

# FINDING 2: DUAL BURDEN

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**American Jewish teens face a dual burden: They contend with the universal challenges of adolescence while grappling with unique pressures that arise from being Jewish.**

In addition to examining factors that contribute to positive well-being among Jewish teens, this study identified sources of stress that undermine well-being.<sup>8</sup> Teens were presented with 21 potential sources of stress, including both well-documented universal teen stressors (like academic pressure, body image concerns, social media use, and peer dynamics) and challenges specific to Jewish adolescents, such as antisemitism and the war in Israel and Gaza.<sup>9</sup> For each item, teens were asked to indicate if it caused them no, some, or a lot of stress.

A factor analysis of teens' responses to each of these stressors revealed five distinct themes: 1) School; 2) The War in Israel and Gaza/Antisemitism; 3) Relationships and Self-Image; 4) Parents; and 5) Gender/Sexuality. (See Appendix C for details about statistical analyses). Stressors related to school encompassed academic and future-oriented concerns, including grades, post-high school prospects, and pressure regarding school-based achievement. Stress about the war in Israel and Gaza/antisemitism included broader current events awareness, the ongoing conflict, antisemitism in general, and being the target of antisemitic comments or threats. Parent-related stress focused on parent-adolescent relationships, including conflicts and parental pressure. The Relationships/Self-Image theme covered a wide range of interpersonal and self-perception issues, including bullying, lack of acceptance, peer pressure, friendships, romantic relationships, body image, and social media. Finally, the Gender/Sexuality theme addressed stress around personal identity issues related to sexuality and gender.

While school-related stress was the biggest issue for

Jewish teens, they also reported nearly as much stress related to recent geopolitical conflicts and increasingly prevalent antisemitism. This finding underscores how American Jewish teens face a dual burden: They must navigate the universal challenges of adolescence while confronting elevated anxieties linked to being Jewish, particularly in the context of recent geopolitical tensions and rising antisemitism.

The prevalence of school-related concerns as a source of stress among Jewish teens is consistent with global trends.<sup>10</sup> Survey respondents described the emotional toll of internal and external pressures to excel academically while balancing extracurricular participation. They also expressed anxiety about their future related to academic transitions and their readiness for adulthood.

Survey findings also revealed a connection between Jewish identity centrality, well-being, and stress among Jewish teens. Jewish teens who reported stronger Jewish identity centrality and greater overall well-being also experienced more stress related to school\* and the ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza.\*\* This suggests that while Jewish identity centrality is positively correlated with overall well-being, it is also predictive of experiencing both more general and Jewish-specific stressors. The interplay between identity, stress, and resilience mirrors patterns observed in other minority adolescent populations, highlighting connections between cultural identities and adolescent experiences.<sup>11</sup>

\* (unstandardized B = .04, SE = .01, p = .002)

\*\* (unstandardized B = .23, SE = .02, p < .001)

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*“Nowadays, schools are much more stressful with much more competition and pressure and a collective poor mental health.”*

— 11th Grader

*“Since I am a straight A student, people think I am smart and that puts pressure on me to get good grades.”*

— 8th Grader

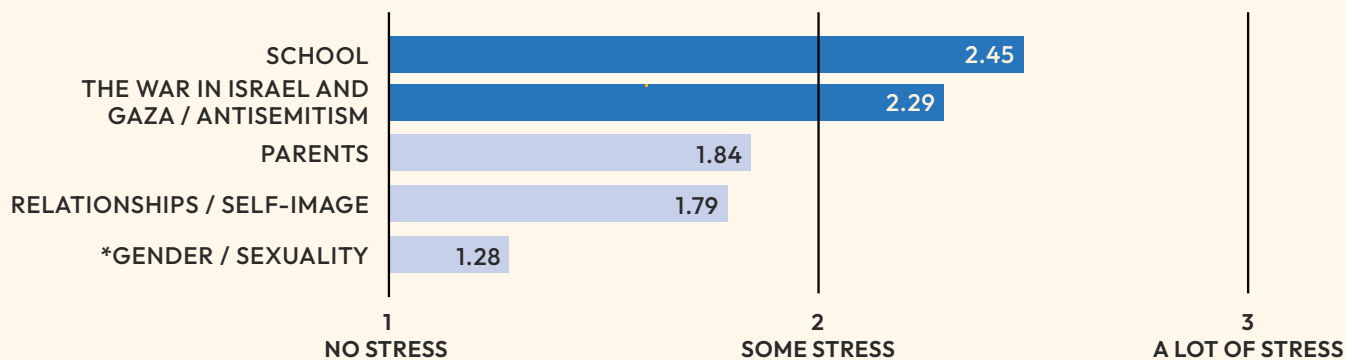
*“People are always telling me to take the best classes, but also to take a bunch of extracurricular activities, and then to remember that high school should just be about having fun. That’s a lot of things to do.”*

— 9th Grader

*“I feel stressed that I’m going to be an adult soon even though I barely feel like I can take care of anything now.”*

— 12th Grader

School-related stress was the biggest issue for Jewish teens followed closely by stress related to the War in Israel and Gaza and antisemitism.



## Stress Related to the War in Israel and Gaza and Antisemitism

Teens who identified the war in Israel and Gaza or antisemitism as a source of stress were asked to elaborate on their experiences. Teens' written accounts of stress related to antisemitism and the war highlight several overlapping issues:

### Concerns about Personal Safety

Many respondents expressed fear for their personal safety, including both immediate physical danger and their ability to express their Jewishness without fear of verbal attacks, social ostracism, or discrimination. Some teens recounted incidents of harassment at school and online because they are Jewish and said they feel unsafe disclosing that they are Jewish. Teens described feelings of constant vigilance and described feeling compelled to hide their Jewishness, both of which contributed to a sense of vulnerability and unease.

*“Walking past students in school who I have seen chant Hamas slogans causes me stress. Trying to explain my feelings about the topic to my non-Jewish friends causes me stress. Trying to understand my feelings about the topic causes me stress. Knowing that it is safer for me to remove my Star of David necklace in public and being cautious of who I share my identity with causes me stress.”*

— 11th Grader

*“I worry about safety as a Jewish person. With a sister in college, I worry for her but also how antisemitism can harm me. I also am worried about the war as I have family in Israel and I worry for them.”*

— 9th Grader

## Social Media and Misinformation

Another concern emphasized the proliferation of misinformation, biased narratives, and antisemitic content on social media platforms. Respondents described feeling overwhelmed by what they perceived as a constant stream of hostile or misleading posts, which they view as oversimplifying complex issues. The pervasiveness of this content undermined teens' sense of safety and belonging in online communities that are often populated by their peers. Some described struggling to refute false narratives or express their own perspectives without facing backlash, both in-person and online.

*“Antisemitic social media posts are constant. It's honestly the only constant thing in my life - to see me being hated on the internet just for being Jewish. When I try to post about the hostages, something I don't even believe is political and is just a social right issue, I am harassed and bullied digitally.”*

— 12th Grader

*“I don't even understand it fully. I just know that people at my synagogue are so pro-Israel while my peers and people on social media are so anti-Israel. All the posts I've seen are violent, angry, and scary. People's strong beliefs and lack of knowledge stress me out.”*

— 11th Grader

## Conflict with Friends and Feelings of Isolation

Respondents also reported feelings of isolation stemming from conflicts with friends, an inability to express themselves freely, and a pervasive sense of alienation from their social circles. Their sense of isolation was exacerbated by fears of judgment, misunderstanding, or being labeled negatively due to their political views or simply for being Jewish. Some teens reported actively concealing their Jewish identity or connection to Israel to avoid conflict or maintain friendships.

*“I have been shunned by my ‘friends’ before they even knew of my political stance just because I am Jewish, and after I had told them that I was pro-Israel, they have pretended like I haven’t existed for the past six months. I’ve been trying to juggle staying friends with the people I love and being myself.”*

— 11th Grader

## Lack of Support

The inability to engage in constructive dialogue has left many teens feeling unsupported in their ability to process current events. Teens described struggling to find spaces where they feel empowered to ask questions and express themselves freely.

*“It is hard for me to understand those who are strongly pro-Israel. It is so important to hold nuance and compassion for all, especially in times of great distress and war. I don’t feel comfortable talking to some of my friends about the conflict, because I worry they will not accept my beliefs and think I am “betraying my Jewish community.”*

— 12th Grader

## College Decisions and Campus Climate

Many survey respondents described experiencing anxiety about choosing a college amid the 2024 campus protests and reports of antisemitism at various institutions. They described concerns about their safety, their ability to openly identify as Jewish, and the potential for social isolation or academic discrimination. Some said they are reconsidering their college choices, weighing the quality of education against campus climates that appeared hostile towards Jewish students. Others feared future repercussions associated with participating in Jewish campus organizations or publicly supporting Israel.

*“I’m going to college next year and currently watching Jewish students being body blocked and harassed for trying to attend their college classes that they pay for. They’re being attacked and told to go die. I’m debating changing my Jewish last name to a neutral name because of this so no one knows I’m Jewish by my name.”*

— 12th Grader