



Sharing Their Stories, Part 7: Voices of Young Israelis

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To:



Voices of Young Israelis, Part 7

Below is our seventh installment of accounts written by young Israelis (fellows and alumni of Amitei Bronfman).

We continue to check in with our Israeli community, offering care and support during this difficult time -- for example, by providing resilience training sessions for 50 Israeli alumni to develop expertise in wellness and coping skills within their community. We also continue to share these stories with *The Forward*, amplifying the voices of our community and helping to demonstrate the complexity and multi-faceted nature of Israeli society to a wider audience.

Shabbat Shalom. Wishing you and your loved ones a happy, safe, and meaningful last day of Chanukah.

The following are all translations from Hebrew; please excuse any mistakes.

Share This



Name: **Shira Rosenak '10**

Lives in **Jerusalem**

Hello friends,



My name is Shira Rosenak, a Bronfman Fellow from 2010. I appreciate the opportunity to write a little bit and share what is going on in these times.

October 7th shook our very foundations. Banal terms received a new, frightening, threatening meaning: Home. Family. Holiday. Morning. A heavy shadow hovers over everything. Not just terms relating to our personal lives; also communal terms also lost their familiar meaning in this earthquake: Leadership. Army. Education. The breakdown of our public sector led to the flowering of civil initiatives, and I was blessed with the opportunity to be part of one of them.

In normal times, I am the Youth Coordinator at Beit Avi Chai in Jerusalem. Our main work is in experiential-cultural education, which draws inspiration from the treasure trove of Jewish-Israeli culture. One week after October 7th, when Jerusalem was in the process of absorbing thousands of teenagers without a sufficient educational response, the educational staff at Beit Avi Chai welcomed teenagers staying at the hotel across the street to a learning center that was set up in the building. The learning center began as a place to take a break, to breathe and gain strength, and slowly turned into a school framework, with the Ministry of Education now involved in managing the school. School days include lessons from the highest quality teachers (experienced staff, some of whom are retirees who were called upon to return to teaching in a reality where many teachers have been enlisted, and there is a very serious shortage of teachers), as well as experiential workshops led by Beit Avi Chai (carpentry, karate, baking, art, theater – spaces for creativity, for physical work, and for multi-disciplinary expression). Around 40 teenagers, who were evacuated from the communities around Gaza almost two months ago, come to this learning center each day for four hours that are a break from the hotel and the intensity of life crowded into rooms without privacy.

Learning together, the personal relationship to each student, the experiential break times that give space for personal expression – all of these enable the teenagers to have a little stability in the midst of an unstable reality. The students who come here were not integrated into the Jerusalem educational frameworks for a variety of reasons. I feel like we are in a bit of an educational laboratory, establishing a school that is adapted precisely to the characteristics of a shifting reality with all of its challenges:

How is it possible to encourage routine learning during this time of unbearable loss of friends and family and classmates who are hostages in Gaza?

How do we relate to expressions of control and power from students who have lost control of their lives?

How do we relate to smartphones in a class of teenagers for whom a smartphone represents existential security, because smartphones warn them of the need to go to a safe room within seconds?

How do we bring parents back into the educational picture of their children, in situations where the parents have lost their livelihood, their homes, and their families, when living at a hotel, without home or stability, often leads to the breakdown of parental authority?

The teenagers who come here are amazing. They are brave and love life, and they are restoring a sense of control and stability to their lives, taking advantage of any opening that reality allows them. It is a privilege to be part of a team working on this crucial task – creating a beneficial educational routine in a temporary reality.

A concluding note: Coincidentally (or perhaps not), in our team of volunteers there are another three Bronfmanim [alumni of The Bronfman Fellowship] – Ariella Green '19, Shira Benbanji '20, and Maayan Hayim Alexander '22. The Bronfman togetherness shows up in an unexpected place. Our small community within this situation enables us to have a shared educational language and values and a different kind of togetherness. It is special for a random group of alumni from different years, who share a connection that is beyond age and cohort, to act together.



Name: **Or Dembitz '22**

Lives in **Jerusalem**

Age: 18

My name is Or Dembitz. I am 18 years old, from Jerusalem.

This year, I am learning in the *Beit Midrash* for women, Migdal Oz. Some of the women who learn here just finished high school, some are learning following national service or the army, and some are married.

I will be enlisted to the army in the summer, and until then I am here. In the morning, we learn Gemara (the Babylonian Talmud) in “*Seder*,” which means that we learn together in *chevruta* (pairs) and then we have class. In the afternoon, we have different classes on a variety of topics – Jewish law, Hasidism, Jewish thought, Bible, and more. In the evening, we learn in *chevruta*, studying Gemara, Jewish thought, or Bible. I love what I am learning: Tractate *Brakhot* (from the Babylonian Talmud), Bible, Hasidic thought, the weekly Torah portion, and more and more.

I believe that learning Torah is not just for one year; it is integrated in all of life. Now, I am trying to gain tools for learning Torah for the rest of my life, through the teachers and content that I encounter here.

After about a month of educational work in my neighborhood, I returned to my *midrasha* (seminary), and I started volunteering in the mornings at a hotel in Jerusalem. Evacuees from Sderot and Kiryat Shmoneh live in this hotel. I volunteer in the 5th and 6th grades in the temporary elementary school that was set up in the hotel.

The kids at the hotel are restless. It is difficult to find several minutes of quiet or any kind of continuity in learning. The attempt to create an educational framework for these kids, whose lives were turned upside down in a single day, is not always successful, despite the good intentions of the volunteers and teachers.

One moment of hope from the last few days was when the teacher showed the kids in our class some cards that were sent to them from kids living in the center [of Israel]. In these sweet cards, with their sweet pictures, those children asked our children from the south how they are feeling and what they are going through at this time.

The teacher invited our students to write cards back. The kids were very touched by this gesture of the kids from the center, whom they do not know, and they wrote in their cards: "We are a bit scared," and: "You are also brave, not just us, and you are keeping us strong, so thank you," and: "It is not fun for us in the hotel, and we are waiting to go home." The kids in this hotel have gone through so much in the last month. These moments of honesty and openness, when they were writing to the kids from the center, were moments when it was hard to hide the tears. Perhaps in these days this is the source of our strength in this land



Name: **Rona Gerzon '19**

Lives in **Zichron Ya'akov**

Age: 21

In the last month and a half, since October 7th, I have had feelings and experiences that are new to me. I never thought I would hear about such horrors. I never imagined that these kinds of events would be etched in my heart at such a young age. I could not have imagined I would feel such a great concern for people whom I never met, but I feel so close to.

Since Simchat Torah, I have slowly gotten back to my routine. At first, each day was different. My friends and I volunteered in different projects and agricultural work. But with

time, I went back to work, while at the same time everything that happened is always in my head.

I want to share with you a particular moment from my daily life. One day, I went to Tel Aviv, to the place where the families of the hostages are gathered, because I wanted to express my support as much as possible. I sat there, and I held pictures of three children who were hostages, all from the same family – the Brodutch family, who were taken captive with their mother to Gaza, while their father remained in Israel. Suddenly, two men arrived and stood in front of me, looking at the pictures. One of them began to cry, and only after several minutes did I understand that it was the children's father, Avichai. He said a few words to me and laughed, "They will kill me when they come back and see their pictures everywhere." I felt like my heart was totally crushed - from worry, from pain, from looking him in the eyes and seeing his helplessness.

Today, this morning, when I am writing about this moment, is the morning after Avichai's children and wife were freed from captivity and returned to him, after 51 days of pain and anxiety. And my heart is with all of the people who have not yet been reunited with their families.

I am full of anxiety regarding the situation of my dear friends from Bronfman – such sensitive, gentle, good-hearted men, who are fighting evil, who are fighting with tremendous self-sacrifice in Gaza, already for a long time. I miss them so much. I am also full of worry for all of the hostages who have not yet returned to us, to my great sadness. May they all return already.

I want to pray and ask whoever is able to join me in prayer – for the souls of the survivors of the massacre on the kibbutzim and at the music festival, for the families of the survivors, for the families of the soldiers who have fallen and who have been injured. May we all send them light and love.

I also pray that all of us, men and women from all over the world, will soften our hearts, will free ourselves of hatred, and that we will never harden our hearts against the suffering of those who are different from us. I see how much it hurts now to experience the lack of recognition of the pain and suffering that our people is going through. And I know that all people harden their hearts to the pain of the "other." But I want to pray that it will be different.

View our [resources page](#) for ways to help, educational links, and mental health resources.

You can read all of the first-hand accounts published so far [here](#).