“Edgar Bronfman’s new provocative volume is a Jewish leader’s personal quest for new answers to timeless questions; it will certainly challenge many readers concerned with Judaism’s future.”
—Elie Wiesel

American Jews are given a call to action in a book by distinguished businessman, philanthropist and Jewish leader Edgar M. Bronfman. In HOPE, NOT FEAR: A Path to Jewish Renaissance (St. Martin’s Press; October 26, 2010; paperback reprint), Bronfman and co-author Beth Zasloff offer a passionate plea to the Jewish community, urging members to celebrate the joy in their culture and religion, and also recognize their responsibility to help heal a broken world.

In the preface to the new paperback edition, Bronfman reflects on the changes that have taken place in the American Jewish community since the book’s original publication in 2008. The recession dealt an enormous blow to the finances of Jewish organizations—especially after the revelation of Bernard Madoff’s Ponzi scheme—prompting many to ask Bronfman if he was still optimistic about the future. Despite the setbacks of the past two years, Bronfman finds hope for these organizations, and the American Jewish community at large, in the energy and promise of Jewish youth. He points to the efforts of more than 300 Jewish startups as proof that organizations can—and should—do more with less. Further, he asserts that these exciting innovations are proof that the renaissance he called for in 2008 is happening right now. Jewish organizations are adapting and renewing – but there is more work to be done.

“If we are indeed the chosen people,” writes Bronfman, “we were chosen to be a light unto the nations and lead them down the paths of justice. Unfortunately, we are still in training and have yet to put our own house in order before attempting to lead others.”
Brongman, who famously led the Seagram Company in a successful expansion of products and distribution throughout the world, says that Jews need a new and hopeful vision. He calls for a renaissance of learning, debate and questioning of Judaism’s central texts, rituals, laws, literature, music and art in order to recreate a vital, welcoming and inclusive Judaism for our time.

**HOPE, NOT FEAR** takes on controversial subjects, with Brongman urging Jews to shed the fears of anti-Semitism, which he views as limiting, and focus instead recreating the faith with the purpose of hope and joy. Furthermore, he calls for the Jewish community to rethink its attitude toward the intermarried. Intermarried couples should be welcomed, he says, so that they may be active and engaged participants in raising the next generation of Jews.

Brongman’s vision is to foster Jewish community on a large scale. His specific prescription, which is the basis of his plan to reinvigorate and redefine Judaism in North America, is three-fold:

- **Bring Jewish life to larger numbers of Jewish youth.** If they are to take up the torch of Jewish life, young Jews need to meaningfully encounter Judaism: its texts, traditions and community. While there is new energy and excitement in Jewish life, it still touches only a small percentage of American Jews. Broad-based initiatives must be created and aimed at bringing an encounter with Judaism to all North American Jewish youth.

- **Build leadership.** Individuals can make change happen. Among our Jewish youth are those who will lead in any field they choose. To bring their energy and creativity to Jewish life, we need to bring them into conversation with the faith’s traditions and with each other.

- **Open up the tent.** Throughout the twentieth century, the North American Jewish community developed remarkably effective institutions. Today’s younger Jewish generation, however, largely have been keeping their distance from these institutions. We need to look at this issue with a wider lens. The question shouldn’t be how to get them back into the Jewish Community Centers or synagogues, but what these institutions have to do to go to them.

Bronfman’s inspiration for the book came from figures released in 1990 by the UJC National Jewish Population study that showed nearly 50 percent of Jews in America intermarried and nearly half of the children born in these marriages were not raised in the Jewish faith. Fearing that Judaism would die out, Bronfman says he was inspired to use his position to affect change. “I have seen and heard a lot in my seventy-nine years,” says Bronfman, “and now have the chutzpah to try to tell others what I think they must do. I apologize for that, but I am doing it anyway.”

Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University calls **HOPE, NOT FEAR** “part memoir and part manifesto.” In truth, it is the mission statement for the Jewish population of tomorrow.

**HOPE, NOT FEAR**

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About the Authors

**Edgar M. Bronfman** is a renowned philanthropist, businessman and Jewish leader. He led the Seagram Company LTD for over 30 years. Through The Samuel Bronfman Foundation, named in memory of his father, he supports many initiatives that inspire a renaissance in Jewish life. He is Founding Chairman of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life and has played a key role in transforming Hillel into a vibrant international organization. In 1987, he founded the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel, which educates and inspires future leaders from diverse Jewish backgrounds. The Curriculum Initiative, which Bronfman created in 1996, supports Jewish students in independent high schools and introduces school communities to Jewish culture and ethics. In 2001, Bronfman founded MyJewishLearning.com to serve as an online center of learning for Jews of all denominations and levels of knowledge.

Until June 2007, Bronfman also served as president of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), an international federation of Jewish communities and organizations whose primary goal is to preserve and foster the worldwide unity of the Jewish people. Working with the WJC, he advocated for the release of the Prisoners of Zion from the USSR and convinced Pope John Paul II that the establishment of a Carmelite convent near Auschwitz would be an affront to Jews worldwide. In 1998, Bronfman succeeded in winning restitution for Holocaust victims whose assets had been held in Swiss banks. He has also served as president of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, which is devoted to the return of property and wealth owned by Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

Bronfman has been recognized for his leadership by organizations, universities and governments around the world. In 1999, President Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States' highest civilian honor.

**Beth Zasloff** is an alumna of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships, and her collaboration with Edgar M. Bronfman has been a dynamic intergenerational partnership. She is a writer and an artist who has read and performed at venues including PS 1 Contemporary Art Center, the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church, Performance Space 122, and the Museum at Eldridge Street. She has taught writing at New York University, Johns Hopkins University and in New York City public schools. She has a B.A. in English from Yale University and an M.A. in fiction writing from Johns Hopkins University. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and three children, and is working on her first novel.
Praise for the hardcover edition of HOPE, NOT FEAR

“Bronfman has spoken to and learned from a highly diverse group of American Jewish religious and cultural leaders outside the mainstream....[a] coherent view of what a more vibrant Jewish future might look like.”

—Publisher Weekly

“There is much merit in Bronfman’s and Zasloff’s book...Edgar Bronfman is saying the right things. For this, he deserves our thanks.”

—The Forward

“Hope, Not Fear is a wise book by a Jewish leader who loves Jews and Judaism alike, who studies Jewish texts weekly to learn how to apply their insights in his daily life, and who learns from all serious Jews, whatever their denominational affiliation. What Edgar M. Bronfman has learned is the subject of this thoughtful, insightful meditation, and the book itself fills one with a sense of hope about the Jewish future.”

—Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of A Code of Jewish Ethics and Jewish Literacy

“Edgar M. Bronfman and Beth Zasloff have done the Jewish people a great service. Their book forcefully shows the precariousness of grounding Jewish identity in fear of anti-Semitism and intermarriage; they offer instead an invaluable road map to energizing the range and resonance of Judaism in all of our lives.”

—Abigail Pogrebin, author of One and the Same: My Life as an Identical Twin and What I’ve Learned About Everyone’s Struggle to Be Singular and Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk About Being Jewish

“Part memoir, part manifesto, Hope Not Fear introduces readers to a senior statesman in Jewish life – Edgar M. Bronfman – and to the two generations of Jewish leaders who have transformed him and are now transforming the North American Jewish community as a whole. Revealing, optimistic, and sometimes controversial, this book serves as an uplifting introduction to the people, institutions, issues and ideas that promise to reshape the North American Jewish community of the 21st century.”

—Jonathan D. Sarna, Ph.D, Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University and author of American Judaism: A History

“This is a brave, honest, painful and joyous book. Edgar M. Bronfman is not afraid to reveal his own failings and his community’s shortcomings. However, even as he bemoans all that has gone wrong, he also has a vision of a great future. He could have, as one of the privileged few, sat back and enjoyed the good life. Instead he has dedicated himself, in a way that would tire a far younger person, to realizing a Jewish renaissance. Both those who are well versed in Jewish tradition and those who know not an aleph from a bet will find themselves provoked and challenged by Hope, Not Fear.”

—Deborah E. Lipstadt, Ph.D, director of the Rabbi Donald A. Tam Institute for Jewish Studies at Emory University and author of History on Trial: My Day in Court with David Irving
An Interview with Edgar M. Bronfman, author of HOPE, NOT FEAR

Q: Can you talk about the title of the book?

A: “Hope, not fear” was a phrase I used when I first met Richard Joel, the former President of Hillel and current president of Yeshiva University, after I committed to join him at Hillel. Richard told me he didn’t fully understand what I meant until his wife explained to him later at home: we need to stop obsessing about anti-Semitism. We need to focus on the hope that we can have more Jews and more engaged Jews and create a Jewish renaissance.

Q: The original publication of HOPE, NOT FEAR coincided with the financial crisis of 2008, and Jewish organizations—along with everyone else—struggled to stay afloat. What did you discover as you observed Jewish organizations grapple with the challenges of the recession?

Those organizations that used creative methodologies to adapt to the economic and cultural changes were able to thrive even during a challenging time. Small organizations can be just as, if not more so, impactful as large organizations. But small organizations weren’t the only ones who leveraged the altered economic climate to their advantage. Organizations such as Hillel took the opportunity to really examine the effectiveness of their programs, removed what wasn’t working and focused more on peer networking which maximized their intended impact with students. One of Judaism’s greatest strengths is its ability to evolve to fit the needs of its diverse community. Jewish organizations will continue to evolve in the future, and the organizations that can adapt to change will be the ones that persevere.

Q: In 2008, The Samuel Bronfman Foundation partnered with Jumpstart on The Innovation Ecosystem, a survey that examined the efforts of more than 300 Jewish startups. What did this report reveal about the state of Jewish organizations? Did the findings exemplify the renaissance you call for in the book?

The findings in the report do reveal a renaissance occurring amidst the growth of a new sector of organic, decentralized, flexible Jewish organizations. These organizations were already operating with a “lean” mindset and are utilizing volunteers effectively to create networks of support and deepen personal and communal connections to Judaism. Renaissance is about learning, teaching and studying, and Jewish education is central to the mission of these organizations. Through the work of many of these organizations, young people have stepped up to fill voids in the Jewish community spurring creativity and vision. Where young people are leading, innovation and renaissance is occurring.

Q: In the new preface, you reflect on the contemporary interpretation of the holiday Tu b’Shvat, the Jewish “Earth Day.” What changes did you observe, and what do they say about the adaptability of the American Jewish community?


Olam, leaving the world better than you found it is, is an integral part of Judaism and the celebration of Tu B’Shvat, which reminds us of our responsibility to be stewards of the Earth, exemplifies this tradition.

Q: In both your Jewish work and your business work, you have often given a lot of responsibility to young people. What motivates you to make those decisions to empower younger people, when you may be able to find someone with more experience?

A: I was a young person too, and I was not given responsibility I thought I deserved. I never want to make that same mistake. Experience is great, but eagerness and desire are the key to doing a good job. You have to trust young people. They are idealistic, and that should be encouraged and fostered.

I am also a feminist. Why? Women work harder than men to get to the same spot, because they have to.

Q: What do you see as one of the Jewish community’s biggest problems to contend with at this moment in history?

A: All of us who are concerned with the vanishing Jew in North America face the same problem: that none, or almost none, of the American Jewish population thinks we have a crisis. But we are in crisis, if one considers the disappearance of Judaism in this country as critical. When our ancestors came to North America, it was not to become better Jews; it was to have a better life for them and their children, and to mingle in with the “others.” We have succeeded beyond their fondest dreams, but the penalty we pay is to lose Jews through assimilation, through ignorance of their Jewish heritage and through apathy. We have a great heritage that has survived all sorts of attempts to snuff it out. We have a religion that encourages one to ask questions and to be skeptical.

If we become more welcoming, we could convince more Jews that it is important to be Jewish; that it is important to be part of the Jewish community; and, most importantly, that being part of this community enriches your life. That is the only way we can sell it. We can’t sell it by your grandmother turning over in her grave. We have to sell it on a personal basis; because of Judaism, you are a better person who leads a better life.

Q: What continues to drive your philanthropic work? Can you point to any great influences that motivate and inspire the work that you do?

A: My father always taught us to leave the world a better place than we found it. In my small way, this is what I am trying to do.