One writer who was homeless when he first got involved started two columns, the "Humanitarian Award" and the "Rainbow Award," that honor organizations and individuals who change the lives of homeless people in Rhode Island. Today, he has worked his way up to become the magazine's creative writing editor and is on his way to moving into his own apartment.

The BYFI Alumni Venture Fund grant helped ensure that Elizabeth could continue her work with *Street Sights*. Elizabeth is grateful for this support. "So many individuals in the BYFI community serve as inspiring examples of what it means to live out one's values and beliefs," she says. For Elizabeth, *Street Sights* is her way of repairing the world, living the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*; it is an expression of her Judaism and provides fulfillment. Elizabeth explains: "I am in awe of all the people I meet who find a way to better their lives and those around them, even when they are struggling to reach a stable place."

For more information visit [www.streetsights.org](http://www.streetsights.org)



### One to Watch Jodi Meyerowitz (BYFI '05)

Jodi Meyerowitz (BYFI '05) is in her senior year at the University of Ore-

gon, but she has already embarked on an ambitious project whose goal is no less than to "create a unified Jewish community." Jodi is co-founder of *Shomer Achi*, an entrepreneurial not-for-profit aimed at fostering personal connections between college students in Israel and the U.S. through community-based learning. She balances her commitment to *Shomer Achi* with her studies in Economics and Planning, Public Policy, and Management and role as President of Oregon Hillel.

When Jodi immigrated to Portland, Oregon at the age of ten from South Africa, she was surprised to find that many of her Jewish

day school peers were not familiar with Jewish life outside of North America and Israel. In college, she saw friends return from organized trips to Israel with a deep love of the land but little contact with Israelis. This concerned her. According to Jodi, "connections based on places are less sustainable than connections built through people." Jodi's experience as a Bronfman Fellow taught her this firsthand. While on her BYFI summer, Jodi connected with Israeli Amitim, a parallel cohort of Bronfman Fellows from Israel. She witnessed inter-Jewish dialogue "without the antagonism."

Jodi plans to continue the pluralistic dialogue she witnessed on BYFI, choosing to pilot *Shomer Achi* in the Pacific Northwest, a region where many Jews are unaffiliated. She hopes to connect them to Judaism through social justice. Jewish American students from and the University of Oregon will engage in social action projects with Israeli students from the Technion and Haifa University. Students will visit one another's countries, hear speakers, study Jewish texts, and conduct community service projects related to immigration.

Jodi was recognized for her leadership by *Presentense*, a Jewish incubator program. Together with *Shomer Achi*'s co-founder Jamie Zebrak, she spent 6 weeks this summer preparing the project and learning practical leadership and organizational skills as a *Presentense* Fellow. *Shomer Achi* has also received seed funding from the BYFI Alumni Venture Fund.

Jodi is already getting a sense of what leadership in the Jewish community entails: "empowering others," and, she says with a laugh, "many early mornings and late nights." ■

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