

# Israel: Ever More Complicated

Post-October 7, 2023, Israel became a prominent concern for Jewish families, heightening parents' desire for Jewish connection but also surfacing tensions in both Jewish and broader communities. Some participants expressed comfort in solidarity with Jewish neighbors, while others felt alienated by polarized views. Many want their children to appreciate Israel's significance but hope to convey its complexities. Parents struggle to discuss Israel amid the current divisive climate and seek Jewish spaces allowing nuanced conversations. For Jewish organizations, accommodating diverse views on Israel while fostering welcoming environments presents a growing challenge for community cohesion.

Inquiring into parents' perspectives on Israel was not central to the original research design of this study. While it did sometimes emerge spontaneously in our focus groups before October 7, 2023, it was unsurprisingly more prominent in those we conducted afterward. In those early days post-October 7, like Jewish people around the world, our participants were raw and reeling. They found comfort in talking to one another. People with diverse identities spoke of feeling greater connection to their Jewish neighbors—even those who held different political views from them—and a renewed sense of urgency to cultivate their family's Jewish identities.

*We live in a very Orthodox and Israeli community. In the last number of weeks, I have felt very connected to those neighbors and very thankful to have that connection and being able to walk the baby and walk the dog outside. I feel like I don't need to worry about talking about it and saying the wrong thing because of my own personal feelings toward it when I'm speaking with some of my neighbors.*

PoC

*There's more of a motivation, I guess now, especially now with what's going on in Israel. You're taken aback. This is happening to people that are just like me. It could happen here. So, I definitely think that's a motivation to continue expanding my family and keep the Jewish religion alive.*

Interfaith

We included specific questions about Israel and the war in Gaza in the one-on-one interviews conducted in April and May 2024. At that time, we inquired into how this issue affected interviewees' relationships with Jewish and general communities. Within Jewish communities and networks, there were experiences of greater solidarity but also some that involved strain—and sometimes, a bit of both. Either way, the majority of our 40 interviewees indicated that the topic of Israel was influencing their interest or comfort in participating in local Jewish institutions in some way.

*[The PJ Library parent connector group is] a part of keeping that connection with other Jewish families, and I find it really important this past year since October 7. I think it's become even more and more important to have people who feel the same connection about Judaism.*

Interfaith EV

A few people in our sample identified as non-Zionist or anti-Zionist, reporting feeling uncomfortable in mainstream Jewish spaces where uncritical support for Israel was assumed.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> We did not inquire into how people defined or understood Zionism, recognizing that the term has multiple subjective meanings and uses (see, for example, Mira Sucharov, "Do American Jews Really Know What 'Zionist' Means?" 2022).

*What you want to have is space for anti-Zionist Jews to feel comfortable in more traditional Jewish spaces. [This city] is pretty conservative, in my opinion. [It's] a more conservative Jewish home population, I would say people who have been here for many generations. So sometimes some of the political work I want my family to engage in rubs up against some of the more conservative Jewish views, and that can make us feel unwelcome and not wanting to be in a space or not wanting to go to an event. That's been a little bit of a challenge.*

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

Perhaps the most consistent theme post-October 7 was that of parents' experience of tension and strain surrounding Israel as a topic, both in Jewish and other communities. Many conveyed how hard it had become to talk about Israel in the current, divisive political landscape, expressing a desire for Jewish spaces that allowed for questioning and nuance. This was generally more about parents' experiences as community members than specifically related to their parenting. However, we note this phenomenon here because parents' sense of comfort or inclusion in Jewish institutions has a marked influence on which places they seek to enter with their children and the communities to which their children have access.

*After October 7, it just kind of broke me a little bit as a parent, to think what everybody was going through and how hard it was. And then I live in a very confusing area that the only people that seem to be pro-Israel are the same people that are antigay or anti-Black. And everybody who I feel like would normally be aligned with me is just so heavily pro-Palestinian that I feel like I don't fit. [Crying] I'm so sorry. I didn't think I would get this upset talking about it. ... It's hard. We've gotten so reactive and everybody's so scared of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, offending the wrong person, that it's hard to find a way to just talk and relate.*

Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

*So my husband's family is so pro-Israel, and so kind of militantly Zionist, you don't say anything about Israel that's even remotely critical. It's*

*like, well, I don't know how productive that is. I think there's a lot to talk about that's not working and a lot that we might want to challenge. And then on the other hand, we have some Jewish friends who are super liberal and kind of in the process of, I dunno, sometimes it feels a little bit posture-y that, well, Israel is just wrong. Everything about Israel is wrong and you've got to be pro-Palestine or nothing. It's really hard to be in between those groups. I'm not sure how much we would feel like we could be in a Jewish space right now while having really conflicting and complicated feelings about Israel.*

General

Regarding hopes for their children's relationships to Israel, the majority of our interviewees wanted their children to develop some kind of appreciation for or attachment to Israel.

*I think I want them to know that Israel is a special place and it's central and it has a special meaning in the hearts of our people.*

General

*I want to take my child back and I want to let my child know about all these histories, whether it's historical stuff or religious stuff. I want her to be part of this. And in the future, I'm hoping that she can really love her own identity and even Israel as a country or her holy land.*

Interfaith PoC

At the same time, several parents indicated that they eventually wanted their children to understand Israel in all its complexity, echoing the frustration with the dominance of polarized discourse on the subject.

*I want them to understand the history and the connection the Jews have. But I also want them to be sort of critical in the same ways that you teach your kids to be critical of human rights abuses anywhere or of regimes that aren't living up to the goals that we would want countries to live up to, including ours.*

Interfaith PoC

*Mainly I think I just want them to understand that it's not quite as black and white as it often seems on the news, or how people seem to portray it. ... I'm hoping that they'll see the gray in between and that there's mistakes on all sides and that there's not an easy solution and that there's just more to it than meets the eye.*

General

*She doesn't really understand what happened and what's going on. I think for an 8-year-old, they don't really understand what went on. And I think that's a benefit for her to not know all the details. I think it's too much to learn what happened there and everything like that. When she's older, when she's a little bit more mature, she'll be able to listen to it and come to her own understanding and what she feels about it. But, with religion, I won't pressure her to feel one way or the other.*

Interfaith PoC

Some parents expressed uncertainty about how to talk to their young children about Israel. Others wanted their children to form their own opinions, echoing the language of choice used in discussions about religion:

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**A Wider Lens: Israel as a Litmus Test** 🕒 Since October 7, 2023, Israel has become an active element in the mix of considerations that parents weigh when constructing their families' Jewish lives; prior, that was probably the exception rather than the rule. Israel draws them close to some institutions, alienates them from others, and leaves many despairing that they don't fit anywhere. Jewish communities are not immune to the extreme polarization of the current political moment, especially in relation to Israel; that constitutes a challenge both to young families seeking connection and to organizational leaders trying to create welcoming spaces. When parents reflect on what they want their children to know about or how they might relate to Israel, their responses are consistent with how they think about other aspects of their children's socialization and identity development. For many, these issues are loaded with tensions, but then—as we have seen—so many other aspects of their aspirations for their children come with such challenges.

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