

Local News

Making a difference

Joe Berman returns from Israel enriched by fellowship experience

By Christopher Goldman
Staff Writer

Seventeen-year-old Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy senior Joe Berman spent six weeks in Israel this past summer as a Bronfman Youth Fellow. He has returned with new ideas about Israel and Judaism — informed by talking to Israeli adults and students, traveling and hearing from politicians and academics.

Based in Jerusalem, 26 Jewish teens from the United States studied, traveled and learned for five weeks as part of the Bronfman Youth Fellowship in Israel, a program launched 13 years ago by Edgar M.

Salute to Youth

Bronfman, chairman of the Seagram Co. Following the program, Berman stayed another week to visit family in Israel.

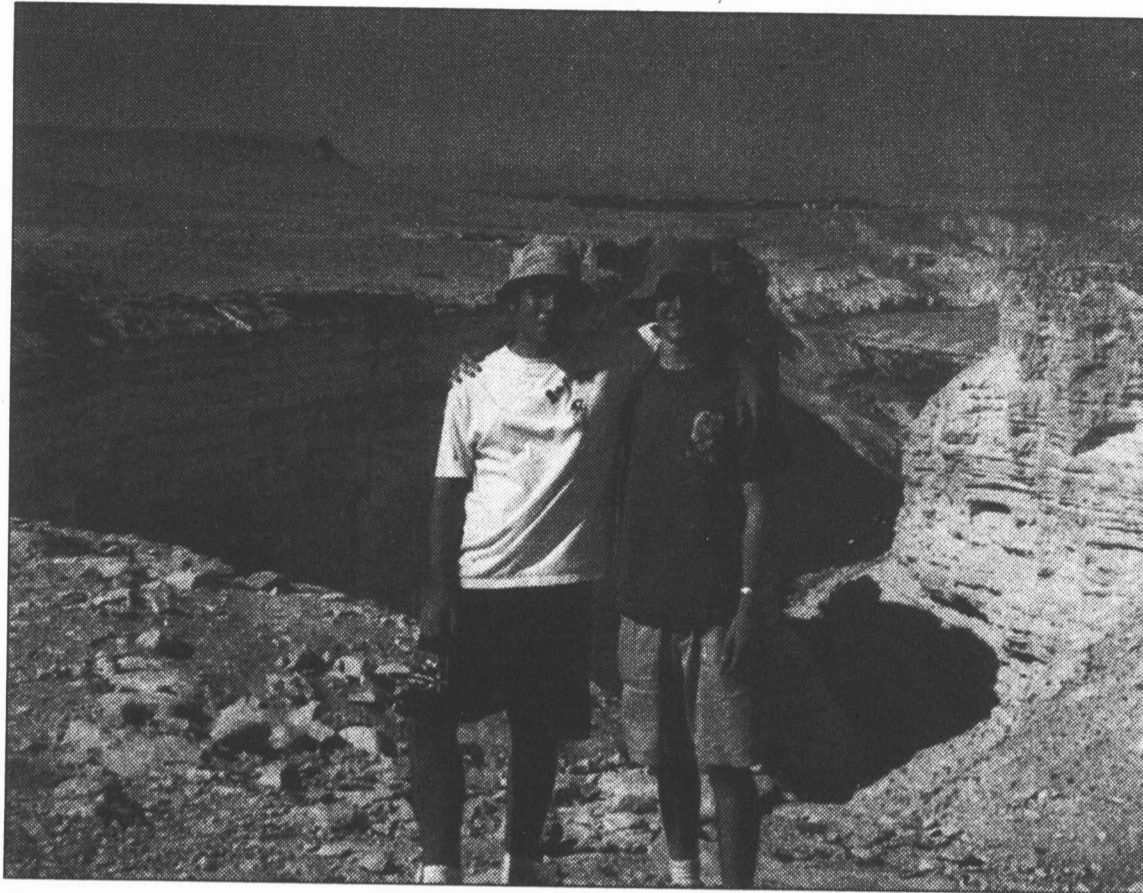
"It was challenging and stimulating," Berman said of his time in the Jewish state. "We did some text study and had classes that dealt with different themes. We talked about politics in Israel and Israeli history and we had some great speakers ... politicians, historians."

Berman said one of the program's themes was the role of myth in history. The students learned how myth was used during the formation of Israel.

Because the trip to Israel fell in the middle of a governmental switch and the peace process getting under way again, Berman said they did not get to meet any "big-name" political leaders.

The group heard from two different Israeli feminist movement speakers. "One was from the Orthodox perspective on the feminist movement, and one was much more liberal," Berman said. "We also dealt with issues of (spousal) abuse. It's a problem they are just starting to deal with in Israel."

And the group spent one week in the Negev desert, interacting with Israeli students participating in a parallel Bronfman program.



Bronfman Youth Fellows Joe Berman (left) and Joe Fishman pause atop a mountain in the Negev during a group hike.

"The week that we spent up north with a group of 20 Israeli kids around our age was very interesting, and we got a whole new perspective on these issues," Berman said. "I tried to learn how it would feel to live, say, close to the border with Lebanon. How would it feel to have the alarm go off and get in a bomb shelter? Or to know that you are going to be in the army in two years ... It gave me some perspective."

Identity in Israel

Identity was another theme Berman and the other students explored during their stay in Israel. "We talked about identity in Israel and how Jews see themselves there — as Israelis, as Jews," he said. "We tied the Arab situation in with the peace process. And sometimes, that was also tied into the myth theme. It was interesting talking with the Israelis about that. It got heated at times, like when we talked about American Jews and their place within Israel. Amongst some of the kids there was definitely some resentment, because we live here (in America) and control so much of what goes on in Israel. And it angers some Israelis. And I came to the conclusion that they probably have a right to resent that (involvement). It's their country, and we don't serve in the Army there and risk our lives for the country. American Jewry does contribute a large amount of money ... but we don't live there and face a lot of the hardships."

Frank discussion of topics such as this, Berman said, was the best part of the summer program.

"I actually got to stay an extra week in Israel, on my own. And I met with family. It was interesting be-

cause I have family on both ends of the religious spectrum," he said. "I have family that is on a die-hard, secular kibbutz. And I have family who are *haredi*. (ed. note: fervently Orthodox) I got to spend time with both of them. And that was amazing, especially in context of the summer, which a large part of it was focused on Jewish diversity and pluralism. I got to see it firsthand. ... I realized that what disturbed me was the lack of religious freedom within Judaism."

Berman said the trip opened his eyes "to how complex Israel is."

'I should make a difference'

Berman was chosen to participate in the Bronfman program, according to a letter from the organization, because of his "exceptional talents, accomplishments and intelligent character." Those attributes are also obvious from his resume. A senior this year at Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy, Berman has taken advanced placement courses in American and European history, American government, English and calculus. History and the social sciences are his favorite subjects, Berman said.

He teaches 7th-grade Hebrew at the Family Education Center of Conservative Judaism.

Patti Kroll, director of education at the Family Education Center of Conservative Judaism, nominated Berman as a Salute to Youth honoree.

"He is one exceptional young man," Kroll said. "He teaches Hebrew in our school to seventh graders and brings his passion and love of Judaism to everything he does."

"He is wise beyond his years. And Joe has a tremendous sensitivity for his own roots and heritage. He really wants to pass this on to the kids he works with."

He interned last school year at the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, where he serves as a member of the speaker's bureau. In 1998, he participated in March of the Living.

"I find (speaking about March of the Living and the Holocaust) to be a continuation of my grandmother's efforts," said Berman, whose maternal grandmother is Holocaust survivor Bronia Roslawowski. "One time, we even spoke together at a school. That was neat. My mom was there, too, so we had all three generations."

Berman participates in baseball at HBHA and is student council treasurer this year.

This year, Berman will serve as Governor of Kansas for the Optimist's Youth in Government Program in Topeka. And a contingent of about 40 HBHA students will participate in the mock government program.

For the past few years, Berman has held many positions in B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, including chapter and council president. He also participated in United Synagogue Youth and was its 1998-1999 chapter religious education vice president. He is 1999-2000 chair of the Heschel Honor Society.

"With BBYO and USY for the past four years, I've developed great friendships. And it helped me

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Local News

Salute to Youth Profile

Name: Joseph Michael Jacks Berman
Parents: Steve and Judy Jacks Berman

Age: 17
Grade: 12

School: Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy

Favorite subjects: Government and Tanach

Favorite "Jewish" food: Marzipan, chocolate rugelach

Favorite book: "Catch 22" by Joseph Heller

Last good book read: "In the Land of Israel" by Amos Oz

College plans: I'm going

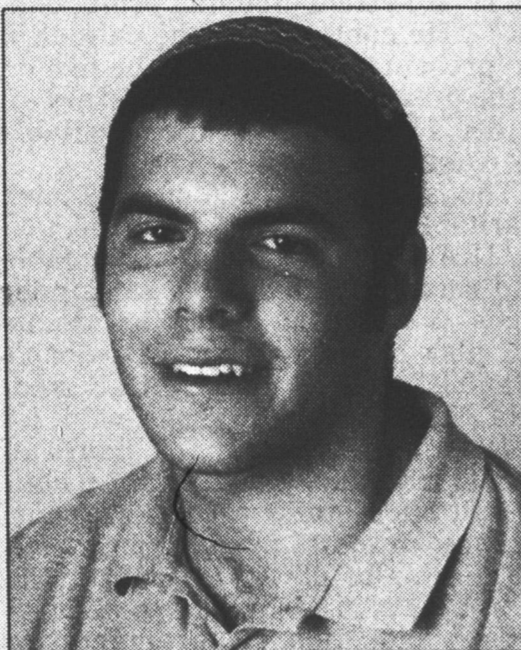
Career plans: ?

Grandparents: Estelle Berman and the late Fred Berman, Bronia Roslawowski and the late Mendel Roslawowski

Most enjoyable pastimes: Spending time with neighbors and friends, listening to music and playing baseball

How did your visit to Israel influence your life? I now look at things with more of an open mind.

Most memorable experience: This



past summer (in Israel) ties the March of the Living.

What is your proudest accomplishment? Helped a friend to have his Bar Mitzvah.

First priority if I were elected President of the United States: Eradicate homelessness.

Most important value I would instill in a child: The difference between right and wrong.

The people I most admire and why: Civil rights activists: they fought (and still fight) for important change. And it is a moral cause.

BERMAN/Salute to Youth

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to grow ... you learn stuff about life. And I want to be a part of making that experience better for other people," Berman said.

That is just a partial list of the many activities Berman has taken on in recent years. So what motivates him to succeed?

"Some things, like baseball, I just enjoy. Debate was just fun and challenging," he said. "But I like to think that if I can make a difference, I should make a difference. So I like doing these that — whether it's in the youth group or student council at school, I see myself as being able to change things."

Berman said this attitude was fostered by his parents and grandparents.

"A lot of it comes from my parents, I think. They're both involved in Jewish communal work," Berman said. His

mother, Judy Jacks-Berman, is nursery school director at Congregation Beth Shalom and Family Center for Conservative Judaism. Joe's father, Steve Berman, is director of BBYO. His paternal grandmother, Estelle Berman, is active in Jewish Women International.

Lately, Berman has been studying weekly with members of the Community Kollel. He's studying Talmud, which Berman said is "very challenging, especially dealing with the Hebrew, Aramaic and different scripts it is written in. I had never sat down and spent a lot of time with just the Hebrew text and just the commentators in Hebrew, without English next to it. I've had to work harder, and I like that. It's a great exercise in logic, also."

Berman is preparing to apply to colleges this fall. He wants to focus on social sciences, government, history and law.



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