

Bronfman salon asks: Why be Jewish?

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What can be expected when three dozen Jewish intellectuals are put in a swank ski resort for 48 hours and let loose on the question "Why be Jewish?" The answer: a rambling, if well-intentioned conversation.

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PARK CITY, Utah (JTA) -- The Word came down from the mountain, and lo! it was not inscribed on stone tablets but was, rather, a rambling, if well-intentioned conversation.

What else can be expected when three dozen Jewish intellectuals are put in a swank ski resort for 48 hours and let loose on the question "Why be Jewish?"

That was the mandate of the July 29-31 conference sponsored by the Samuel Bronfman Foundation that brought together an unusually mixed group. It included French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, New Republic literary editor Leon Wieseltier, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion President David Ellenson, writer Anita Diamant and other rabbis, professors, artists, philanthropists and communal professionals.

It was the first major Jewish event hosted by the foundation's managing director, Adam Bronfman, son of philanthropist Edgar Bronfman. The two moved side by side through the two-and-a-half days, refusing interviews but chatting affably with attendees.

The conference also served as the launch pad for the Bronfman Vision Forum, an initiative that will provide space for Jewish communal conversations aimed at invigorating Jewish life, a pet project of the elder Bronfman and one now shared by his son.

"Over the last 15 years, massive amounts of philanthropic dollars have been spent on Jewish continuity projects," said conference organizer Rabbi Eliyahu Stern, director of special programs for the foundation. "But demographic projects will ultimately fail if they are not guided by a long-term vision."

This conference, which featured text study, group discussions and lectures, is part of a number of foundation-sponsored, free-wheeling gatherings aimed at focusing attention not just on bringing the unaffiliated into the Jewish community, but clarifying what the community stands for today.

Some who were in Utah have also attended "The Conversation," a two-day, invitation-only confab

held the past two years in Aspen, Colo.

These rarefied, all-expenses-paid gatherings beg the question: "So what?" What does it matter if a bunch of smart Jews sit around talking?

Some in Park City wondered the same thing. "The take-away is there's no take-away," said former Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim of Washington.

Some participants questioned the top-down premise.

"There's a presumption that we get to answer the question 'Why be Jewish' on behalf of the 'amcha,' " or Jewish people, said Idit Klein, executive director of Keshet, an advocacy group for gay inclusion.

But many saw value in simply sharing ideas with experts in fields far removed from their own.

Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, welcomed the chance to meet with an array of Jewish professionals "and have them be open and willing to learn from each other."

If some participants grumbled about the conference's lack of tangible goals, organizers insisted that was the point.

"We're not looking for 'an answer,' " explained the foundation's executive director, Dana Raucher. "We've gathered a rather eclectic mix of people, each of whom has something to offer. Each of these people has influence somewhere. Each of them will hopefully have been enriched by this and will take the conversation home with them."

In fact, as more than one conference attendee pointed out, the Talmud, the seminal text of rabbinic Judaism, emerged out of just such open-ended conversations among Jewish leaders.

In obvious reference to that history, the conference was structured around three text study sessions, each led by a different teacher modeling a different entry into Jewish life: Talmud, spirituality and Jewish culture. The ensuing discussions were wide ranging and often very personal, dealing with topics such as belief in redemption, the disintegration of communal responsibility, the appeal of ecstatic prayer and the deficiencies of existing communal structures.

Absent from the conversations were anti-Semitism, Israel and the Holocaust, the holy trinity of American Jewish identity for the past 60 years. That, too, was intentional.

"The big question this generation is asking is, 'Why should I be Jewish? How does Judaism influence my life?' The old 'peoplehood' argument doesn't resonate with them," Stern said.

One difficulty at the conference was the split between the communal professionals, who wanted to focus on outreach, and the academics and writers, who were interested in a more philosophical discussion. That created a tension that sometimes yielded the most honest, and potentially fruitful, conversations, like those dealing with the role Jewish thinkers ought to play in setting the

communal agenda.

"We need to go out to the Jews and ask them why be Jewish," suggested Bambi Sheleg, a columnist for the Israeli daily Ma'ariv.

Arthur Gross-Schaefer, a professor of business law and ethics at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, said the American Jewish community "needs a new myth" that can appeal to the younger, largely unaffiliated generation. That's something this group, and others like it, can realistically tackle, he said.

"We can give them tools about how to have a beautiful bar mitzvah, but I think they want to be part of a greater story, something that gives them a reason to want to be part of this journey," Gross-Schaefer mused. "That's what we have to find."