

Gil Troy — Zionism and Israel

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We love you, Charles Bronfman (In Honor of his 80th Birthday)

By Gil Troy, Canadian Jewish News, 6-16-11

At an intimate birthday dinner in Jerusalem at the end of May, the president of Israel, Shimon Peres, had a formidable task.

The golden-tongued Peres had to honour a personal friend of 60 years, a man who is a cherished friend to Israel, the Jewish People, and citizens of Canada and the United States. He had to find a fresh and meaningful way to capture the emotions in the room as we toasted a visionary philanthropist who has been honoured again and again with honorary doctorates, the Order of Canada and honorary citizenship status from Jerusalem.

Smart and sophisticated enough to know that, sometimes, it is best to trust simplicity and sincerity, Peres, brimming with emotion, welcomed Charles Bronfman to the exclusive club of vital, vibrant, inspiring octogenarians, and said: "We love you, Charles." Peres' soft-spoken delivery and Polish-accented "r," elongating the name nobly, made the name "Charrries" sound like the loftiest of titles.

And it's so true.

We love you, Charles, as Montrealers, because of the devotion you showed the city during its darkest hour. By keeping the Montreal Expos alive when you did, you were investing in the city where your father launched your legendary family's many heroic accomplishments. And by supporting McGill and Concordia universities so generously, you helped Anglo life continue to thrive, not just survive.

We love you, Charles, as Canadians, because your Canadian foundation's CRB Heritage Minutes not only educate Canadians about the past but offer a model of public education, proving that not everything popular and compelling need be superficial or stupid.

We love you, Charles, as Americans, because, spurred by your beloved late wife, Andrea, you helped us heal after the mass murders of Sept. 11. Andy's initiative, "The Gift of New York," giving free museum, culture, and sports tickets to 9/11 families, not only embraced the families brutalized by Islamist terrorism, it helped revive the New York cultural scene after the mass trauma, reminding Americans to define New York by the institutions that make it live, not the evildoers who marked so many for death.

We love you, Charles, as Israelis, because your Keren Karev is like a magic wand waved up and down the country, making once-ugly sites beautiful and turning seemingly intractable social and educational problems into opportunities to help people by pioneering creative, cutting-edge solutions.

We love you, Charles, as Jews, because your Taglit-Birthright Israel program has now launched more than 250,000 Jewish journeys at a critical time in the life of Israel and the Jewish People.

Like a brilliant matchmaker, you and your fellow philanthropists brought together Jews from communities scattered throughout the world – craving inspiration – with Israel, a country oozing with inspiration, but increasingly misunderstood by Jews and non-Jews who judge it harshly from afar rather than experiencing and embracing it up close.

And in your typical style, you've followed through on the unexpected consequences of this bold experiment, pioneering through your Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies in New York programs for the oft-overlooked and neglected Jewish 20-somethings, who deserve creative, open-minded and dynamic programs tailored to their unique characters.

Of course, this is only a sampling of Bronfman's art of giving, the many amazing projects he has shared with the world. That such a miracle man is such a mensch, mastering the art of living, too, is even more impressive. I have seen how gentle, modest, and accessible he is with Birthright participants, flustered by meeting the great man, yet immediately put at ease by his charm. And I vividly remember the first time, he, and the lovely but formidable Andy, along with their dog, Yoffi, first hosted an obscure young academic in the majestic Montreal headquarters of Seagram's a decade ago. The warmth, the respect and the openness conveyed at our first meeting also set me at ease, launching me on one of my great life adventures: helping with Birthright's educational programming.

And so for your kindnesses and your accomplishments, your greatness and your heimishness, I echo the president of Israel's plain but profound words: we love you, Charles – and happy 80th birthday.