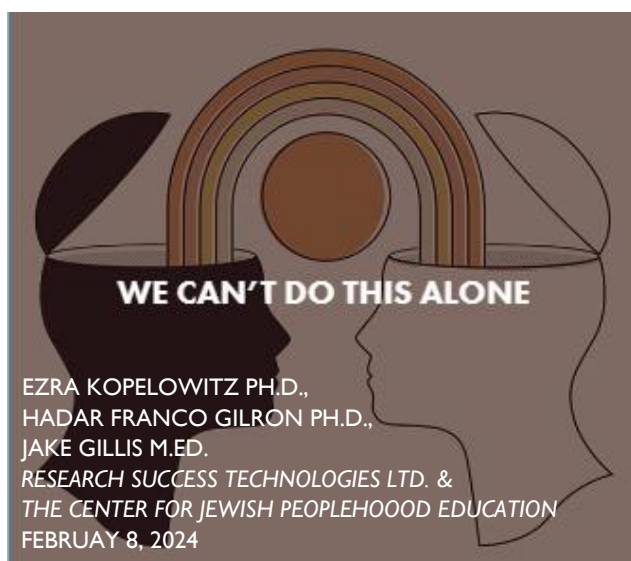




RESPONDING TO THIS HISTORICAL MOMENT

JEWISH EDUCATORS, CLERGY,
ENGAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS,
AND THE WAR IN ISRAEL

*“If I am myself able to process this moment,
then I would be in a better position to help my learners.”*



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INTRODUCTION¹

On October 7, 2023, Hamas invaded Israel from Gaza. The Israel Defense Forces estimates that 1,300 civilians were murdered and 240 were abducted. Hamas’s atrocities included torture, sexual violence, and the destruction of the communities the terrorists reached.² The attack itself, the Israeli response, and the resulting reality for Jews living in and outside of Israel are nothing short of an existential upheaval challenging fundamental assumptions of living as a Jew in this world. The scale is such that almost all of the 1,456 Jewish educators, clergy, and engagement professionals from 24 countries who responded to our survey (see the details below) agreed that the war is a historical moment. The research is co-sponsored by M² (The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education) and the Jewish Education Project, with support from 21 Jewish educational and communal organizations.³

This report delves into the experiences of Jewish professionals confronted by the ongoing Israel–Hamas war and its impact on their personal lives, communities, and students. It reveals a collective state of trauma characterized by isolation, confusion, and a deep-seated need for safety, hope, and understanding amid the upheaval. **A recurring theme in many responses highlights the challenge of formulating an educational response to the current situation.** Many reported simply struggling to talk about the October 7 attack with their learners and constituents. This sentiment was eloquently captured in Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl’s October 13 sermon, which centered on the struggle to find the right words.

“Never before have I felt how important words are for creating realities. And how deafening silence can feel in the face of an atrocity. . . . Ein Milim. There are no words. But in the absence of words, we turn to each other, and to the prayers of our people that have given us language when we cannot find our own.”

Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl, Central Synagogue in New York City. October 13th, 2023. [Link](#)

Acknowledging the shared trauma in the first months following October 7, we looked at the respondents’ answers to the survey questions to suggest educational strategies going forward. Furthermore, we contend that this event underscores a significant need. Jewish professionals need a framework, both for their professional training and in times of need, for engaging in purposeful educational communication about challenging issues that people experience, including collective traumas, like those due to the October 7 attack and its aftermath.



The historic nature of the Israel–Gaza war expressed by the largest-ever gathering of American Jewry. Washington D.C. November 14, 2023.

¹ We thank M² for initiating this research project so soon after the October 7 events and, in particular, Clare Goldwater and Shuki Taylor of M² and Shlomi Ravid of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education for their involvement in pondering the implications of the findings and formative feedback. Early discussions among three focus groups comprising Jewish professionals also inform this report (see the Methodology section). We are also grateful to the 21 organizations that helped distribute the survey.

² Source: Israel Defense Forces: [Link](#). Three months after the date of writing this report, the process of identifying the victims, including those who were murdered and kidnapped, continues.

³ The Academy of Jewish Thought and Learning, the Association of Directors of Communal Agencies for Jewish Education, the Association for Reform Jewish Educators, the ATRA – Center for Rabbinic Innovation, the Australian Council of Jewish Schools, For the Sake of Argument, Hillel International, iTalAm, Jewish Teen Funder Collaborative, the Jewish Education Project, the Lookstein Center, PajeS, the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies, Prizmah, UnitED, and the Zionist Federation of Australia.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report delves into the experiences of Jewish professionals in the wake of the October 7 attack against Israel, highlighting their feelings of isolation and confusion. Faced with events of historical magnitude, there is across-the-board recognition of the need to respond, coupled with uncertainty about the best course of action. During the survey period after the attack, these professionals were seeking clarity, facts, safety, and hope while grappling with fundamental questions about the unfolding events and their implications.

The report underscores the inherent difficulties in facilitating conversations about challenging issues, including but not limited to those related to Israel. These challenges existed prior to October 7 and were on full display in the immediate aftermath. Issues fundamental to living life in contemporary society at this particular moment were raised. For example, in the age of social media as a primary source of information, “what should we believe?” In the jarring experience of feeling oneself as part of a persecuted minority, we ask, “Why do they hate us?” **These experiences and questions lead to a desire to speak and process.**

Some of the survey respondents provided purposeful educational responses to the war, which demonstrate how these large existential issues can integrate into a Jewish professional’s repertoire in a manner that overrides narrow disciplinary or context-specific approaches to Jewish education and community. **The focus is on responding to this moment and seeing one’s membership in the Jewish Peoplehood as an asset for tackling life’s big issues.**

In the past decade, various initiatives have emerged, focusing on enhancing the communication skills of Jewish professionals, particularly around contentious issues. These initiatives represent a shift toward acknowledging the importance of facilitating educational conversations about challenging topics as essential components of a vibrant Jewish community. They aim to foster environments where individuals can engage in meaningful conversations about personal and collective issues, thus strengthening community bonds.

The report draws on the answers to the survey questions to propose a framework for purposeful educational communication to help Jewish professionals navigate the dynamic and changing post–October 7 landscape. This framework emphasizes the importance of identifying one’s professional narrative, including specifying the big questions posed by learners, educational and institutional considerations, and dilemmas to craft an appropriate educational strategy. Ideally, this process occurs through a discussion with colleagues.

Furthermore, the report addresses the gap in the training of Jewish educators, who specialize in specific disciplines but feel ill-equipped to handle charged issues, like the rise of anti-Semitism or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Our recommendation is not to focus on one discipline, such as Israel education, but rather to emphasize the need for Jewish professionals to develop their ability to engage with and communicate about a wide range of challenging issues. These not only span various disciplines but also touch upon critical aspects of Jewish identity and peoplehood. They encompass the need to (1) provide emotional and psychological support for the professionals themselves and their constituents, (2) foster community engagement and dialogue, (3) ensure safety and security in learning environments, and (4) provide curricula development and training in critical content areas.

In conclusion, the post–October 7 context, with its historical significance, shines a spotlight on the importance of addressing substantial questions and dilemmas as an inherent part of Jewish life. This moment presents an opportunity for Jewish education to evolve, integrating topics like Israel and anti-Semitism into a broader educational strategy that reflects the complexities of being Jewish in the current era.

METHODOLOGY

An internet survey was administered from November 13 through December 27, 2023. In total, 1,456 individuals responded to the survey. The respondents received the survey link from the supporting organizations listed in exhibit 1.

The respondents are from all the institutional sectors of Jewish education working with the entire age range of target populations. Tables providing a detailed overview of the survey respondents are found in the appendix to this report.

Three focus groups with 70 Jewish professionals were conducted by way of video conferencing in December 2023. Those discussions served as a forum for formative discussions, which informs this report.

Exhibit 1. Response to the survey by way of supporting organizations and referrals from survey respondents.

	# respondents
Jewish Education Project	452
Referral from a survey respondent or other source	434
M ²	251
UnitedEd	354
Referral from a survey respondent	114
BBYO	72
Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies	55
Hillel International	47
Association of Directors of Communal Agencies	38
The Lookstein Center at Bar Ilan University	24
Atra Center for Rabbinic Innovation	19
Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools	16
For the Sake of Argument	8
Association of Reform Jewish Educators	6
Total	1456

RESPONDING TO THE HISTORICAL MOMENT

Respondents as a whole feel that the Jewish People are in a historical moment, with the large majority agreeing that “I have an important role to play.” They are, however, less sure as to how to help their learners deal with this historical moment. Of the respondents, 35% are confident (“very strongly” or “strongly agreeing”) in their ability to help their learners, while the rest were less than very confident.

	Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree, not disagree	Disagree	Strongly + Very strongly disagree	Total
We are in a critical historical moment for the Jewish People	73%	19%	7%	1%	0%	0%	100%
I have an important role to play in helping my learners grapple with this historical moment	48%	27%	19%	5%	1%	0%	100%
I feel able to help my learners grapple with this historical moment	14%	22%	44%	11%	9%	2%	100%

Exhibit 2. In thinking about the events unfolding since October 7th, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

RESPONSE BY TARGET POPULATION AND INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR

There is little difference between the populations with which the Jewish professionals or institutional sectors work in terms of regarding the war as a historical moment and their role in responding. There are differences concerning the confidence they feel. However, **in no sector is there a majority who feel very confident.**

Most Confident: Professionals working in multiple settings or with college-age students are the most confident, with 46% and 43% strongly or very strongly agreeing, respectively, that they are able to help their learners deal with this historical moment (Exhibit 3), which in terms of institutional sectors are those working on college campuses or who are specialists in Israel education or advocacy (Exhibit 11 in Appendix 2).

Least Confident: Those working with young children or families in Jewish supplementary schools and JCCs are the least confident (Exhibits 3 and 11 in Appendix 2). Respondents working in the area of social justice who tend to work with teens and young adults are the least-confident institutional sector, with 34% not agreeing that they feel able to help their learners (Exhibit 11 in Appendix 2).

Target population with whom respondents work	I feel able to help my learners grapple with this historical moment			Total
	Very strongly agree + strongly agree	Agree	Less than agree	
Other, or more than one of these	46%	42%	13%	100%
College age	43%	41%	16%	100%
Seniors	36%	46%	17%	100%
Teens (middle and high school)	39%	42%	19%	100%
Adults (40+)	37%	44%	19%	100%
Young adult learners (20s and 30s)	38%	43%	20%	100%
Families	37%	42%	21%	100%
Elementary school age	36%	44%	21%	100%
Early childhood	33%	41%	26%	100%

Exhibit 3. A target population's confidence to grapple with this historical moment by target population

RESPONDING TO TRAUMA AND CHAOS

“If I am myself is able to process this moment, then I would be in a better position to help my learners.”

The quote above is from an educator giving voice to the overwhelming nature of the historical moment. A similar voice is heard through almost all the responses to the survey. The nature of the written responses and the answers to the closed survey questions points us to an experience of trauma and the feeling of needing to grapple with chaos. **“How do I respond?”** These Jewish professionals are seeking structure, asking basic questions, such as: **“What is happening?”** **“Why is it happening?”** **“How do we find security and hope?”**

The Jewish professionals selected the dynamics – big issues and questions – that they are grappling with. Almost all selected combinations of “facts,” “safety,” and “hope” in response to “fear,” the need to anchor their educational work in “narrative”-based meaning in order to encounter “despair” (Exhibit 4).

Combinations of safety/fear, facts/narratives, and hope/despair are central to the Jewish professionals’ response to the war and forms a dominant narrative of response. This narrative holds for Jewish professionals working in all sectors of Jewish education and with the entire range of target populations (see Appendix 3, Exhibit 12).

Exhibit 4. The following is a list of dynamics – big issues and questions – that the current situation in the Jewish world (in Israel and beyond) might be evoking for you and your learners. Please select up to five that you are finding most relevant to address in your educational work.

Safety–Fear	72%
Facts–Narratives	70%
Hope–Despair	64%
Solidarity–Fragmentation	53%
Loneliness–Belonging	40%
Power–Fragility	22%
Particular–Universal	18%
Loyalty–Betrayal	17%
Doubt–Conviction	16%
Exposed–Sheltered	14%
Privilege–Burden	13%
Other	7%
Total	100% (of respondents)

SAFETY–FEAR

Of the respondents, 72% selected “Safety–Fear” as a dynamic evoking big issues and questions for them and their learners. The respondents reported feeling more fearful, deeply anxious, and less secure personally. In reaction to the October 7 events and rising anti-Semitism, they are working to restore their shaken sense of security. They are tackling fears and trauma. The respondents describe primary needs for physical and emotional safety; within that framing, they pose broader, existential questions, wondering how to respond.



Safety as a Primary Need

- A Primary Need** { • “I find that individuals are, first and foremost, concerned about safety in the broadest sense – personal, familial and community.”
- Physical Safety** { • “We do not normally have a security guard, though on Shabbat mornings there is one present. As I spoke with parents shortly after Oct. 7, it became clear that many felt fearful of coming to shul... We have had a security guard and just this past Shabbat when reflecting on gratitude, a child shared they were grateful for the security guard. I feel overwhelmed and at times under-equipped to process feelings of Jewish safety and fear, and this unprecedented time is so charged.”
- Emotional Safety** { • “The parents of my students. They are concerned for their kids' safety, they struggle with their universal concern for life and the particular threat against Jews and they wonder how much to expose their kids to.”

Existential Questions and How to Respond

People are scared not only because of the rise in anti-Semitism but also because of several underlying fears concerning the events' implications for their lives. They are worried about the increasing sense of living in a hostile environment. They fear what might happen to Jews and question why this is occurring in the first place. They also wonder why there is such hatred toward them. These thoughts and feelings lead to despair. On one hand, there is a desire to react to this fear and, on the other, there is a sense of existential loneliness, which is a new experience for many.

- How to express oneself as a Jew in this dangerous moment?** { • “Am I safe? Can I wear Jewishly identifying symbols? Can I respond to that awful thing my 'friend' said on social media? What does it mean/say about me if I don't, out of fear? Am I a coward? What would I stand up for? Would I do it 'right?' I know what my parents/teachers think... what do I really want/need? What does it really mean to be a Jew? Is there more comfort/meaning in Judaism than what I've known until now?”
- How to respond to fear?** { • “I don't have the training to help those in crisis or experiencing bullying or anti-Semitism.”
- Why do they hate us?** { • “The feeling that we are living through what our grandparents lived through in Europe is hard to bear; the hate is impossible to understand, and we try to find means of escape from the realities around us.”
• “Many of my (adult) learners are feeling that this is Germany all over again. They feel betrayed by their fellow liberal Americans by whom they stood in every movement and who are now abandoning them.”

FACTS–NARRATIVES

Of the respondents, 70% selected “Facts–Narratives” as a dynamic evoking big issues and questions for them and their learners. The respondents wrote about a deep need to understand the history, context, and events having to do with the war so that they can make sense of what is happening and offer an educational response. The need to do so stems from feelings of confusion and insecurity, which underlie emotional difficulties many express as they struggle with their educational response. There are three major variants: (1) I don’t know enough. (2) I don’t know what to believe. (3) I’m still grappling with diverse narratives.



I Don’t Know Enough

The feeling of not knowing enough makes it difficult to cope with an intense emotional and personal experience while also feeling the need to offer an educational response. Respondents speak of the need for knowledge, better understanding, and access to age-appropriate resources.

- Knowledge { *• “I don’t feel as though I have enough knowledge of the history of Israel to be confident enough to tackle this on my own. I wouldn’t want to give incorrect info.”*
- Understanding { *• “I need to understand how to deal with this moment before I can work with students. I am not fluent in the conflict, and I feel unprepared to talk about it.”*
- Resources { *• “I feel like I need resources on how to reconcile the Israeli and Palestinian narratives for my learners and for me.”*
• “More information and resources appropriate for all ages are needed.”

I Don’t Know What to Believe

Respondents are grappling with the diverse narratives about the war, each emphasizing different facts, alongside the feeling of being inundated by “fake news” coming through social media from which students receive much of their information.

- Perception of Bias { *• “More ACTUALLY unbiased historical context.”*
- Fear of Ignorance { *• “Lack of understanding by many as to the history and the current status of Hamas’s power. Need to clarify, mostly with adults, what the language being used against Israel actually means and why it is hateful and damaging.”*
- Too Much Information { *• “My high school kids feel very isolated – surrounded by people who don’t even think about it, never mind understand what this means for them. The younger kids receive a swirl of information they don’t understand or misinformation they are being bombarded with.”*

Grappling with Diverse Narratives

Diverse understandings of the war within the Jewish community are, for some, a source of anxiety. How should one best navigate different approaches to future relationships with the Palestinians or the suffering occurring as the result of Israel's response?

Navigating Diverse Perspectives

• “There is a deep division amongst people in the community, and we have to choose our words extremely carefully. People who use the word 'peace' are being made to feel like it is a bad word by some. It is a terribly lonely and confusing time.”

Opening Up Space for Discussion

• “I suspect there are differences of opinion within the congregation in which I serve as education director. I don't feel we really give 'air time' to perspectives that differ from the congregation's official stance on Israel. We pay lip service to casualties and suffering on both sides of the conflict but treat any real probing or admission of differences of opinion as acts of heresy.”

HOPE-DESPAIR

Of the responses, 64% reflect a process of searching for hope and optimism, with an emphasis on strengthening solidarity and connection to the Jewish community. Despair, fear, and frustration arise from not knowing enough, discerning facts, or deciding what to believe. There's also a heightened fear for the safety of individuals and the Jewish community due to the conflict in Israel and rising anti-Semitism, leaving educators feeling overwhelmed in their attempt to provide solace and optimism.



Seeking Hope in the Face of Fear

- “People are trying to feel hopeful but feel despair; people are trying to find out ‘what are facts and what are not?’, and our students and families fear for their safety and the safety of others.”
- “Hope/despair is certainly the strongest dynamic. As a rabbi, I want to meet people in their despair but also provide them with hope. Safety/fear is prevalent with respect to what we do at the synagogue and how that is communicated. It is also, to a lesser degree, prevalent in how my congregants are feeling beyond the synagogue's four walls.”
- “The focus changes as weeks go by. The first few weeks were characterized by frightened students and faculty and a sense of despair. We combatted these with many structures and initiatives geared toward increasing hope and solidarity.”

PURPOSEFUL EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES

NEED TO COMMUNICATE

Education at heart requires communication, which requires an educator to communicate about the war through conversations, discussions, lectures, or educational events.

Among other possibilities, many of the survey respondents wrote of the need to process in order to make sense of what they wish to communicate. For others, the goal is to bring their learners to grapple with a moral challenge. Yet, for others, the goal is to communicate for the purpose of advocacy.

DIFFICULTY COMMUNICATING

Many of the written responses evoke the difficulty in communicating about the war, in general, and about Israel and anti-Semitism, in particular.

The difficulties include feelings of inadequacy – “I am not prepared.” Others cite emotional blocks, the fear of breaking down in front of their students. Institutional concerns are cited by many. There is also broader cultural reticence to engage in difficult moral and/or fraught emotional conversations.

For Processing

• “We have teens grappling with the war at home A LOT and so Midrasha is where they just want TO BE. We have other teens who aren't getting to talk about the war or anti-Semitism at all and so they NEED us to talk about it.”

For Grappling

• “Deep questions about the moral difference between Israeli and Palestinian lives. Loneliness of left-leaning Jews who feel betrayed by their non-Jewish allies. Certainty that we must never talk, and the secret need to talk.”

For Advocating

• “I think succinct, straightforward messaging that I'm able to take and then deliver without emotion or commentary is most important. Talking points and maybe even ideas. I have a lot of information, my own opinions, and organizational messaging but a lot of that is unhelpful when talking to someone with strong opinions.”

Not Prepared

• “I think the most difficult thing is that students expect me to have answers. But I feel as lost as they do.”

Emotional Blocks

• “Being able to articulate what is going on in my heart and my head. Being able to talk about these events without crumbling.”

Institutional Concerns

• “My personal views differ from those of my supervisors, so I think it would be inappropriate to speak on something that I cannot discuss with conviction. Also, many of our students are young, and the families (rightfully) have concerns about how such topics are introduced, or even if they should be discussed at all. Finally, I work primarily in supplementary education, and we simply do not have the time to give this topic the attention it deserves.”

Cultural Blocks

• “I think the main struggle centers around support for Israel. American Jewish adults vary in opinions and their level of understanding the reality in Israel/Gaza. It is hard to find ways to teach children from a liberal community because as an educator you are afraid to teach something that conflicts with their parents' understanding or with our own colleagues' opinions. Lastly, American Jews avoid talking about things that will scare the children so we are walking on egg shells in that area as well.”

PURPOSEFUL EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Based on the survey responses, we highlight the characteristics of Jewish professionals' well-thought-out educational strategies regarding the war.

Purposeful educational communication involves crafting a narrative that allows people to make sense of a complex situation by presenting information in a clear, concise, and relatable manner. A narrative can include questions, values, and themes that resonate with both educator and student, fostering a shared understanding and promoting engagement through relevant connections to their lives and experiences.

The following is an example of a purposeful educational narrative from a Day School educator's response to the war.

How are these dynamics or issues showing up in your educational work?

“Concerning the Matzav, I’m noticing a lot of binary thinking amongst my students, as well as emotionally motivated reasoning which means my students jump to conclusions without evidence. I’m noticing them creating narratives and stories in their minds that may not be reflective of the facts and can lead to black and white thinking not only about themselves but also about the world. I’m finding them skipping the step of doubt/wonder and jumping to conviction. I’ve been pushing them to hold onto more of a posture of ‘I don’t know.’ Additionally, the more emotional concepts, given my teaching Chassidic thought, feel very resonant to my thinking, especially that of loneliness versus belonging as a framework for understanding how people are coming to their political convictions as well as in our own sense of moral loneliness and searching for moral belonging in the world.”

The educator's worries are articulated through a tapestry of value-driven dynamics, where the overarching emphasis on facts versus narratives and safety versus fear merge into a broader educational theme. This theme advocates for embracing “doubt/wonder” as a tool to navigate the complexities of moral loneliness and the quest for belonging.

Compare the above quote to another day school educator's response that is representative of most of the written responses to the survey.

How are these dynamics or issues showing up in your educational work?

“As a Jewish Day School, we have many stakeholders with different challenges. Our parents are worried about safety, our Israeli parents are concerned not everyone cares or is as invested as they are, our teachers range from uninformed to inundated with news, and our students have been appropriately informed but remain concerned yet refreshingly supportive and patriotic.”

This educator's answer is a natural response to crisis, which is to focus on the challenges. There is, however, a need to chart a course forward – one that not only raises issues but also uses a value-driven approach to address them.

Respondents offering purposeful educational responses are crafting narratives to make sense of the chaos and trauma resulting from the Israel– Hamas conflict, emphasizing factual accuracy, safety, and hope. Amid this dominant narrative, the following are examples of compelling educational themes. They weave their values into their responses to the war and dilemmas, enriching their narratives with poignant questions and concerns that resonate with both them and their students. Some focus on reinforcing solidarity, some aim to tackle feelings of isolation, while others engage with issues at the intersection of critical discourse, navigating between the particular and the universal and balancing doubt with conviction.

DIVERSE, PURPOSEFUL EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE WAR

Integrating Jewish Studies and Current Events: Use of religious teachings and prayers to connect students to current events.

○ *“In Bible studies, I spoke about the Rambam’s statement that redeeming the hostages is the most important Mitzvah. In Ivrit studies, I show videos of solidarity, pictures conveying hope and strengths, we wrote letters to soldiers and displaced children, and we learned a song about belonging to the same nation and our Jewish identity. In Mechanechet class, we prayed the Tfila Lishlom Chayaley ZAHAL and Medinat Israel, as well as Tfila Lishlom Hashvuyim. We also discuss current events.”*

Incorporating Current Events into Prayer: Using positive stories and updates on the conflict to guide students in their prayers, aiming to foster a sense of unity and purpose.

○ *“Our students are writing their end-of-year exams (southern hemisphere) so our only touch-point is Tefillah, but we have adjusted Tefillah to focus on the situation. We do this by starting with an upbeat story of unity and brotherhood during the current crisis. Before the Amidah, we have a brief update on the situation and guide the students where our prayers are most needed.”*

Addressing Anti-Semitism and Complexity of Conflict: Holocaust teacher addresses complexities of anti-Semitism and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

○ *“I teach a high school Holocaust course. Part of the curriculum addresses anti-Semitism, historic and contemporary. Most of my students have no direct connection to Israel or Palestinian people. However, I feel that it is necessary for me to address these current topics and the complexity of this ongoing conflict in order to prevent students from justifying terrorism because they are sympathetic to the Palestinian plight.”*

Personal and Global Narratives: Sharing personal experiences, balancing personal and global perspectives with a focus on creative engagement and a thoughtful discourse.

○ *“Sharing personal experiences with the community, taking a stand, trying to balance the personal and global narrative. Finding creative ways to engage the community. Working with what my learners bring in and thinking carefully of what is being shared. Using the correct terminology.”*

Student-Centered Responsibility: Addressing students’ concerns about their role and responsibilities in the conflict.

○ *“The dynamics and issues are prominently manifesting within my educational work, primarily stemming from the concerns raised by my students. These concerns revolve around identifying their role in the given context and attributing responsibility. To address this, I am committed to incorporating additional information into nearly every class session.”*

Historical Context and Religious Perspective: Providing historical context and viewing the war through a Jewish lens.

○ *“One of the classes I teach is for seniors at an all-girls high school. They were born after the Gaza Disengagement in 2005. They lack a lot of historical context. Although I teach Judaic Studies, I have spent a considerable amount of time on providing historical background on this conflict in addition to discussing Emunah and Bitachon.”*

Action and Reflection: Navigating between involving students in active responses and creating space for reflection.

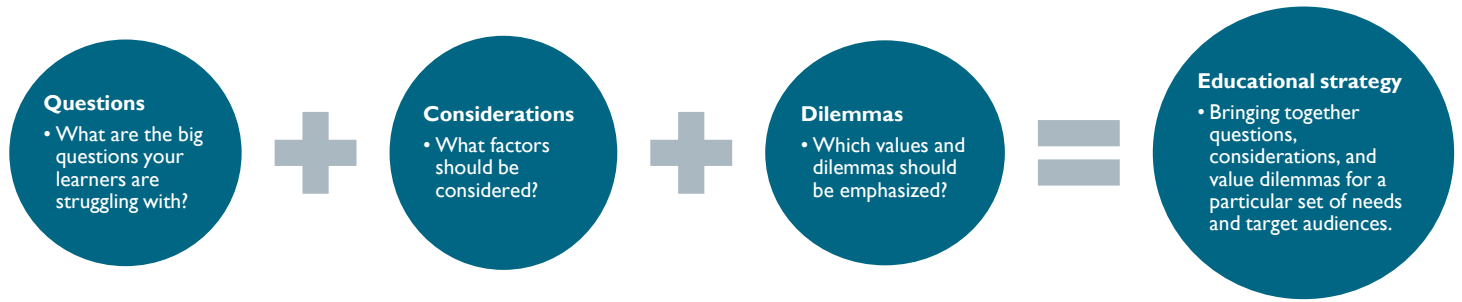
○ *“In the midst of turmoil, I go back and forth between the need to inform my students about what is going on in Israel and the Jewish world. We both want to be active in doing – volunteering, helping in whatever way they can but also create a space for just being and finding our center in the chaos. I find that what we need most sometimes is returning to some sort of regular study and routine.”*

Action and Solidarity: Learning about current events, understanding anti-Semitism, and responding through action with a focus on community support, strength, and solidarity.

○ *“We have pivoted from our regular curriculum and are spending class time learning the facts – what happened this week, anti-Semitism, Jew hatred, learning the Jewish response – to encourage others by making videos to send to Israeli soldiers, making a display in our synagogue for the hostages, learning about the volunteer activities happening in Israel and here in the US, hearing from people who attended the solidarity rally for Israel in DC. Prayer for the captives, which, sadly, we have from past experience: acheinu kol Beit Yisrael. Learning about the strength and support we give and receive as a community, phrases like am Yisrael chai, yachad n'natzach, Kol Yisrael arreivim zeh la'zeh, chazak chazak v'nitchzake.”*

CRAFTING EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY

The written responses to the survey provide a rich basis for crafting educational strategy. The respondents’ voices illustrate different possibilities for communicating about the war in a manner appropriate for each person’s concerns and the context in which they work. Identifying a personal professional narrative is challenging but crucial. To help craft responses to the war, we propose a four-step process: (1) questions, (2) considerations, (3) dilemmas, and (4) educational strategy – the result of discussions with others.



Questions: *What are the big questions your learners are struggling with?*

Major groupings of questions provided by the respondents to the survey question: **What is (are) the big question(s) that your learners are struggling with right now?**

Personal Safety	Israeli–Palestinian Conflict	Anti-Semitism / Anti-Israel	Identity & the Jewish Good
Where am I and my children safe?	How can we best support Israel at this time?	Why do people hate Israel?	What is my role as a Jew?
Who can I talk to?	What are the acceptable positions on the conflict for Jewish professionals?	How to deal with anti-Semitism?	Should I be publicly Jewish?
Am I safe on campus?	Why is Israel at fault?	Why do so many people hate us?	How do I stand for my own people while not closing my heart to the Palestinians?
How do we define “safety” these days?	How can we hold both Israeli lives and Palestinian lives as equally valuable?	How to deal with friends who make anti-Israel statements?	What can I do to be helpful?

Educational Considerations: *What factors should be considered?*

Major considerations provided by the respondents in response to the question: **How are these dynamics or issues showing up in your educational work?** (referring to the previous question from which they selected dynamics relevant for them and their learners)

Security and Openness:

Balancing the need for safety and heightened security measures in response to threats, with the desire to maintain an open, welcoming community environment. This includes the impact of security on the community's sense of normalcy and the emotional well-being of members, especially children.

Unity and Ideological Diversity:

Managing the challenge of diverse political and ideological beliefs within the community, especially regarding Zionism and the Israel–Palestine conflict, while striving to maintain community unity and solidarity.

Educational Integrity and Sensitivity:

Navigating the tension between providing comprehensive, fact-based education on politically and historically sensitive topics, and the need to maintain a neutral, inclusive stance that respects diverse perspectives.

Personal Beliefs and Professional Responsibilities:

The internal conflict faced by educators and leaders in aligning their personal convictions with their professional responsibilities to their community, especially in the context of controversial or divisive issues.

Value-Informed Dilemmas: *Which values and dilemmas should be emphasized?*

Respondents could add their own dynamics to the list presented in the survey (see pg. 4 above). Ninety-six chose to do so. The following are the four major response categories.

Emotional and Interpersonal Dynamics:

Emotional states: Anger, Sadness, Pride, Shame, Grief, Joy, Trust, Anxiety, Rage, Heartbreak

Interpersonal: Empathy, Compassion, Hate, Kindness, Disagreement, Unity

Jewish Cultural Identity and Values:

Evoking identity: Anti-Semitism, Jewish Pride, History of anti-Semitism, Connection with other Jewish people, Zionist Identity, Pride & Shame in Jewish Context

Ethics: Justice, Morality, Ethical vs. Immoral, Good vs. Evil, Rights vs. Obligations, Local vs. Global

Education, Religion, and Sociopolitical Issues:

Educational contexts: Learning to Counter Anti-Semitism, Encouraging Critical Inquiry

Religion: Faith, Prayer, Religious vs. Nonreligious, Emuna [belief], Tefillah [prayer]

Politics – Israel and beyond: Caring about Israel, Israel-Diaspora Relations, Palestinian rights vs. Hamas, Zionism, Security vs. Freedom, Progressive vs. Conservative

Conflict, Communication, and Knowledge:

Perspectives on conflict: Conflict-Communication, Victim vs. Oppressor, Nuance in Discourse, Disagreement within Families

Knowledge and understanding: Knowledge vs. Ignorance, Complexity vs. Simplicity, Truth vs. Falsehood, Historical vs. Contemporary Narratives

Educational Strategies: Bringing together questions, considerations, and value dilemmas for a particular set of needs and target audiences

Four major categories of response to the question: If you would like to elaborate on the educational support you need, please do so in the space below.

Emotional and Psychological Support:

Addressing educators' personal emotional responses and well-being.

Strategies for processing complex emotions related to sensitive topics like conflict and anti-Semitism.

Guidance on discussing war-related topics with different age groups, including young children.

Community Engagement and Dialogue:

Managing diverse opinions in classroom and community discussions.

Balancing personal convictions with professional responsibilities.

Encouraging critical thinking and informed discussions among students, particularly regarding media and news content.

Safety and Security in Learning Environments:

Addressing safety concerns in educational settings amid complex socio-political scenarios.

Providing resources for mental health support and counseling.

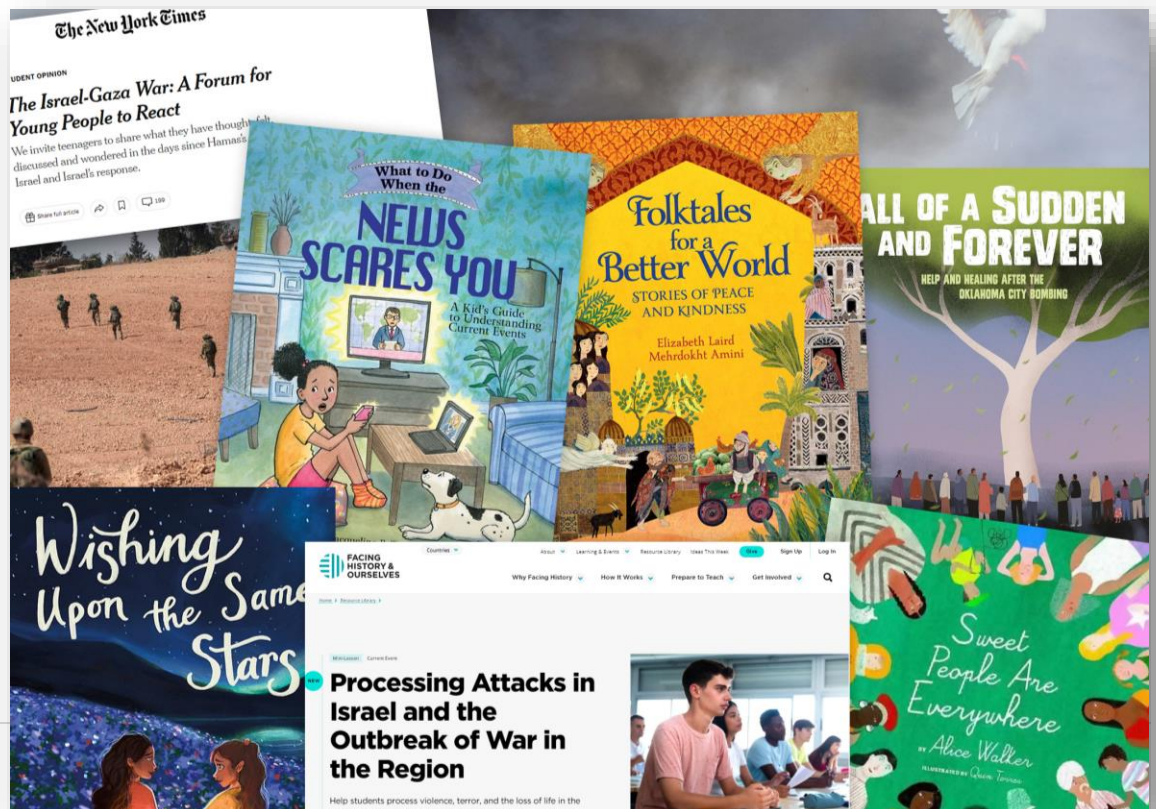
Creating inclusive and safe spaces for education and dialogue.

Content Focus and Curricula:

Creation of focused educational courses on current events, historical contexts, and cultural issues.

Development of nuanced, age-appropriate curricula that encompass diverse perspectives and historical accuracy.

Enhancing teacher knowledge and skills in areas like modern history and geopolitical issues.



Source: School Library Journal

[Link](#)

BEYOND THE CRISIS – IMPLICATIONS FOR JEWISH EDUCATION

RESPONDING TO TRAUMA AND CHAOS

This report shows that most Jewish professionals were expressing feelings of isolation and/or confusion regarding their response to the historical events in the months following the Israel– Hamas war. Although nearly all recognize the need to react, there’s a common uncertainty about the best course of action. In the period following the October 7 attack, these professionals were in search of clarity—looking for facts, safety, and hope. They desired straightforward answers to essential questions, like “What is happening?” and “Why is it happening?”

DIFFICULTY IN RESPONDING

In ordinary times, conversations about challenging issues, in general, are difficult,⁴ particularly when Jews need to speak to one another about charged issues involving Israel.⁵ In this snapshot of time, the difficulty that Jewish professionals experience in facilitating educational conversations about challenging issues is evident in these survey results. Other post-October studies also confirm the traumatic emotional intensity of the event and the difficulty in responding among educators.⁶

The need for training and support for Jewish professionals to tackle challenging issues is only just gaining traction in the Jewish community. A pioneer in this effort is an organization named *Resetting the Table* founded in 2014 with the goal of promoting communication about contentious issues in the Jewish community. One outcome is a collaboration with *Hillel* to train campus professionals on “conversations across difference,” with a focus on Israel.⁷ In the past decade, organizations such as *GatherDC*, *Tribe 12*, and *The Base Movement* were founded to promote the Jewish community in which a core building block is conversations in which participants can speak with others about issues of importance to them. Two years ago, *M2: The Institute for Experiential Education* launched its *Values in Action* initiative to “equip Jewish educators [with the skills] to support their learners in navigating the complex challenges of our time and inspiring them to take positive action.” **The common denominator of these recent developments is the realization that a robust, meaningful experience of the Jewish community is one that includes speaking about challenging personal and collective issues.**

“WE ARE NOT ALONE” – A FRAMEWORK FOR PURPOSEFUL EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATION

This report offers a framework for thinking about purposeful educational communication about the challenging issues arising for Jewish professionals after the October 7 attack. At heart is the need to identify a personal professional narrative, which is challenging but crucial. For many, such a process requires support and engaging one’s colleagues in discussion. We used the respondents’ written answers to propose a framework for enabling collegial discussions for the purpose of crafting educational strategies to respond to difficult social issues. **The need is for planful discussions so that Jewish professionals will have each other’s support and input in times such as these.** These include focusing on the big questions that one’s learners or constituents are concerned with, educational considerations and value-informed dilemmas.

The need for developing purposeful educational strategies is evidenced in the diverse areas of Jewish life addressed by the survey respondents. These touch on providing emotional and psychological support for the professionals themselves and their constituents, enabling community engagement and dialogue, providing a sense of safety and security in learning

⁴ Daniel A. Cox, Ryan Streeter, Samuel J. Abrams, Jacqueline Clemence. 2020. “Socially Distant: How Our Divided Social Networks Explain Our Politics.” Survey Center on American Life. [Link](#) Pew Research Center. 2014. “Political Polarization in the American Public.” [Link](#)

⁵ Steven M. Cohen and Rabbi Jason Gitlin. 2013. “Reluctant or Repressed? Aversion to Expressing Views on Israel Among American Rabbis.” Report commissioned by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. [Link](#)

⁶ See: David-Manchester. “2023 JFNA Israel Hamas War Sentiment Survey: Findings from a Poll of Americans – General Public and Jewish.” Jewish Federations of North America & the Berman Jewish Data Bank; Ziva Hassenfeld. “‘Something Has Broken’: Teachers in Israel Are Straining to Provide Stability and Support for Their Students.” Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education.

⁷ See: Sara Weissman. June 2, 2022. “Conversations Across Difference,” *Inside Higher Ed*. [Link](#)

environments, and providing training and curricula support in needed content areas having to do with issues, such as anti-Semitism and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

A FOCUS ON THE MEANING OF JEWISH LIFE

Many of the respondents to this survey are educators who focus on specific disciplines (Jewish studies, history, philosophy, etc.) or areas (early childhood, youth groups, campus life, etc.) and do not feel they have the training to grapple with charged issues, such as the rise of anti-Semitism or the Israel/Palestinian conflict.

Many commented on the need for better Israel education. For example, one respondent wrote: “Teachers need to be better trained in Israel education. Too many are not fluent with modern Israeli history and current events.” The learning from this survey points in a different direction. Drawing inspiration from Mordechai Kaplan (see the quote on the right), the need is not for Jewish professionals to embrace yet another discipline such as Israel education. Rather, **there is a need to recognize that a core competency of a Jewish professional should be the ability to facilitate educational conversations about challenging issues that their learners and constituents are experiencing.** Each brings knowledge and/or skills associated with their disciplinary or area specialization and, in so doing, empower their people to think from a place of Jewish learning and perspective about issues that are important to them.

“Practical projects, like the construction of synagogues, collecting funds for Palestine, or for the Jews who are victims of wars and persecution, organizing federations, fraternal orders and social clubs, are undoubtedly an indispensable part of living as a Jew. But, if those efforts are carried on without the least notion of their relation to the meaning of Jewish life in its totality and the direction which it should be made to take, before long they are bound to slacken, and ultimately to languish completely for lack of interest. The initial energy is bound to be spent before it has the chance to activate any latent source of energy that can be relied upon to be permanent.”

Mordechai Kaplan. 2010 (1934). *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. The Jewish Publication Society. pg. 85

In this survey, issues fundamental to living in contemporary society are raised. For example, in the age of social media as a primary source of information, “what should we believe?” Amid the jarring experience of feeling oneself as part of a persecuted minority, “why do they hate us?” **These experiences and questions lead to a desire to speak and process.** As we showed in the examples of purposeful responses (see pg. 10), these large existential issues can integrate into a Jewish professional’s repertoire in a manner that overrides narrow disciplinary or context-specific approaches to Jewish education and community. **The focus is peoplehood education, responding to this moment and seeing one’s membership in the Jewish People as an asset for tackling life’s big issues.**

Due to historical dimensions, the post–October 7 reality is a moment that demands paying attention to big questions and challenging dilemmas. This moment can serve as an inspiration for Jewish education going forward. In this vision, Israel is not a siloed topic or an educational discipline but is rather integrated into the life of each individual’s lived Jewish experience. In this report, we tackle the integration of big issues related to Jewish life through an initial attempt to move from a reactive response to the Israel–Hamas war through a narrow narrative that focuses on the desire for security, facts, and hope into a more purposeful Jewish educational response. In that response, Israel and anti-Semitism are but threads in a broader educational strategy for being Jewish at this moment in time.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I – CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Age Group	%
Early childhood	25%
Elementary school age	50%
Teens (middle and high school)	63%
College age	22%
Young adults (20s and 30s)	25%
Adults (40+)	32%
Families	34%
Seniors	15%
Other or more than one of these (please describe)	6%
Total	100%

Exhibit 5. With which population do you work? Please check all that apply.

Institutional Sector	%
Jewish day school and/or yeshiva	33%
Jewish supplementary school (e.g., Hebrew school, Sunday school, afterschool program)	31%
Synagogue / congregation / minyan / religious organization	26%
Jewish youth group / movement	15%
Engagement	15%
Jewish preschool or early childhood care	13%
Jewish Federation / foundation	10%
College Jewish organization (e.g., Hillel, Chabad on Campus)	9%
Jewish summer camp	8%
Israel education / advocacy organization	8%
Something else	7%
JCC	7%
Self-employed / independent contractor / “gig” worker	7%
Innovation	6%
Social justice / service learning	6%
Total	100%

Exhibit 6. Which of these best describe the sector of the Jewish community in which you work? Select all that apply.

Religious Affiliation	%
Chabad + Ultra-Orthodox	5%
Modern Orthodox	15%
Conservative	24%
Reform	24%
Reconstructionist + Renewal + Secular Humanist	6%
“Just Jewish” + nondenominational	17%
Not Jewish	1%
Other	9%
Total	100%

Exhibit 7. With which Jewish stream/denomination do you identify?

Age	%	n
Under 30 years	11%	114
30 to 39	22%	242
40 or 49	27%	290
50 or 59	24%	254
60 or older	17%	179
NET	100%	1079

Exhibit 8. How old are you?

Gender	%
Woman	72%
Man	25%
Other	0%
Nonbinary	1%
Gender fluid	0%
Gender queer	0%
Prefer not to say	1%
NET	100%

Exhibit 9. Which of these best describes you?

Country	%
Australia	5%
Canada	12%
Great Britain	3%
Israel	4%
South Africa	1%
United States	70%
Other*	4%
NET	100%

Exhibit 10. In which country do you live?

*Other includes Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, Netherlands, Paraguay, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Trinidad, and Ukraine.

APPENDIX 2 – CONFIDENCE TO HELP LEARNERS GRAPPLE WITH THIS HISTORICAL MOMENT BY INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR

Institutional Sector	I feel able to help my learners grapple with this historical moment			Total
	Very strongly agree + strongly agree	Agree	Less than agree	
College campus Jewish organization (e.g., Hillel, Chabad on Campus)	46%	42%	11%	100%
Israel education / advocacy organization	47%	41%	12%	100%
Jewish day school and/or yeshiva	44%	42%	15%	100%
Jewish youth group / movement	43%	41%	16%	100%
Synagogue / congregation / minyan / religious organization	36%	47%	17%	100%
Jewish summer camp	31%	50%	19%	100%
Jewish Federation / Foundation	37%	43%	20%	100%
Jewish preschool or early childhood care	40%	40%	20%	100%
Jewish supplementary school (e.g., Hebrew school, Sunday school, afterschool program)	33%	45%	22%	100%
JCC	29%	47%	24%	100%
Social justice / service learning	34%	33%	34%	100%

Exhibit 11. Confidence to grapple by institutional sector.

APPENDIX 3 – EDUCATIONAL DYNAMICS BY INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR OF JEWISH EDUCATION

Column %	Other, or more than one of these	College age	Seniors	Teens (middle and high school)	Adults (40+)	Young adult learners (20's and 30's)	Families	Elementary school age	Early childhood
Safety–Fear	71	71	72	75	74	72	79	77	77
Facts–Narratives	71	76	71	79	72	70	76	74	67
Hope–Despair	70	63	69	65	69	66	69	65	66
Solidarity–Fragmentation	55	53	61	56	58	54	59	57	56
Loneliness–Belonging	40	45	47	41	48	50	45	41	47
Power–Fragility	29	29	28	21	25	26	26	22	24
Particular–Universal	21	28	25	19	25	26	20	17	13
Loyalty–Betrayal	15	20	22	18	22	19	19	16	18
Doubt–Conviction	18	21	21	16	17	18	15	14	13
Exposed–Sheltered	11	12	13	16	12	16	16	16	16
Privilege–Burden	11	16	12	13	10	12	12	13	13
Other	12	8	10	7	10	8	8	7	6

Exhibit 12. The following is a list of dynamics - big issues and questions - that the current situation in the Jewish world (in Israel and beyond) might be evoking for you and your learners. Please select up to five that you are finding most relevant for you to address in your educational work.