

ISRAEL IN JEWISH EDUCATION – CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

The events following October 7th raise deep questions about the place of Israel in Jewish education.

EDUCATING FOR LOVE OF ISRAEL

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.⁴

THREE CURRENT APPROACHES – SOLIDARITY, COMPLEXITY, CRITICISM

The field of Jewish education is currently divided into three general approaches.

SOLIDARITY

The majority of Jewish educators’ associate educating for love of Israel as one and the same as expressing solidarity. As illustrated in the quotation side-right the focus is on nurturing positive emotional bonds with Israel.

Solidarity

• "We continue to teach children about Israel in a positive light without dwelling on the war. We initially did age-appropriate discussions about what was going on. Then we proceeded to teach love of Israel as part of our curriculum. Truthfully, the kids don't talk much about the war. We are very focused on solidarity with Israel, bringing shishinim to do programming, and singing hatikvah and am yisrael chai every school session."

CRITICISM

A second approach is the mirror image of the solidarity approach, in which the emphasis is on enabling criticism of Israeli government policy as legitimate Jewish expression.

Criticism

• "Helping my students and their parents see the humanity in all victims of Hamas' terror because some families just want to see all Palestinians suffer and die regardless of their actual complicity. ...We ran a 3-session lesson on having difficult conversations with our 8th grade students. Part 1 actually showed a video about reconciliations between Tutsi and Hutu people *Rwandan Genocide). Part 2 was a highly structured conversation about the war in Israel where students expressed views and responded to views from other peers. Part 3 was a slightly less structured follow-up conversation, where students could also express views and where they were a bit less reserved in their sharing and this shared more of their 'real and raw' feelings."

COMPLEXITY

A third approach works to strike a balance arguing that to educate for the love of Israel, requires learners not only to form positive emotional bonds but also to formulate their personal opinion and ability to discuss with others Israel in all its social and political complexity.

Complexity

• "While I agree we should teach a love for Israel we should also help our students understand that it's okay to disagree. Mainly how important it is to have meaningful conversations and listen to others."

⁴ On the focus on “love of Israel” in Jewish education see: Novak Winer (2024) 283-285, Zakai, 2016, Kopelowitz and Pitkowsky (2024) pp. 313-315, Grant and Kopelowitz (2012) pp. 7-8., Pomson et al., 2009.

Emotions, Questions and Goals Associated with Solidarity, Complexity and Criticism

Solidarity, Complexity and Criticism are distinct educational worldviews that include the educators' goals, the emotions they attribute to their learners and the questions they report their learners asking. The table below shows how goals, emotions and questions associated with each approach correlate with one another.

- ❖ **Solidarity:** This educational approach emphasizes Jewish mutual support and supporting Israel. These are the largest group representing 59% of the survey respondents.
- ❖ **Complexity:** These are 25% of the respondents, whose educational strategy is to balance support for Israel with enabling critical engagement regarding the Israeli government's policies, embracing the diversity of opinions and need for holding complexity.
- ❖ **Criticism:** These are educators who place a strong emphasis on empathy towards Palestinian suffering and negative critiques of Israeli government policy in general and the way the war is being waged in Gaza. They represent 16% of survey respondents.

Table shows the respondents who are categorized as solidarity, complexity and criticism educators, with a focus on the percentage of each group that selected a given educational goal, learners' emotions and questions.⁵

Type of Question	Solidarity Items	59% are Solidarity Educators	25% are Complexity Educators	16% are Critical Educators
Attribute learners' emotions	Identification with Israel	71%	19%	27%
Attribute learners' questions	How can I best support Israel at this time?	60%	8%	11%
Attribute learners' questions	Why do people hate us?	59%	25%	12%
Educator's goal	To nurture a sense of connection to Israel	42%	4%	6%
Attribute learners' questions	How can I explain to others Israel's moral high ground in executing this war?	29%	5%	5%
Attribute learners' questions	To support advocacy for Israel	20%	0%	2%
	Complexity Items	Solidarity	Complexity	Critical
Attribute learners' emotions	Confusion	56%	80%	68%
Attribute learners' questions	How can I maintain relationships with Jews who think differently than I do about Israel?	23%	57%	52%
Educator's goal	To facilitate respectful conversation and allow for expression of opposing viewpoints	20%	56%	49%
Educator's goal	To encourage complex thinking	22%	50%	42%
Attribute learners' questions	Are Israel's actions in Gaza morally defensible?	17%	46%	49%
Attribute learners' questions	How do I stand for my own people while not closing my heart to the Palestinians?	14%	36%	22%
	Critical Items	Solidarity	Complexity	Critical
Attribute learners' questions	How can we hold Israeli and Palestinians lives as equally valuable?	6%	18%	66%
Attribute learners' emotions	Antipathy towards Israel	4%	10%	62%
Attribute learners' questions	How can I identify with the Jewish people when Israel is inflicting pain on the Palestinians?	2%	8%	53%
Attribute learners' questions	How can I protest Israel's actions in Gaza?	1%	1%	38%
Educator's goal	To convey empathy for Palestinians' suffering	1%	4%	35%
Educator's goal	To support protest of Israeli policy	0%	0%	15%

⁵ Respondents were assigned to one of the 3 educational strategies if they scored positively on at least two of the 6 items grouped in the table below. 10% qualified on none of the educational types. 13% qualified on more than one. If so, they were assigned to one of the types based on the following priority order: Critical, Solidarity, Complexity.