

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the harrowing events of October 7th, 2023, Jewish educators worldwide find themselves navigating a new and challenging landscape. This crisis is sending ripples through the global Jewish community, and educators are at the forefront of helping students make sense of this moment in history. With emotions running high and political complexities unfolding, Jewish educators have a vital role in guiding their learners and communities through a period of healing, reflection, and engagement.

Our focus, amid the uncertainty and emotional upheaval, is a need to deepen the connection between learners and Jewish life, particularly their relationship to Israel. The fallout from October 7th may be traumatic for many, but also offers Jewish educators a unique chance to reaffirm the centrality of Israel for Jewish belonging, while simultaneously grappling with the diverse perspectives and generational shifts among their learners. This research report shows that most Jewish educators are not equipped to rise to the challenge. Learning from those who are confident in their response, we offer guidance and insight on how to meet the moment and improve Jewish education in the future.



Pro-Israel Rally in London ([left](#)). Discussing differences about Israel ([middle](#)). Anti-Zionist Jews demonstrate for ceasefire ([right](#)).
Click on links to open source of pictures.

THE RESEARCH

In the two months following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, Jewish educators, clergy and other engagement professionals expressed feelings of isolation and confusion regarding the events unfolding in Israel and their local communities. This was the major take-away of the first survey we conducted in November 2023.¹

Faced with an event of historical magnitude, there was across-the-board recognition of the need to respond, coupled with uncertainty about the best course of action. These Jewish professionals were seeking clarity, facts, safety, and hope while grappling with fundamental questions about the unfolding events and their implications.

Given the intensity of the post-October 7th events unfolding both inside and outside of Israel, where did we find Jewish professionals nine months in (June/July 2024)? As with the original research we asked:

- ❖ Do Jewish professionals continue to consider October 7th as an event of historical proportions?
 - If so, what are the implications they perceive for their work?
- ❖ Do they continue to agree that there is a need to respond?
 - If so, what are the big issues?
- ❖ What is their confidence and ability to respond?
 - In which areas do they need support, and what is the nature of that support?

The research is sponsored by the Jim Joseph Foundation in partnership with The Jewish Education Project and M2: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education.²

¹ Ezra Kopelowitz Ph.D., Hadar Franco Galor Ph.D. and Jake Gillis M.A. (2023, November) Responding to this Historical Moment: Jewish Educators, Clergy, Engagement Professionals and the War in Israel. November 2023. M2: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education and the Jim Joseph Foundation. [Link](#)

² We'd like to thank Rabbi Dena Klein, Chief Jewish Education Officer of The Jewish Education Project who served as a thought partner, providing invaluable feedback and support.

METHODOLOGY

Surveys

This report draws on two surveys.

- ❖ **Wave 1:** Fielded in November 2023, one month following the October 7th invasion. 1125 responded.
- ❖ **Wave 2:** Fielded from June 6 to July 31, 2024. 1281 educators or engagement professionals responded.
- ❖ 147 answered both Wave 1 and Wave 2. This report includes comparisons based on these responses.
- ❖ Unless otherwise noted, the data cited in this report draws from the Wave 2 survey.

Wave 2 Survey Distribution:

- ❖ 16 organizations sent a survey to their educators and engagement professionals.³
- ❖ The survey was also sent to the 599 individuals who responded to the first survey and left contact information, requesting to receive updates on the research, 147 (25%) of whom responded.
- ❖ 86% of respondents live in the United States. The remaining respondents are from: Argentina, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, Paraguay, Poland, South Africa, and Spain.
- ❖ Respondents represent a wide range of educational sectors, learners by age group and denominational affiliation (see following page).

Details for the Wave One survey are found in the Wave One report (see footnote 1).

The full frequency reports for each survey can be downloaded using these links. Wave One: [Link](#) . Wave Two: [Link](#).

Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 senior professionals who work in the field of Jewish education in August 2024. Five of the interviewees were nominated by the Jim Joseph Foundation and The Jewish Education Project due to their thought leadership in the field, five were selected due to the depth of their response to the survey and diverse approaches to Israel in Jewish education. The interviews focused on the educators':

1. Personal assessment and perceptions of the situation
2. Shifts in educational approach and response to October 7th as experienced in the interviewee's sector, community, experience.
3. Practical implications:
 - a. What is expected of educational leaders during such times?
 - b. What does success look like and what is required in order to get there?
4. Insights on ideological perspectives and their implications for education.

Summaries of the Interviews are available upon request. A list of those interviewed is found in Appendix I.

Educator Focus Groups

In September 2024, three online focus groups were conducted with senior Jewish educators. Organized and moderated by The Jewish Education Project, the focus groups involved Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz presenting top level findings from the research with the goal of receiving feedback as to the implications for, and use of the findings for the field of Jewish Education. 64 Educators participated in the focus groups.

³ Supporting organization include: ADCA, BBYO, For the Sake of Argument, Hillel International, The Jewish Education Project, Moishe House, M², NCSY, Pardes, Society for Humanistic Judaism, The Lookstein Center, UnitedEd, URJ (includes NFTY), USCJ, USY, and the Wexner Foundation.

Survey Respondents

Respondents represent a wide range of educational sectors (exhibit 1), learners by age group (exhibit 2) and denominational affiliation (exhibit 3). They span the full range of working aged adults with 40 to 49 years old being the median age (exhibit 4). Three quarters have worked 10 or more years in the field (exhibit 5).

Exhibit 1. Which of the following best describe the sector of the Jewish community in which you work? Select all that apply

Synagogue / congregation / minyan / religious organization	43%
Jewish day school/yeshiva	23%
Jewish supplementary school (e.g. Hebrew school, Sunday school, after-school program)	22%
College campus Jewish organization (e.g. Hillel, Chabad on Campus)	14%
Jewish youth group / movement	11%
Engagement	11%
Jewish preschool or early childhood center	7%
Something else	7%
Jewish summer camp	6%
Social justice / service learning	6%
Self-employed / independent contractor / "gig" worker	6%
Jewish Federation / foundation	5%
Israel education / advocacy organization	4%
JCC	4%
Innovation	4%

Exhibit 2. With which populations of learners do you work most intensively? Select all that apply

Early childhood	18%
Elementary school age	42%
Teens (middle and high school)	55%
College Age	23%
Young Adult learners (20's and 30's)	23%
Adults (40+)	35%
Families	28%
Seniors	19%
Other	4%

Exhibit 3. Thinking of the institution(s) where you work, with which denomination, if any, is it (or are they) most identified?

Haredi	1%
Chabad	0%
Orthodox (other than Haredi or Chabad)	11%
Conservative	15%
Reform	28%
Reconstructionist	2%
Other	6%
More than one	13%
None – it's non-denominational	25%
Total	100%

Exhibit 4. How old are you?

18 to 21	1%
22 to 24	4%
25 to 29	8%
30 to 34	9%
35 to 39	11%
40 to 49	27%
50 to 59	20%
60 or older	20%
Total	100%

Exhibit 5. For how many years have you worked as a Jewish educator, in any way, either full-time or part-time?

Less than 5	12%
5-9	13%
10-14	15%
15-19	15%
20 or more	46%
Total	100%

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the events of October 7th, 2023, Jewish educators have found themselves at the center of an unprecedented challenge, guiding learners through a landscape shaped by intense emotions and complex questions. The research findings show that Jewish educators are experiencing considerable emotional strain, with many expressing anxiety and despair as they navigate teaching in the post-October 7th environment. Educators also report their learners experiencing similar negative emotions including confusion, anger, and isolation in response to the unfolding events. Many feel unprepared for addressing the crisis within their existing frameworks, revealing gaps in training and resources to navigate these challenging topics.

A CALL TO ACTION

This moment, while difficult, offers a unique opportunity for rethinking how Jewish education responds to crisis and challenge whether involving Israel, or other areas of life that involve emotional challenge and/or the need to address diversity of opinion and behavior. In such moments, individuals must respond to the world around them, and Jewish educators should see themselves as a resource and guide for doing so. Our focus here is the post-October 7th crisis, and the way Jewish educators are responding.

The power of the events playing out is such that educators realize they need to respond. Events include the war in Israel, the ideological prism through which the war is covered in the media and accompanying public discourse amplified by the 2024 Presidential election, the increased diplomatic isolation of Israel, and the sharp rise of antisemitism. **The post-October 7th events are existential in nature**, causing many Jews to assess their relationship to the Jewish People, to the society around them and to Israel.

As with any crisis or challenge there are diverse Jewish reactions as to how to understand and respond. Drawing on the survey data we show there are currently three approaches among Jewish educators to Israel.

1. **Solidarity:** A focus on nurturing a love for Israel, meaning positive emotional bonds.
2. **Criticism:** A mirror image of the solidarity approach with the emphasis on enabling criticism of Israel as legitimate Jewish expression.
3. **Complexity:** A third approach, which works to strike a balance arguing that to educate a love of Israel, requires learners not only to form positive emotional bonds but also to formulate their opinion and ability to discuss with others Israel in all its social and political complexity.

The tendency of most educators is to embrace one of the solidarity, complexity or criticism approaches, which we argue is not productive for forging a constructive response to the post October 7th crisis, or any other emotional crisis or challenge. Either solidarity or criticism when taken alone cannot enable education to strengthen emotional bonds between Jews who hold different opinions in the face of crisis. Alternatively, complexity cannot stand as a goal unto itself, as the creation of positive bonds between Jews and Israel is a core goal of Jewish education.

Currently the dominant approach to Israel in Jewish education only emphasizes “solidarity,” educating for love of Israel. The result is that many Jewish educators are unprepared for responding to intensely negative events that require consideration of a complex social, moral and political reality and divisive Jewish communal environment. **Many Jewish educators are expressing feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, unsure of how to tackle the negative intensity of their personal emotions and those of their learners.**

We call for an integrative approach that emphasizes forging positive emotional bonds between Jews while recognizing the need to enable learners to grapple with both complexity and criticism. **Our call is for educators to lead the integration of Israel into Jewish life as a positive force for Jewish belonging and identification.** In a moment of crisis, can Jewish educators bring learning and engagement with Israel to serve as a source of constructive bonding between Jews, rather than a catalyst for division?

For this purpose, we draw on the research data to advocate for an integrative model of Jewish education in which Israel is integrated into all areas of the discipline. In so doing educators facilitate (1) Jewish bonding and (2) complex thinking.

Educators nurture their learners' consciousness of belonging to the Jewish People and enable each to develop a robust self-understanding of their desired Jewish life in relationship to other Jews, Israel and the society in which they live.

BEYOND TRADITIONAL ISRAEL EDUCATION

For most Jewish educators, prior to October 7th, Israel integrated into their educational work as a means for reinforcing Jewish solidarity and mutual support. Educational work focused on ceremonies and learning with the goal of inculcating and reinforcing a “love of Israel.” Dominant educational foci include acquiring knowledge about Israel from biblical times to the present, the story of the Zionist movement, and the creation of the State and its miraculous survival in the face of its enemies and contemporary positive themes such as “Israel: the Startup Nation.” These areas of knowledge are complemented and reinforced by ceremonies focusing on the celebration of Israel’s Independence, Israeli music and culture, or commemoration and contribution having to do with Israel in times of war or tragedy. **The research findings point to the limitations of this “traditional” approach to Israel in Jewish education, which leaves educators lacking the knowledge and skills to address politically and emotionally charged topics.**

STRUGGLING TO RESPOND TO AN EVENT OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The comparison of responses from the survey conducted following October 7th, 2023, and nine months later in June and July 2024 shows the enduring significance of the October 7th events and the challenges Jewish educators face in confidently fulfilling their roles. At the time of the second survey, Jewish educators continued to view October 7th and the resulting fallout as a historical event and recognized the importance of their role in guiding their communities. However, they also continued to feel underprepared, underscoring the need for sustained support and development to meet these new demands effectively.

The research findings also show that most Jewish educators find themselves less than fully aligned with their institutions' educational priorities on matters touching on the fallout from October 7th. Value conflicts between educators and their supervisors can create tension and hinder their ability to respond to 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 lay leaders, parents and other stake holders.

INCREASED ENGAGEMENT AND ADAPTING TO MEET THE MOMENT

Despite the challenges, the aftermath of October 7th has sparked renewed engagement with Jewish life, as current events underscore Israel’s centrality to the collective Jewish experience. For many Jews, this crisis is a catalyst for exploring their Jewishness more deeply, prompting both introspection and dialogue about Israel’s role in their lives. Jewish educators report that learners who were previously disconnected or indifferent are now seeking a meaningful connection to organized Jewish life, sometimes exploring questions about their Jewishness for the first time. This surge in interest is also visible within Jewish institutions, where the educators report that people who were less engaged are now participating more actively. In response, educators are rethinking their approaches, adapting their practices to build on this heightened engagement. Many are seeking to deepen their knowledge and creatively address the emotional, intellectual, and practical needs of their learners and communities.

BALANCING JEWISH BONDING AND COMPLEX THINKING IN EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Drawing on calls by Jewish educational researchers spanning decades and this research, we argue that the angst generated by the current crisis is an opportunity to accelerate the long called for move towards integrative Jewish education. This approach encourages educators not to treat “Israel education” as a distinct discipline; but, rather to view Israel as integral to their area of specialization. How when teaching Bible, Talmud, prayer, Jewish history, or current events etc., can educators view Israel as a source for (1) Jewish emotional bonding and (2) complex thinking, enabling their learners to see Israel as a nuanced, multifaceted part of their Jewish lives? The goal is to foster a deeper, reflective engagement with Jewish life in which Israel is apart. Such an approach can strengthen Jewish communal life by enabling learners to deepen their sense of collective Jewish belonging in relation to the moral and ideological diversity within the Jewish community.

We learn that only 27% of respondents chose both Jewish bonding and complex thinking educational goals in their response to October 7th, meaning that the large majority prioritize either Jewish bonding (35%) or complex thinking (38%) goals. **The long-term goal is to bring Jewish educators to embrace both bonding and complex thinking.**

DIVERGING APPROACHES BY DEMOGRAPHICS AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Approaches to Israel in Jewish education vary according to educators' demographics, experience, and political orientation. Younger, less experienced, and more politically liberal or progressive educators are more likely to prioritize complex thinking goals, focusing on helping students explore and/or critically analyze complex topics surrounding Israel. Older, more experienced educators and the more politically conservative are more likely to emphasize Jewish bonding, aiming to foster a strong sense of commitment and participation in Jewish community.

Notably, no matter the demographic, political orientation or educational sector only a minority of Jewish educators adopt a fully integrated approach that combines both Jewish bonding and complex thinking.

The integrated approach, we argue, is essential for being able to respond to crisis and challenge in a manner that enables Israel to serve as a force for strengthening engagement with organized Jewish life in a time of crisis.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR INTEGRATIVE JEWISH EDUCATION

Key areas where Jewish educators report the need for support include:

1. **Curriculum resources** that cover knowledge for essential topics. Depending on their educational goals, educators seek resources that include Peoplehood, Zionism, and both Israeli and Palestinian narratives. Additionally, educators are requesting support for facilitating discussions across diverse viewpoints, especially in dialogues with non-Jews and individuals critical of Israel.
2. **Peer support systems** are another priority, with educators expressing the value of connecting with colleagues to share ideas and develop emotional resilience. Opportunities for professional collaboration, such as peer trips to Israel, are seen as helpful for educators' personal and professional growth.

Drawing on interviews with educators four areas emerge as particularly important: (1) curriculum integration of Israel into different areas of Jewish education, (2) professional development for that purpose, (3) support for navigating institutional pressures, and (4) the ability to offer learners ethical guidance.

RECOMMENDATION - BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATIVE JEWISH EDUCATION

To advance the field, we recommend building on existing work, knowledge and resources in the field. Collaborative working groups should bring together philanthropic partners, educational institutions, and community leaders who are already working to advance integrative Jewish education with Israel as a focus. These groups would focus on developing the following frameworks and delivery of resources:

- ❖ **Curricula** focusing on 1) emotional knowledge, 2) Jewish Peoplehood, 3) historical and 4) contextual understanding, and 5) ethical inquiry.
- ❖ **Pedagogic strategies** for integrating Jewish bonding with complex thinking including: 1) **Collective rituals** and actionable engagement to help students connect personally and communally with Jewish life and Israel through shared practices like singing, prayer, and volunteer work for fostering a sense of belonging. 2) **Experiential learning**, such as role-playing, immersive learning and discussions with diverse perspectives, to deepen students' understanding of Israel's complexities while celebrating Jewish diversity. 3) **Dialogue skills** for encouraging respectful engagement with differing views along with group activities that show how grappling with diversity, cultivating empathy leaves one inspired to embrace and deepen a commitment to the good of the Jewish People. And 4) **personal relationships with Israelis** building on those interactions in an intentional manner to both enable emotional bonding and complex thinking.
- ❖ **Emotional support frameworks** to reduce burnout and foster resilience, allowing educators to feel supported and better prepared to guide their students through challenging times. These include: 1) **community-building initiatives**, such as peer support groups, mentorship programs, and retreats. 2) **Developing professional**

support networks that acknowledge the emotional challenges educators face—like grappling with difficult questions and conflicting values. And 3) **professional development trips** to Israel with a focus on emotional renewal, deepening connection to Israel and peer networking.

- ❖ **Navigating communal pressure** exerted by their supervisors, lay leaders, parents and other communal stakeholders. Jewish educators face challenges in aligning with their institutions' educational goals, particularly on sensitive issues, creating tension and feelings of isolation. To address this, it is recommended that 1) institutions **develop support structures** that encourage open, respectful conversations and provide emotional support. 2) **Peer networks**, including mentorships, support groups, and immersion trips (see previous recommendation). And 3) **encouraging active support from leadership** to foster institutional cultures that value complex thinking and empower educators to lead community-building processes.

Moving Forward: Seizing the Opportunity

The crisis following October 7th presents the field of Jewish education with a unique opportunity to strengthen Jewish engagement, particularly around Israel. Inspired by the wisdom of Jewish tradition, we advocate helping learners not only understand but also act, feel, and reflect deeply on their identification with the Jewish People and the Jewish life they wish to embrace. The verse from Devarim, "the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it," reminds us that, despite the challenges, the answers lie within reach. This moment calls for teaching that blends heart with complex thought, fostering resilience, purpose, and belonging. Through collective efforts, educators can shape the future of Jewish education, nurturing a thoughtful, engaged, and connected Jewish community.