

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We are Implicated in the Story of the Jewish People

The intense emotional reaction of Jews in general, and Jewish educators in particular to October 7th and the ensuing fallout places a spotlight on the urgent need for integrative Jewish education.

The Need to React: Jews, whether they want it or not, are implicated by this historical moment. For almost all, there is no choice but to take notice: “I am Jewish, what do I do?” Do I ignore what is happening around me and suppress my Jewishness? Do I react and accentuate my Jewishness? The emotional intensity of the moment means that there is a need to form an opinion and take an action. In these moments the potential contribution of Jewish educators is large.

Jewish Lens: As Jews, each one of us are inculcated with a Peoplehood consciousness⁸ - shared memory, knowledge and emotional associations, which affect the way we understand and respond to the world around us. In “normal” times those who are not engaged in Jewish life only notice their “Jewish lens” on occasions when confronted with Jewish memory such as visiting a museum or taking part in an especially moving ceremony. However, in a time of crisis our Jewish lens is activated. We have no choice as Jews, in the context of the intense media and socio-political environment in which we find ourselves to take notice. **No matter our political orientation, or level of involvement in the organized Jewish community, Jews recognize that Israel is not just another country, and the rise of antisemitism is not something we can ignore.** Both Israel and antisemitism sit on millennia of the Jewish experience from biblical to modern Israel, and persecution as a minority is captured in our sacred texts, holidays, religious rituals, history books, art, theater, language etc. They are part of who we are.

Anxiety and Despair: The result of being forced to activate our Jewish lens by dint of historical circumstance is an intense emotional experience, captured in this research by the negative emotions that Jewish educators are expressing of their own experience as well as the way they see their learners reacting. We propose that the reason that nine months into the war the intensely negative reaction marked first and foremost by “anxiety” and “despair” continues, is that most Jewish educators lack sufficient training. After the initial shock of October 7th, ideally Jewish educators can begin to apply their professional knowledge and skills to treating challenge and conflict as integral to living a rich human and Jewish life and guiding their learners forward to a desire to engage, learn and react in a constructive manner. Most Jewish educators are not ready for the challenge.

From Crisis to Opportunity: The question is how do we react to crisis and challenge? How do we move ourselves and our learners from a place of “anxiety” and “despair” to “curiosity” and a desire for constructive engagement with other Jews, community and the surrounding society, in which Israel is seen as a positive force? **The answer we propose is to recognize the critical need for integrative Jewish education.**

Integrative Jewish Education: Moving Beyond Israel Education Narrowly Defined

In our February 2024 report we noted that many educators focus on specific disciplines (Jewish studies, history, philosophy, etc.) or areas (early childhood, youth groups, campus life, etc.) and do not feel they have the training to grapple with charged issues, such as the experience of living as a minority group, the rise of antisemitism or negative portrayals of Israel in the media in the context of the Israel/Palestinian conflict and beyond. Many commented on the need for better Israel education. For example, one respondent wrote: “*Teachers need to be better trained in Israel education. Too many are not fluent with modern Israeli history and current events.*”

Learning from our previous and current survey points in a different direction. The need is not for Jewish professionals to embrace yet another discipline such as Israel education. Rather, there is a need to recognize that **a core competency of a Jewish professional should be the ability to respond to core issues and challenges of life by facilitating**

⁸ On the idea of “Peoplehood Consciousness” see Kopelowitz (2021), Ravid (2014). Or a similar use but coined, “Jewish Consciousness,” see Horowitz (2008).

both Jewish bonding and complex thinking, what we refer to here as “integrative Jewish education.”⁹ The goal is for each educator to bring knowledge and/or skills associated with their disciplinary or area specialization and, in so doing, empower their people to think from a place of Jewish engagement - action, identification, learning and perspective - about issues that are important to them.

Responding to Challenging Issues

In ordinary times, conversations about challenging issues, in general, are difficult,¹⁰ particularly when Jews need to speak to one another about charged issues involving Israel.¹¹ In this snapshot of time, the difficulty that Jewish professionals experience in facilitating educational conversations about challenging issues is evident. We first saw the difficulty in the survey conducted shortly after October 7th, and nine months later the difficulty persists. Other post-October studies also confirm the negative emotional intensity of the event and the difficulty in responding.¹²

The need for training and support for Jewish professionals in general, and Jewish educators in particular to tackle challenging issues as central to their professional practice is only just gaining traction in the Jewish community. A pioneer in this effort is an organization named *Resetting the Table* founded in 2014 with the goal of promoting communication about contentious issues in the Jewish community. One outcome is a collaboration with *Hillel* to train campus professionals on “conversations across difference,” with a focus on Israel.¹³ Since 2015, *The Jewish Education Project* has trained more than 200 professionals in methodologies that support discussion across difference. In the past decade, organizations such as *GatherDC*, *Tribe 12*, and *The Base Movement* were founded to promote the Jewish community in which a core building block is conversations in which participants can speak with others about personal or macro issues of importance to them. Two years ago, *M²: The Institute for Experiential Education* launched its *Values in Action* initiative to “equip Jewish educators [with the skills] to support their learners in navigating the complex challenges of our time and inspiring them to take positive action.”

The common denominator of these recent developments is the realization that a robust, meaningful experience of the Jewish community is one that includes speaking about challenging personal and/or collective Jewish issues. The following recommendations build on and assume robust work already taking place in the field of Jewish education and community building today. Many educational and communal organizations are actively developing resources and professional development frameworks for Israel in Jewish education, post October 7th and beyond. A list of organizations cited by survey respondents in their written responses appears in Appendix 2.

“We are Not Alone” – A Framework for Support to Respond

In our February 2024 report we offered a framework for thinking about purposeful educational communication about the challenging issues arising for Jewish professionals after the October 7 attack.¹⁴ There we focused on the need to identify a personal professional narrative, which is challenging but crucial. For many, such a process requires support and engaging one’s colleagues in discussion. We used the respondents’ written answers to propose a framework for enabling collegial discussions for the purpose of crafting educational strategies to respond to difficult social issues. **The need is for planful discussions so that Jewish professionals will have each other’s support and input in times such as these.** These include focusing on the big questions that one’s learners or constituents are concerned with, educational considerations and value-informed dilemmas. This need continues.

Here we broaden the frame to focus on the necessary conditions for an educator to feel confident engaging in integrative Jewish education – feeling able to engage learners in both Jewish bonding and complex thinking about challenging issues. Keren Fraiman suggests four key areas that contribute to Jewish educators expressing

⁹ Discussions of integrative Jewish education are found in: Bryfman (2024, February 1), Golden (2024, September), Chazan (2016), Pomson and Chazan (2015), Chazan, Chazan and Jacobs (2013), Kress (2012), Ross, Woocher and Woocher (2007).

¹⁰ Cox et. al. (2020)

¹¹ Cohen and Gitlin (2013)

¹² Manchester (2023), Hassenfeld (2023).

¹³ Weissman (2022)

¹⁴ Kopelowitz et. al. (2023) p. 9.

- ❖ **Political and Moral Knowledge:** Open discussions around political views encourage critical engagement with Israel's role in the world. Ethical discussions deepen students' critical thinking and foster a sense of responsibility towards one another, their community and the Jewish People.

These five areas of knowledge collectively support an integrative approach that blends Jewish bonding with complex thinking.

2. Pedagogy

The sections of this report that document educators' strategies for integrating Jewish bonding and complex thinking point to four general pedagogic strategies. The common denominator are pedagogic practices in which learners are activated to engage with Jewish knowledge in ways that build feelings of bonding, while developing their personal understanding of what is important to them as individuals and in relation to other Jews and Israel.

- ❖ **Development of Informed Opinion through Collective Rituals and Engagement:** Beyond cognitive reflection on their connection to Israel, learners can be encouraged to act on their insights through both personal and communal activities. Learners cannot only engage in group rituals but also design them or reflect on them together. These include religious and secular rituals such as lighting candles, reciting prayers, singing songs or reciting meaningful texts focused on Israel and Jewish peoplehood that enable learners to recognize themselves as part of a larger historical and global Jewish People. Participation in ceremony transforms personal introspection into a collective experience, reinforcing a sense of belonging and purpose. Additionally, actionable engagement, like organizing volunteer projects, engaging in political or civil action with Israel as a focus, can turn introspection into outward expressions of collective identification, bridging the development of informed opinion with Jewish bonding.
- ❖ **Integrating Complex Narratives with Experiential Learning:** To deepen engagement with diverse perspectives on Israel and Israel in Jewish life, educators can facilitate active, experiential learning. For example, role-playing exercises where students advocate for different viewpoints or organizing discussions with guest speakers help students practice engagement with complex issues. This cognitive exploration can be reinforced behaviorally through ceremonies that include diverse voices or events honoring multiple aspects of Jewish history and identity, different Jewish narratives. Singing songs from various Jewish traditions or observing rituals reflecting Israel's multicultural society teaches students to embody and celebrate diversity while considering the implications of that diversity of Jewish life. These actions reinforce a respectful engagement with varied perspectives, transforming understanding into collective experiences involving both Jewish bonding and complex thinking. Engaging with narratives should also take into consideration the desire of many educators to also expose their learners to Palestinian interpretations of the Israel/Palestinian conflict.
- ❖ **Communication Across Differences Integrating Dialogue Skills and Collective Expression:** Educators can teach specific dialogue techniques, like active listening and constructive expression, through small-group discussions on challenging topics, giving students practical experience in navigating differences respectfully. Complementing communication across differences are behavioral exercises, such as participating in group singing or collaborative art projects, demonstrate that individuals with diverse opinions can unite through shared and meaningful Jewish actions. Ceremonies where students join voices in song or rituals highlight that bonding can coexist with diversity, cultivating empathy and mutual respect.
- ❖ **Relationships with Israelis:** Educators can build on inter-personal interactions between their learners and Israeli Jews in an intentional manner to both enable emotional bonding and complex thinking. These include possible interactions with 1) Israeli *shlichim* [emissaries] who work in Jewish educational institutions, 2) Israeli youth in planned *mifgashim* [educational encounters] virtual or in-person when they are visiting abroad or when a diaspora Jewish group visits Israel; or 3) ongoing interactions with family, friends or teachers who live in Israel.
- ❖ **Advocacy-focused activities** can be used both to urge love of and support for Israel, while also enabling complex thinking. Possible educational activities supporting advocacy range from organizing celebrations of Israeli culture and heritage through Independence Day events, music, and symbols, to teaching Israel's historical narrative, including its biblical roots, Zionist development, and statehood. They also emphasize Israel's modern contributions, such as

technological innovations and humanitarian efforts, to instill pride and admiration. In the process educators have the opportunity to facilitate discussions on Israel's current geopolitical challenges, enabling a sophisticated understanding of the Jewish relationship to Israel as integral to Jewish belonging.

3. Emotional Support

Educators are not just instructors; they are guides and mentors, the emotional pillars of their communities, holding space for learners to process trauma, navigate difficult discussions, and find strength in their sense of Jewish belonging. However, many educators are not prepared to address Israel in their work in the context of crisis. They feel emotionally drained and isolated, making it difficult for them to offer the support their learners need. **Investment in emotional support networks for educators can change this.**

- ❖ **Initiatives that promote community-building among educators** - peer support groups, mentoring programs, or retreats can help reduce burnout and foster resilience. These efforts will allow educators to feel seen, supported, and rejuvenated, better equipped to guide their students through uncertain times.
- ❖ **Fostering professional networks that recognize the emotional challenges educators face**, acknowledging ambivalence, grappling with difficult questions without conclusive answers, and highlighting conflicting Jewish values.
- ❖ **Israel professional development travel programs for educators** also provide a compelling platform for emotional renewal, offering a chance to connect with other educators, experience collegiality and deepen their personal connection to Israel. Educators return home with fresh energy and confidence.

4. Navigating Communal Pressure

- ❖ **Value Alignment and Communication Challenges:** Our data shows most Jewish educators finding themselves less than fully aligned with their institutions' values on matters touching on the fallout from October 7th. This includes value conflicts with their supervisors, which can create tension and hinder an educator's ability to navigate discussions on complex issues. This lack of alignment also affects collegial interactions, with only 45% feeling fully able to engage in productive dialogue with colleagues. Many of the written comments also include references to pressure from parents and other stake holders.
- ❖ **Support Structures:** The feelings of isolation within one's own work environment underscores the need for support structures that promote open and respectful conversations, and emotional support that overlap with the above areas, including.
 - **Peer Support Needs:** Many educators express the need for peer support networks where they can share insights and challenges with colleagues. Programs like mentorships, support groups, and Israel immersion trips can provide emotional renewal, especially if done with work colleagues. These peer connections reduce feelings of isolation and help educators feel seen and supported amid challenging circumstances.
 - **Institutional Culture that Views Complex Thinking as Essential:** There is a need to work with the leadership of Jewish organizations to encourage and empower their educators to lead educational and community building processes that strengthen community and support complex thinking. Buy-in and active support of professional and lay leadership is essential for creating a culture in which educators feel valued and respected in their work environments.

Moving Forward: Seizing the Opportunity

The events of October 7th have undoubtedly created a moment of crisis for Jewish educators, but they have also opened new possibilities for education to drive robust Jewish engagement in general, and with Israel in particular that will leave the organized Jewish community strengthened. As we move forward, let's take inspiration from the wisdom of Jewish tradition to guide our educational efforts. The verse from Devarim, often referred to as the concept of "Not in Heaven," feels especially relevant today:

"כִּי קְרוֹב אֵלַיךְ הַדְּבָר מֵאֵד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ"

“Because the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.”

This verse reminds us that, no matter how overwhelming or complex the challenges may be, the answers are within our reach. As educators, we have the power to help our learners not just understand, but to act, to feel, and to reflect deeply. We can foster connections, nurture belonging, and equip our learners with the tools to engage thoughtfully with Israel and Jewish Peoplehood.

Let this be a call to action: to teach with heart, to inspire complex thought, and to encourage meaningful action. In these difficult times, we can help our learners and communities rise above the complexities, fostering both resilience and a deeper sense of Jewish purpose and belonging. The work we do together—through words, ideas, and actions—can shape the future of Jewish education and community.