

# TURNING CRISIS INTO OPPORTUNITY: BUILDING ON INCREASED JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

## ADAPTING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Amid the difficulties, there is a silver lining: the crisis triggered by October 7th is sparking increased engagement with Jewish life. The force of current events drives a renewed sense that Israel is a presence in Jewish life that requires our attention. For some, the crisis has ignited a desire to explore their Jewishness, while for others, it has brought a sense of urgency to discussions about Israel and its place in their lives. Many Jews are asking Jewish questions and seeking answers, sometimes for the first time in their lives. Some of the less engaged are showing up at Jewish institutions to connect with Jewish communal life; some are intensifying their engagement.<sup>6</sup>

- ❖ **Seeking Connection:** Many Jewish educators report that learners who were previously disengaged or indifferent to their sense of Jewish belonging are now seeking a deeper connection to their heritage.
- ❖ **Adapting Practice:** Educators are adapting their practices to meet this moment, seeking to enrich their own knowledge and find creative ways to build on the heightened interest in Jewish life. In some cases, they are reexamining how they address Israel, placing greater emphasis on the emotional, intellectual, and practical dimensions of Jewish engagement.

*51% of the educators' report increased participation in their organization's programs and services.*

*40% report people who previously had low levels of participation in organized Jewish life showing up.*

*57% report that because of increased or changed participation since October 7th, they have adapted their professional practice in some manner.*

### Examples of Adapting Practice

Community programming to enable teens to ask questions about Israel

• "My colleagues and I have done our best to offer educational resources and 1:1 support with our teens at this time as they navigate these challenges. This has included emotional support, opportunities to express community solidarity and more. A big role I have played this year is in the public schools attending to issues with teachers and administration as a representative of the Jewish community. We have developed a community program for teens to engage with questions about Israel, be equipped with knowledge to fight misinformation and antisemitism and more."

Recognizing Passion as Caring

• "Holding together a completely diverse group of community members in how they are in relationship with Israel. Leaning in, not shying away. Holding a lot of pastoral conversations when it comes to Israel. Understanding that people are passionate, and it's because they care. Reading as a community 'Can We Talk About Israel?' by Daniel Sokatch."

Expanding the Tent

• "My response is to enlist the help of a wide range of adults on campus to try and build bridges and relationships, which can get more people in a room. Especially university folks and spaces that can see more 'neutral' or safe for different constituencies."

<sup>6</sup> See Dias (2024), Bryfman (2024, September 26), Hersch (2024).

## EDUCATING FOR EXPANDED JEWISH CONSCIOUSNESS

The crisis sparked by October 7<sup>th</sup> is taken by some educators as an opportunity to shift gears, with focus on taking a wider view of Israel, antisemitism, the experience of being a minority, political divisions within the Jewish community and other cardinal challenges of Jewish life. The goal is to use crisis and life's challenges to enable deep and meaningful engagement with being Jewish and Jewish life in this moment. An approach to Jewish education that is about promoting a holistic awareness of oneself as a Jew and a person in relation to the world around us. **How through a Jewish lens can "I can tackle the big issues and challenges of this moment?"** The following are examples.

Antisemitism  
through the lens of  
Jewish history

• "Helping the students put the conflict and the anger at Israel and American Jews in historical context. Students don't have enough background. I teach a lot of history through primary sources. I've gone back to the early Zionist writing of the late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries to show how intense the antisemitism was then without a Jewish state as a refuge."

Grappling with the  
Complex Nature of  
Being a Minority

• "Personally: Not detaching from non-Jewish friends who don't understand the depth of the fear & sorrow, and not detaching from Jewish friends who just want to cultivate a sense of fear and anxiety. I have constantly emphasized Jewish education as the antidote to the potential alienation and fear I've seen. I keep telling parents and teachers that our job is to show the students WHY to be Jewish. Honestly, I just dug deeper into what I would typically do, and along the way I would point out to parents and funders that \*this\* event/course/etc was part of maintaining a joyful Jewish life for the generations to come."

Expanding Moral  
Perspective

• "How to lead my congregation in ways that support individuals and the congregation, while allowing for diverse perspectives and maintaining moral and intellectual integrity. Leading with three principles: 1. We must not surrender our intelligence and ability to analyze complex matters thoughtfully. 2. We must not surrender our moral integrity. We must keep our eyes and hearts open to the human suffering involved. 3. Moments of destruction, such as this offer rare opportunities for learning. We must take every opportunity to learn and broaden our perspectives. I'm running community discussions for this purpose."

Tackling Jewish  
Polarization

• "The divide in the Jewish community - particularly felt with staff and alum. The rise of antisemitism that our alum face in high school and college. Clarifying our values/missions within the school - facilitating discussion with alum - trying to be a listening ear for struggling faculty while staying within professional boundaries. Equipping students to take on antisemitism/anti-Zionism upon graduation by educating them and role playing. Middle School Israel class - meets once a week in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, and once a week for a semester in 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>. Gives students a safe place to process difficult conversations about Israel and gain skills for thinking critically."