

5 QUESTIONS FOR...

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Jeffrey Solomon, President, Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies

Jeffrey Solomon is president of the New York City-based Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, a global family of charitable foundations that actively connect young Jews with their communities, culture, and each other. In Israel ACBP is active in the areas of educational reform, the environment, and peace and reconciliation. In Canada its focus is on Canadian history and heritage. And in the U.S. the foundations are focused primarily on Jewish identity and commitment. ACBP is a limited-term philanthropy that will conclude its grantmaking activities within ten years of Charles Bronfman's death. Bronfman's wife, Andrea, died in an automobile accident in 2006.



Philanthropy News Digest: How do you manage what is, in effect, three different organizations in three different countries?

Jeffrey Solomon: It can be difficult, but there are common themes that all three offices focus on. Probably the most interesting is the notion of investing in what we call "next generations." Charles and Andy — when she was alive — always had enormous confidence in young people and believed that by supporting youth development, they could empower young people to make the world a better place. From a management perspective, all three offices have long-term employees, and they've worked hard to make sure we don't become three different "silos." Last year, for example, we took our North American staff to Israel to help them understand the programs there. Similarly, our senior Israel staff comes to the U.S. at least a couple of times a year. It's a terrific team, and I think part of what makes them so effective is that they really like what they do.

PND: How do you keep the programs you've created vital?

JS: A key part of our strategy is to work with our grantees to move them toward sustainability and independence, so they'll be around long after the foundation is gone. For example, our Canadian heritage program created an organization called Historica six years ago with a gift of \$25 million, a third of which was earmarked for endowment. We were very conscious of the desirability of sustaining that organization over time. Six years later, the Bronfman name is invisible but Historica is going to be a gift to Canada for a long time. We're in the process of doing a similar spinoff of our educational reform program in Israel and in all likelihood will create a national endowment for that purpose, provide multiyear support, and build in steps to help the organization achieve sustainability.

PND: What was the genesis of Birthright Israel, and how have you been able to grow it so rapidly?

JS: Birthright Israel is a miracle, a once-in-a-lifetime philanthropic home run. It began with Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman, the odd couple of philanthropy. Michael was one of the original hedge fund managers — a born trader with a ninety-second attention span. Charles is a brand builder who always thinks in terms of the long haul. Together, the two of them hatched the idea of giving every Jewish child in the world between the ages of 18 and 26 the gift of a trip to Israel. The first trip attracted thirteen thousand applicants, but we only had enough money to send eight thousand, and so the participants were selected by lottery. That gave us a perfect control group — those who didn't go were almost exactly like the young people who did. For six years a research team from Brandeis has been following the two groups and have compiled evidence that shows the program has an amazing impact on the individuals who participate. At this point, 112,000 young people and 16,000 Israelis — most of them soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces — have participated in the program. In fact, the IDF's Behavioral Sciences Unit did a study of the Israeli participants and, after learning that it's a powerful training experience for many young Israeli participants, recommended that the IDF create a Birthright management unit. It's just an extraordinary story.

PND: I attended college in Ireland for a semester, and one of the things I came away with was a much clearer sense of how American I am. Does the same kind of thing happen to those who participate in Birthright Israel?

JS: Absolutely. One of things that's frequently overlooked in any conversation about religion in this country is how American we all

are. When you're at a birthright event, typically there are people there from dozens of countries, but you're most struck by the Americans because of the amazing diversity they represent — you have Asian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans and African-Americans, and they all have a Jewish parent. Whatever multiple ethnic identifiers they have, it's just a powerful experience.

Another unintended consequence of the program is that it helps to expose participants to the idea of philanthropy. We get tens of thousands of emails saying things like, "You changed my life. I never knew that philanthropy had the power to change people's lives."

PND: How has Andrea Bronfman's death affected the organization?

JS: Because Andy and Charles were and, in Charles' case, are very involved philanthropists, it's hard to get past the personal. We have a very young staff, and Andy would stop in everybody's office in the morning and talk with them. She was a surrogate mother to many of them, so the personal loss is profound. On the anniversary of her death, January 23, we closed the office and encouraged staff to spend the day volunteering at the [Central Park Conservancy](#), which was one of her favorite organizations.

As a practical matter, we've been working on two fronts — taking the projects that were her projects and assuring that they continue to thrive for decades to come. Second, as a spend-down foundation, our assumptions went out the window. Charles is seventy-five, so many of the efforts we had been working to sustain have been put on a faster track than they might otherwise have been. But, you know, he regularly reminds me what good genes he has. He has a 101-year-old aunt that he never tires of telling me about. So, I'm hopeful that he and ACBP will be around for a long time to come.

— *Matt Sinclair*



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