

Lack of peace separates U.S., Israeli Jewry, says Bronfman

By [Cnaan Liphshiz](#)

What keeps Israel and U.S. Jewry apart is not lack of religious pluralism, but lack of peace in the Middle East, according to Charles Bronfman, one of the Jewish people's most prominent philanthropists. Though hesitant to "be very political," as he defined it, Bronfman told Anglo File in an interview in Jerusalem last week that peace was now crucial to Israel-Diaspora relations because Israel's image is deteriorating and U.S. Jews "are not insulated against CNN."

Bronfman, a Canadian-born billionaire and co-founder of Birthright Israel, says that the program, which brings Diaspora youth on subsidized Israel trips, is a major uniting force. But he adds that the program's alumni are generally put off by North America's Jewish organizations, and reluctant to replete their dwindling ranks.

The concern for Israel's image is both connected to the current tensions between Jerusalem and Washington D.C., Bronfman clarifies. "Whatever tensions there appear to be, they're a blip on the radar," he says. "The two countries need each other. What can't stay is the status quo. It's going to kill everybody here in this whole area." Former U.S. President Bill Clinton "told us how to get out of the status quo years ago," Bronfman says, alluding to the formation of a Palestinian state. "We all know what the answer is. Getting there is another matter."

In the meantime Israel is having limited success in telling its side of the story, according to Bronfman, who last week concluded one of many short visits to Israel. "We turned from David to Goliath in 1982, with the invasion into Lebanon, and the Arabs became David. Now everybody's worried about the Palestinians. Now we're occupiers, oppressors, who live by the sword. That's what you see in the media and it festers and has effects on the general population and on Jews as well."

He names Birthright as just about the only major force which helps "reduce the widening gap" between U.S. Jewry and Israel. "I've been with Taglit for so long because they get the job done, and because it's a brand. As a businessman I appreciate brands," he says. In its nine-odd years of existence, the birthright (or Taglit) brand has sent some 230,000 young Jews on their first visit to Israel, funded by a consortium of private philanthropists, Diaspora communities, Israel's government and Jewish organizations such as Keren Hayesod and the Jewish Agency.

Staying away from Federation

Birthright, Bronfman says, is producing new Jewish leadership in the U.S. but they tend to stay away from the federation system of the United Jewish Communities - the central framework for U.S. Jewish institutions and their coordination. "Changing the culture of any institution is very difficult," says Bronfman, who turned 78 last month.

"I've been in business all my life and I've seen that most mergers fail not because of the numbers but because of the people. If the cultures don't mesh, you get no deal. And there's a big cultural difference between the institutional federations and the enthusiastic alumni just back from Israel." Last year Bronfman, the Montreal-born heir to a large family business in the liquor industry, married Bonita Roche after the death of his second wife, Andrea Morrison, who was killed in a car accident in 2006.

The problem between Taglit Alumni and Jewish institutions, according to the financier, is that when Birthright participants seek to become active with the federations, "they are usually given a list of names and told to solicit, because that's what the federations focus on - getting money."

Citing recent research on the Taglit phenomenon by Professor Leonard Saxe of Brandeis University, Bronfman says that half of the Jewish campus leadership in North America is made up of Birthright alumni.

"So they don't go into the federations. So what," he asks, sitting in his office in the capital's center. Recalling his own experience as a former federation president and first chairman of UJC, he says: "I feel badly for the federations. They are lost and they've seen their total numbers going down. They have internal problems and they need to save money. They can't carry out revolutions."

But Birthright, with help from the federations, has recently launched a retention program labeled Birthright Next. It aims to provide a framework of activities for Taglit alumni so as to preserve and harness their new understanding - and often love - of Israel.

"With the advent of Birthright Next, the federations are figuring out how to engage the alumni and that's a very positive step," says Avi Naiman, past chair of the Israel and Overseas Committee of the UJC Federation of Northern New Jersey. "The problem is being recognized and addressed. Results remain to be seen."

Bronfman seems to stiffen a little in his chair when the conversation touches on the differences between North American Jewish pluralism and the ultra-Orthodox institutional monopoly over Israel's rabbinate. "This is the only Jewish homeland, yet only Jews of one persuasion can get married here," he says with annoyance. "Some can't get buried in certain places. It's crazy. This was meant to be a haven for all Jews but one group controls everything."

Noting cases of soldiers who died in defense of Israel but who were refused burial in the same cemeteries as their comrades because they were not considered a Jew by halakha (Jewish religious law), Bronfman says: "It's a total disgrace. But if there were peace, then maybe something would happen with pluralism as well. Who knows."