
Bronfman to unveil new book

By KAREN BOSSICK
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Ketchum - There was a time that Edgar M. Bronfman Sr. turned his back on Judaism, if you go by what Nicholas Faith writes in his book, "The Bronfmans: The Rise and Fall of the House of Seagram."

No more.

Bronfman, long the most celebrated name in Jewish philanthropy, is now calling on Jews to turn away from the dry, joyless Judaism of his youth to embrace a more celebratory life that will attract and retain young Jews.

He does it in his new book, "Hope, Not Fear: A Path to Jewish Renaissance."

"We're too concerned with anti-Semitism," he says, pointing out that no one blamed Joe Lieberman's loss as vice presidential candidate on anti-Semitism. "We're too concerned with the past. We're not concerned enough with the future, about ways to reinvigorate Judaism in America."

Bronfman will give Wood River Valley residents a sneak peak of his new book, along with a discussion of it from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday at Iconoclast Books, 671 Sun Valley Road. The book is being pre-released before its national release Sept. 16.

"It's going to speak to people because that's where many of them are at," says Rabbi Barney Brickner, leader of the Wood River Jewish community. "A lot of what (Bronfman) has to say will resonate with Jews because it's about Judaism being a culture. His chief concern is that people are proud to be Jews."

Bronfman, who has had a home in Sun Valley for 25 years, sponsors the Edgar M. Bronfman Chamber Series that leads off the Sun Valley Summer Symphony season each year.

His grandparents were Russian Jewish immigrants. His father, Samuel Bronfman, purchased Seagram's in 1928 and Edgar eventually became its CEO.

At the same time, he appointed himself the Jewish ambassador to the world, paying off the World Jewish Congress' debt, pressuring Soviet leaders to release Jewish dissidents, exposing former U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim's Nazi past and even pressuring the Swiss to fork over \$7 billion to compensate for the way Swiss bankers profited from Nazi evil.

Here in America he has donated a fortune to scholarships for Jewish students.

But, he says, he was a political Jew until his late 50s when he realized that there must be something more to Judaism because of the way it survived suppression in the Soviet Union.

A conversation with a fellow airline passenger about the way ancient rabbis meted out the justice of an ox that had killed three people got him interested in what the Talmud says.

"I'm a student and I'm curious so when I'm in New York on Thursdays, I go to Talmud class," he says.

Bronfman, who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton, says he wrote the book as a way to tackle the ignorance and apathy that results in most American Jews knowing little about Judaism.

"You have to spread a wide tent and invite everyone in and make them feel welcome," he says.

That includes embracing those outside the traditional Jewish mold, including welcoming gay Jews and embracing the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew.

"The thing I've discovered is that if there's a Jewish partner who wants the other to become Jewish, there's no reason not to. Instead of having one Jew who doesn't know anything about his or her heritage, you usually get two people who know about it," he says.

Judaism is not a religion of faith but a religion of text, Bronfman contends.

And, he adds, the Holocaust is no longer enough to drive Jewish identity and participation.

"We need to celebrate the joy in Judaism, even as we recognize our responsibility to alleviate suffering and to help heal a broken world," he says. "We need to understand Judaism as a multi-faceted culture as well as a religion and explore Jewish literature, music and art. We need to understand our tradition of debate and questioning and invite all to enter a conversation about our central texts, rituals and laws. We need to open our book anew, and re-create a vital Judaism for our time."



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