

From: **THE SAMUEL BRONFMAN FOUNDATION**

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**JEWISH THOUGHT LEADERS DISCUSS JUDAISM AS CIVILIZATIONS  
AT BRONFMAN FOUNDATION'S WHY BE JEWISH GATHERING IN UTAH**

“Judaism is a path, not a destination,” declared philanthropist and community leader Adam Bronfman in opening the “Why Be Jewish” conference sponsored by The Samuel Bronfman Foundation in Park City, Utah this past week.

It is a path laid and followed over three days by 25 of the world’s most distinguished Jewish thought leaders as they discussed, dissected, and debated the emergence of tribalism and secularism in world Jewry and how these two trends inform what it means to be Jewish in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. And on this path, the participants – including writer and literary critic Leon Wieseltier, Jewish Theological Seminary Chancellor Arnold Eisen, author and MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant” recipient Rebecca Goldstein, Emory University professor Deborah Lipstadt, Polish-Jewish activist Konstanty Gebert, Brussels Parliament member Viviane Teitelbaum Hirsch, leading Mexican intellectual and publisher Enrique Krauze and former Israeli Knesset member Avraham Burg – encountered challenges, addressed their differences, forged common ground, and planted seeds for the future.

Indeed, the conference offered a unique opportunity for the political scientists, scholars, journalists, and community leaders to dialogue in a high-level, engaging and respectful forum. Among the themes they focused upon were:

- Judaism has evolved over the past half-century from an era of people-hood to one of individuality, impacted by social trends, ideas, ideology, practices and norms. There is not just one factor that informs and inspires one’s Jewish identity. For today’s Jews throughout American and the rest of the Diaspora, as well as Israel, there is no such thing as a single Jewish identity, no one “authentic” Jewish experience anymore. Moreover, each identity is one of choice.
- Israel is complicated to Jews in both America and the rest of the Diaspora. In fact, a number of participants questioned whether one can have a full Jewish life without Israel. Yet, while Israel is central to Judaism, the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora is changing due to political, social, and religious influences.
- Despite the differences among the plethora of Jewish identities, each is bound to the other by tradition, community, and a sense of obligation to make a difference in the world. As such, there needs to be a renewed emphasis on community-building, on conceptualizing and implementing initiatives that will yield a sense of belonging and commitment while being full partners in a multicultural and multiethnic world.

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“In order to have a sense of where we want to go, we have to have a sense of where we are,” Adam Bronfman explained. “I don’t have the answers, but by bringing these distinguished thought leaders together in one room and giving them a forum to connect and listen and learn from each other, we have provoked thought and gained understanding. It’s about planting seeds. The key is how the seeds germinate.”

And according to Edgar M. Bronfman, founder of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation and one of the world’s most preeminent Jewish community leaders, “there is still much work to be done. The truth is not everything is wonderful [in the Jewish world]. But I’m not worried about the fight. Without conflict, there can be no progress. As long as there are conferences such as this one that evoke conversation, that keep the conversation on the front burner, there is hope.”

The participants were:

- Dr. Ruth Bevan - Senior Professor of Political Science, Yeshiva University
- Avraham Burg – Former Israeli Knesset member and former Chairman of the Jewish Agency
- Patricia Cohen – Culture writer for *The New York Times*
- Esther Dischereit - Berlin-based Jewish-German author and filmmaker. She is the author of *Lessons in Being Jewish*. Her most recent film is *A Dress from Warsaw (Ein Kleid aus Warschau)*
- Dr. Arnold Eisen – Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary
- Wayne Firestone – President of Hillel International
- Jonathan Freedland - British-based religion columnist of *The Guardian*
- Konstanty Gebert - Polish columnist for the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, leading Jewish activist and was one of the leaders of the Solidarity movement in Poland
- Beatrice Godlewicz - Belgium-based secular Jewish high school headmaster and artist
- Dr. Rebecca Goldstein - Author of *Betraying Spinoza* and recipient of MacArthur Foundation’s “genius grant”
- Gidi Grinstein - President and founder of the Reut Institute
- Viviane Teitelbaum Hirsch - Member of the Brussels Parliament and author of *Hidden Children, Tears Behind the Mask*
- Dr. Enrique Krauze - Mexican historian and essayist, and president and publisher of *Editorial Clío* and the cultural magazine *Letras Libres*
- Rabbi Benny Lau - Young Israeli spiritual leader of the Ramban synagogue in Jerusalem and lecturer at Bar-Ilan University
- Dr. Deborah Lipstadt – Professor at Emory University
- Dr. Judith Liwerant - Argentinean-born Professor of Political Science at the University of Mexico
- Dr. David Myers – Professor of Jewish History at University of California Los Angeles and author of the forthcoming *Between Jew and Arab: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz*

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- Esther Perel - Therapist and best-selling author of *Mating in Captivity*
- Daniel Septimus - Editor-in Chief of MyJewishLearning.com
- Gabor Szanto - Hungarian writer and editor of Hungarian Jewish weekly *Szombat*
- Dr. Shmuel Trigano - Professor of Sociology at Paris X- Nanterre and president of l'Observatoire du monde juif and director of the Collège des études juives de l'Alliance israélite universelle
- Leon Wieseltier - Writer and literary critic

Photos and video from the conference, as well as copies of the papers presented, can be obtained by contacting The Samuel Bronfman Foundation or by visiting <http://www.thesbf.org/whybejewish.html>.

#### About The Samuel Bronfman Foundation

The Samuel Bronfman Foundation (TSBF) focuses on projects dedicated to fostering a Jewish renaissance. TSBF is an active supporter of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel, The Curriculum Initiative and MyJewishLearning.com. More information about TSBF can be found at [www.TheSBF.org](http://www.TheSBF.org).

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