



The Alumni Advisory Board Model: Empowering the “Next Generation” Now

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BYFI Community

by Naamah Paley

Our bi-annual meetings of the Alumni Advisory Board (AAB) of the Bronfman Fellowships in Israel (BYFI) start off like any other Board meeting: bagels and coffee around a large table with smiling faces, notepads, and assorted pens and flip-charts. But if you look closer at the faces, you’d notice that those sitting around the table are significantly younger and less, how shall I say, financially advantaged than those around most boards in the Jewish world. The twenty-person AAB, which serves as a “think tank” for alumni life, provides substantive opportunities for a group of young Jews to share their considerable skills and insights. As an alumnus of the Bronfman Fellowships and, now, as a young professional working for the organization as Senior Program Officer, I have experienced the inner workings of both an alumni board and more established boards. I am convinced that just as young Jews need to better understand the value of governance and participation on boards, most established boards need to better understand the value of young voices and key aspects of an alumni advisory board.

Few of my friends, all of whom are in their late twenties and early thirties, are involved with Jewish organizations and none have served on nonprofit boards. Shortly after graduating college, I was solicited by every school I ever attended, my university Hillel and organizations I had interned with. While each asked me for funds, none asked me for my skills or time. Together with historian Jack Wertheimer, researcher Ari Kelman (a BYFI alumnus) explored this challenge in a 2010, “Generation of Change: Leaders in their 20s and 30s Reshaping Jewish Life.” The Avi Chai Foundation study reiterates that young Jews are less likely to get involved with pre-existing organizations and more likely to start new initiatives. The article examines both sides of the spectrum, the young Jews and the establishment. They urge, “established organizations will have to rethink their governance structures to make room for younger Jewish leaders,” and “for their part, younger Jewish leaders would do well to reexamine their views of the establishment.”

Alumni advisory boards directly address Wertheimer’s concern. While a number of Jewish organizations provide opportunities for young people to serve as board observers or junior board members, an alumni board empowers the “Next Generation” now. At BYFI, our AAB members range from 21 to 42 and each have an equal voice at the table – and an equal vote. The AAB is both a training board and an active board – we expect and need real work from our members but also hope that members will use this experience to learn more about what nonprofit boards are and what board membership should look like. This training angle of AAB volunteerism shifts depending

on the age, experience and life-stage of each member: younger alumni may need support in running the agenda on a conference call, while older alumni may be interested in hands-on fundraising training. We strive to support our alumni across the spectrum.

Young Jews are confident in their professional skills in the workplace but may not recognize that these are transferable as lay leaders. Additionally, young Jews tend not to have a grasp on the landscape and often the value of the organized Jewish community and are, as Wertheimer articulated, more likely to channel skills towards start-ups. I joined the AAB as a recent college graduate working for the New Israel Fund after spending the previous year in Israel on a Dorot Fellowship. I was searching for a meaningful way to engage with the American Jewish community. While I was confident that I had skills and experience to contribute to my community, I was at a loss about how to articulate what those skills were and how I could actually be of tangible use to an organization that I cared about. It may be surprising that I, like so many of my peers, was unclear how to give back. Even in the case of young Jews who have already been part of leadership programs like Dorot and BYFI, there is rarely a clear link between those experiences and board membership opportunities.

Joining the AAB served as a bridge of my professional and lay leader positions. At the New Israel Fund (NIF) I spent much of my time supporting the Board of Directors. Nonetheless, I struggled to grasp what exactly a board was and what their relationship with an organization should look like. What made a good board member? What hard skills did we need from our board? How did recruitment work – and how did what the organization needed from our board shift according to new strategies? Serving on the AAB was an accessible opportunity that opened my eyes to what a board is really about and helped me answer questions that I was asking in my professional work.

For organizations with alumni populations, building an alumni advisory board creates a clear structure for input and buy-in from the community. AAB members serve as liaisons to our diverse constituencies – we rely on them to represent those in their life-stage and professional fields at our board room table. At BYFI, our alumni are deeply involved in our work and we turn to them to conceive of strategic means of engagement for the wider alumni network.

For organizations without alumni, involving young people in real decision making and advising is a critical approach for engagement. We've all heard organizations across the established Jewish community complaining about the "crisis" of engaging young Jews with Judaism, with Israel, with community. Like most other populations, young Jews are particularly eager to be utilized for their skills, rather than to sit as symbolic representatives at meetings. Traditional organizational boards might benefit from recruiting young Jews with particular skills: perhaps knowledge of social media, familiarity with a particular landscape (like college campuses), and connectors with access to large networks of other young Jews.

Undoubtedly, traditional nonprofit boards are essential resources for fundraising. This consideration is important when organizations develop their governance structures. Unfortunately, when financial means become the primary criteria for selecting board members, younger voices and more diverse perspectives are often de-prioritized. Experienced board members want to be recognized for their skills in addition to the financial support that they can offer and solicit. Through gaining experience as full board members, whether on an alumni advisory board or on another board, young Jews will

learn that their skills are relevant to professional boards and the relevance of governance. Board rooms across the Jewish world will benefit from keeping the usual spread of bagels and cream cheeses – but adding younger faces into the mix.

Naamah Paley is a 2002 alumna of the Bronfman Fellowships and a 2008-09 Dorot Fellow. Naamah served as Chair of the Events Committee on BYFI's Alumni Advisory Board before joining the professional staff as Senior Program Officer at the Bronfman Youth Fellowships.

This post is part of a special series in recognition of the 25th Anniversary of The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel.

