

Prepared for: **The Jewish Education Project**

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# Jewish Educators Returning from Israel

## Reconceiving Israel Education in the Midst of Seismic Events

December 2024

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## Background

Between February and June 2024, the Jim Joseph Foundation supported a partnership between the Jewish Education Project and the iCenter, aided by M<sup>2</sup> and the Jewish Agency for Israel, to bring 324 educators on short trips to Israel as part of 13 different groups. These trips were launched with the goal of helping educators and educational leaders connect with Israelis, see for themselves the ways in which Israel has changed since October 7, 2023, and engage in joint reflection on what these changes mean for their work and for their responsibilities as Jewish educators.

In July 2024, the Rosov Consulting team completed an interim report (*Jewish Educators Coming to Israel*) about the participants goals for taking part, what they experienced in Israel, what they gained from these programs, and how ready they felt to draw on their learning in their roles as educators and educational leaders.

Between August and October 2024, the research team returned to the participants in order to explore longer-term outcomes created by these experiences and to probe more deeply into the extent to which the Israel education practices of the participants and their organizations have changed during the past year. In August, 324 participants received a short survey to which 224 individuals responded (a response rate of 69%).

As was the case at the time of the interim study, the Rosov Consulting team also interviewed a subsample of three participants per program provider (18 in total across six providers) to probe more deeply into the themes explored by the survey and to be sure we captured the voices of individual participants. These interviews took place between four and six months after participants returned from Israel.

## Findings

The findings from this study relate to two broad themes: first, those concerned with the contribution of the trip to the participants' work as Israel educators and the ways in which they have incorporated their learnings in their educational practice. And second, what Israel education looks like today in the settings from which participants come, what the participants seek to accomplish, what has changed over the last 12 months and whether those changes have been informed by their trip experience. The report weaves back and forth between these two foci, considering what has changed in the field and what contribution these trips have made to the changes that educators note.

## Profile of the Participants

The educators who participated in these experiences work in a wide array of communal and educational settings. The largest subpopulations work in Jewish supplementary schools (31%), synagogues (31%), summer camps (22%), and day schools (22%) while noteworthy minorities work in youth-serving organizations (11%), Jewish engagement and social justice organizations (10%), or Israel education or advocacy organizations (8%). Many reported working in more than one setting.

Almost all (95%) are working in the same setting as when they participated in the trip; a slightly smaller percentage (88%) work in the same role. Most of the participants have some supervisory or management

responsibilities; more than half (59%) reported combining these responsibilities with front-line work with learners, and nearly a quarter (22%) reported that they only worked as supervisors or managers. Just 13% described themselves as educators without management responsibilities.

21% of the survey respondents (45 individuals) reported having visited Israel since they returned from one of the thirteen programs trip, with more than two-thirds (69%) indicating that these additional visits included a professional component.

## Impact of the Trip

A major part of the survey explored the extent to which the educators' trips have shaped both the participants' own practices and their organizations' approaches to Israel education. While a majority (57%) reported having "incorporated what I learned into my practice," 30% were still in a planning phase ("I have some ideas and am getting clear what it would take to actualize them"), and 13% are still in a contemplation phase ("I am thinking about how best to do this, but I don't have concrete ideas yet"). This constitutes a marked change from the weeks immediately after the program when close to half of the participants were still in a planning phase and only a quarter had implemented their learning. Even so, these reactions still underline the extent to which educational change is a slow-moving process.

Interviews with camp educators suggest that their work was more immediately shaped by the trip than those in most other sectors. These educators returned to North America ahead of the summer camp season, needing to consider what, if anything, they would do differently during the coming months. Educators in other settings did not face such pressing deadlines. They are only now implementing changes in the early part of a new academic year.

*I can't imagine this summer at camp... if I hadn't had the trip, if I hadn't been to Israel, if I hadn't had sort of the firsthand encounter with all of aftermath of October 7th and where the country is at. It definitely made me feel a lot closer, especially as an educator this summer when I needed to be the one who was making decisions about Israel stuff and supporting our staff who were coming from all different places. —Camp Educator*

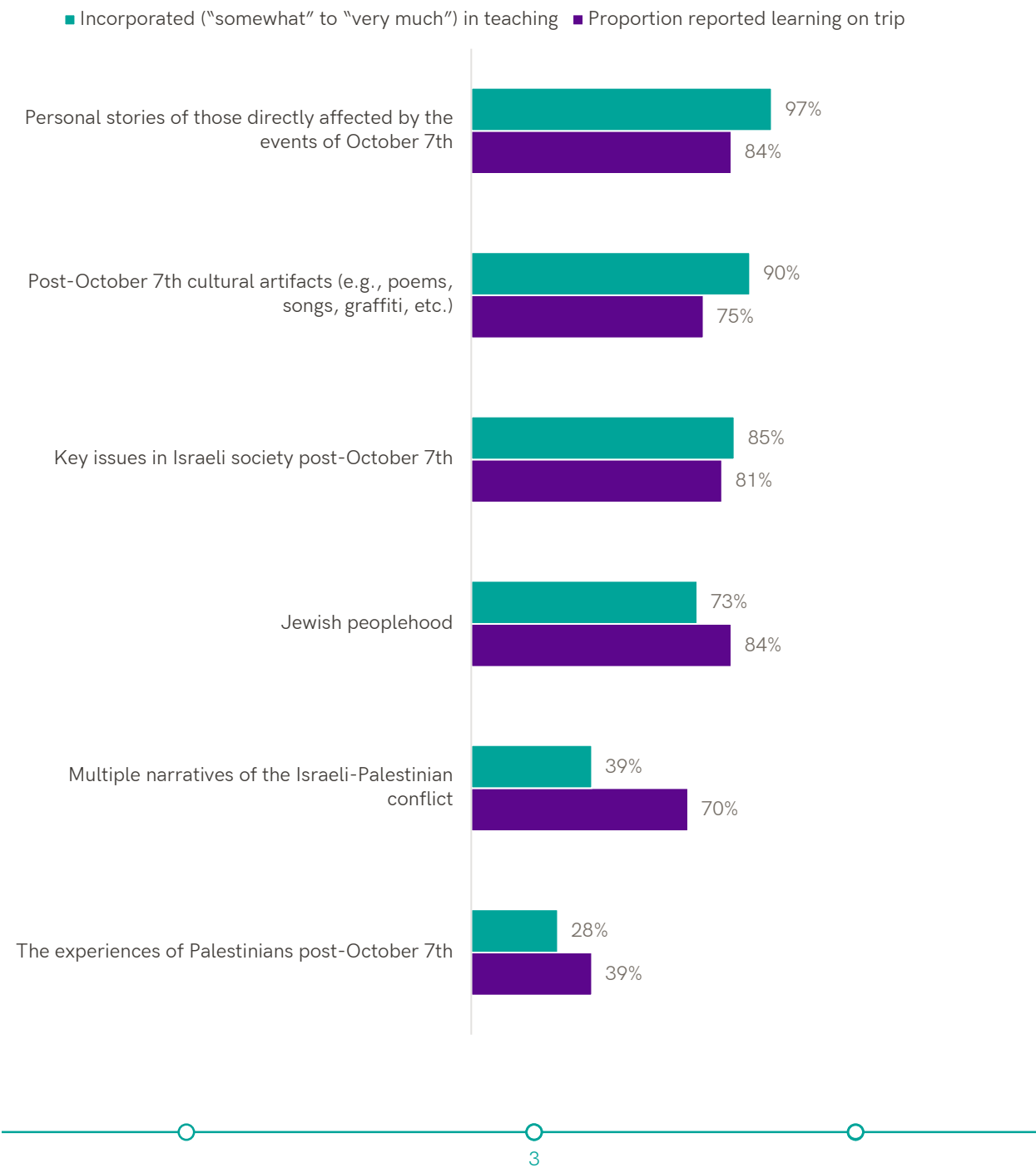
*The trip helped concretize some of the thinking for me, which helped inform our agency's approach to how to talk about Israel and how to communicate our values and our expectations to the community. And it was the experiences that I had on that trip and the thought process that I went through after that trip that helped me think about what I wanted to say on our first Friday night with our staff that were all brought together across all of the camps during staff orientation for Friday night Shabbat services —  
Camp Educator*

Impact on Educators

1. New Content and its Integration in Teaching (A Narrow Question)

When exploring what participants gained from trips, the most basic question to consider is what new knowledge they came away with. Those participants who work directly with learners were asked to think back to what content they learned, and then the extent to which they have incorporated this content in their teaching. As can be seen, Israeli and Jewish perspectives on October 7<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath loom large relative to Palestinian perspectives.

Table 1. Content Learned and Taught



## 2. New Practices of Israel education (A Broader Question)

The concept of “educational practices” is a broad one. It encompasses how educators enact their work and what they seek to accomplish. A large majority of survey respondents made clear that their “practice of Israel education” is different today from 12 months ago (12% say “very much”; 42% “a lot”; 33% “somewhat”). The 89% of respondents who selected one of these three options also indicated that their trip to Israel contributed to this change (12% said “very much”; 47% “a lot”; 32% “somewhat”), 91% in total.

Open-ended survey responses and interview responses shed more light on the various ways in which educators’ practices have changed, as follows:

*Emphasis on Personal Narratives:* Educators are increasingly prioritizing personal stories and testimonies from individuals in Israel, especially those affected by the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>; something we noted in our interim report. This approach aims to create a more relatable learning experience, emphasizing the human aspect of the Israeli narrative.

*Greater Nuance.* When they first returned from Israel, the participants had little patience for nuance. They had born witness to such stark events; they had limited appetite for complexity. Over time, they have been more willing to incorporate critical thinking and discussions that reflect the diverse realities of Israeli society, moving beyond traditional political frameworks of right and left, for example.

*Introducing More Contemporary Content.* Educators have become very interested in integrating current events into their teaching. The present moment in Israel and North America feels so significant in historical terms, whether it be the continuing trauma of the hostages, what it means to be a country at war for over a year, and the turmoil on college campuses, educators feel obliged to ensure that their learners are appropriately informed about these moments.

Further analysis of these developments, by means of segmenting the responses of participants from the three largest sectors represented in the trips (supplementary school/synagogue, day school, and camp), surface differences that reflect these distinctive contexts and the goals of educators who work in them. Camp educators, we find, have emphasized experiential learning and emotional connection; day school educators have prioritized systematic, structured curriculum development; and synagogue educators have focused on communal identity, resilience, and responding to current events. We offer two examples of how these differences have played out in educators’ practices.

### 1. Emphasis on Hearing and Connecting to the Personal

- **Camp Educators:** Camp educators report an increased focus on storytelling, personal narratives, and real-life accounts from events in Israel to deepen campers' emotional engagement with Israel. Camp settings readily lend themselves to experiential learning, and these educators describe actively working to help campers “feel connected” to Israel and incorporate hands-on activities, such as workshops and rubrics for nuanced discussions.

- **Day School Educators:** While they also emphasize personal narratives, day school educators highlight integrating these into a structured, academic curriculum. They mention “holding two truths” and addressing the complexities of Israeli society but focus on how to teach this through established curricular changes rather than immersive experiences alone.
- **Synagogue Educators:** Synagogue educators also mention integrating personal stories and emotional narratives, but they tend to focus more on fostering resilience, by means of these stories, especially in response to local antisemitism and global events. Given their community-centered role, they emphasize connecting Israel education to broader Jewish identity and peoplehood themes.

## 2. Approach to Current Events and Complex Topics

- **Camp Educators:** Camp educators tread carefully around sensitive topics, adjusting their approach to be age-appropriate and maintaining a balance between supporting Israel and acknowledging complex issues. They describe rethinking the language they use, and sometimes avoiding certain topics entirely.
- **Day School Educators:** Day school educators are generally more direct in tackling current events and controversial issues. They discuss unpacking slogans like “From the River to the Sea” and introducing diverse narratives, including Palestinian perspectives, which indicates a structured, intellectual approach to addressing contentious topics.
- **Synagogue Educators:** Synagogue educators report a growing emphasis on resilience and heroism narratives related to October 7th, linking Israel’s challenges to communal and personal values. This approach resonates well with synagogue settings, where many community members seek to understand Israel through a moral and emotional lens. Additionally, these educators describe making connections between Israel education and rising antisemitism, which may be a more pressing concern in a community setting than in schools or camps.

## 3. Changed Goals (An Ultimate Question)

A kind of ultimate question for individual participants is whether their goals for Israel education (not just their content knowledge and their practices) have changed since their trip. Notably, slightly more than 40% report that their goals have indeed changed substantially (10% “very much; 32% “a lot”).

In their open-ended responses participants provided an account of the primary drivers for these changes. Thematic analysis identified three main themes, part of which seems to be associated with their program in Israel while also being shaped by the broader political context in North America:

- (i) **Increased Awareness of Complexity and Nuance in Israel's Reality:** Educators indicate that they returned from Israel with a heightened awareness of Israel's multifaceted nature, including its internal conflicts and diverse narratives. They realized they needed to convey a more nuanced view

to students which includes balancing both positive and challenging aspects of Israeli society and politics at this time.

An educator who reported that her goals have changed “a lot” described her goals today: *To hold both the traumas of Israelis and the traumas of Palestinians as important. And to use our distance [in] North America to allow us to hold both, as difficult as that might be.*

- (ii) **Personal Connection and Emotional Investment:** Many educators feel a deepened personal connection to Israel, often leading them to re-evaluate how they present Israel to their students. This connection encourages them to move beyond superficial elements of Israel (like food or music) to a more authentic representation that fosters personal connections among students.

Here is how someone who reported that her goals changed “a lot” described her goals today: *To give students here a more connected well-rounded education on the State of Israel, the conflicts, and the people who are there defending us. So, students feel a closer connection to the land and not just as a distant place with people we don't know. When we have visitors from Israel, they should feel a connection.* —Day School Educator

- (iii) **A Sense of Urgency Due to Current Events:** Recent events and often-dubious critiques of Israel have prompted educators to prioritize equipping students with the tools to understand and respond to complex issues surrounding Israel, antisemitism, and Zionism. These educators, especially those who work with high school age learners, are focused on preparing students to navigate the challenges they may encounter regarding Israel in academic and social settings.

These goals are well conveyed by an educator whose views also changed “a lot”: *Israeli history and education is more important than ever right now. There is so much misinformation being shared that a strong understanding of the history and complexity is important.* —Camp Educator

## Impact on Organizations

Survey respondents also convey that their organizations have changed their approaches to Israel education over the last twelve months. A large majority of survey respondents made clear that their “workplace’s approach toward Israel education today” is different from 12 months ago (9% say “very much”; 37% “a lot”; 40% “somewhat”). The 86% of respondents who selected one of these three options also indicated that their trip to Israel had contributed to this change (8% said “very much”; 26% “a lot”; 39% “somewhat”), 73% in total, a response that reflects the relative seniority of many of those who participated in trips and the opportunities they’ve had to shape their organizations’ approaches.

Open-ended responses and interview responses shed more light on the ways in which organizations’ approaches to Israel education have changed. The following comment from a synagogue educator in a follow-up interview makes explicit the many dimensions of an organizational approach to Israel, ones that extend beyond a specific educator’s practices.

*Israel is always in the center. So especially now at the beginning of the school year when we discuss the holidays... always making sure that we place Israel in the historical context; all the stories stem from right there... We always make the connection. We always make sure that kids learn even more about Israel, and it's always right there, even into the eyes, if you will, because we created special bulletin board in the building that shows the Israel connection. It's quite interactive so kids can respond and share their thoughts, and it's a good visual that we added over the summer.* —Congregational Educator

In broad terms, open-ended survey responses indicated how organizations' approaches have changed:

*Starting Earlier and Continuing Longer.* There is a noticeable shift towards incorporating Israel education into the experiences of younger learners and throughout all grades, rather than confining it to middle and high school grades. In school settings, this includes adding lessons on significant texts like the Prayer for the State and IDF, promoting a continuous connection to Israel.

*Greater Integration and Expanded Curriculum.* Educators are becoming more intentional about integrating Israel education across various subjects and/or activities, rather than treating it as a standalone topic (about more of which below). Many organizations have revised their programs to include contemporary issues, historical context, and the social-political landscape of Israel. This has involved not only enhancing educational materials, but also integrating discussions on current events and their implications for Israel and the Jewish community.

*Increased Collaboration.* Organizations are now prioritizing partnerships with Israeli institutions and engaging more Israeli speakers and guests in their programs. This collaborative approach aims to enrich the educational experience and provide deeper insights into Israeli culture, society, and ongoing challenges.

*Focusing on Safe Spaces and Open Dialogue.* There is a growing recognition of the need for safe spaces where individuals can discuss Israel-related topics openly. Organizations are striving to create environments where questions can be raised without fear of judgment, promoting learning and understanding across a spectrum of beliefs and experiences related to Israel.

Again, segmented analysis of these responses reveals some striking differences across different sectors of Jewish education, reflecting the different structures, cultures and priorities of these settings. We offer two examples of these differences.

## 1. Depth and Integration of Curriculum

- **Camps:** Camps are moving towards weaving Israel education into the daily camp experience rather than situated within isolated programs. The focus is on experiential learning, making Israel a part of the broader camp environment through activities, discussions, and integration with general camp programming.
- **Day Schools:** Educators reported a structured, curriculum-based approach to Israel education, often tied to specific grade levels or courses. Many day schools are formalizing Israel education with new



scope and sequence documents, dedicated Israel classes, and expanded curriculum. There's a clear emphasis on integrating Israel education across various subjects and creating a long-term framework for learning.

- **Synagogues:** While synagogues are also expanding their curricula, they appear to be focusing more on flexible, community-based education. Changes include adding sessions or classes, but they emphasize congregation-wide initiatives like sermons, Tisha B'Av gatherings, and other communal events. This approach is less about formal school curriculum and more about incorporating Israel education into congregational life as a whole.

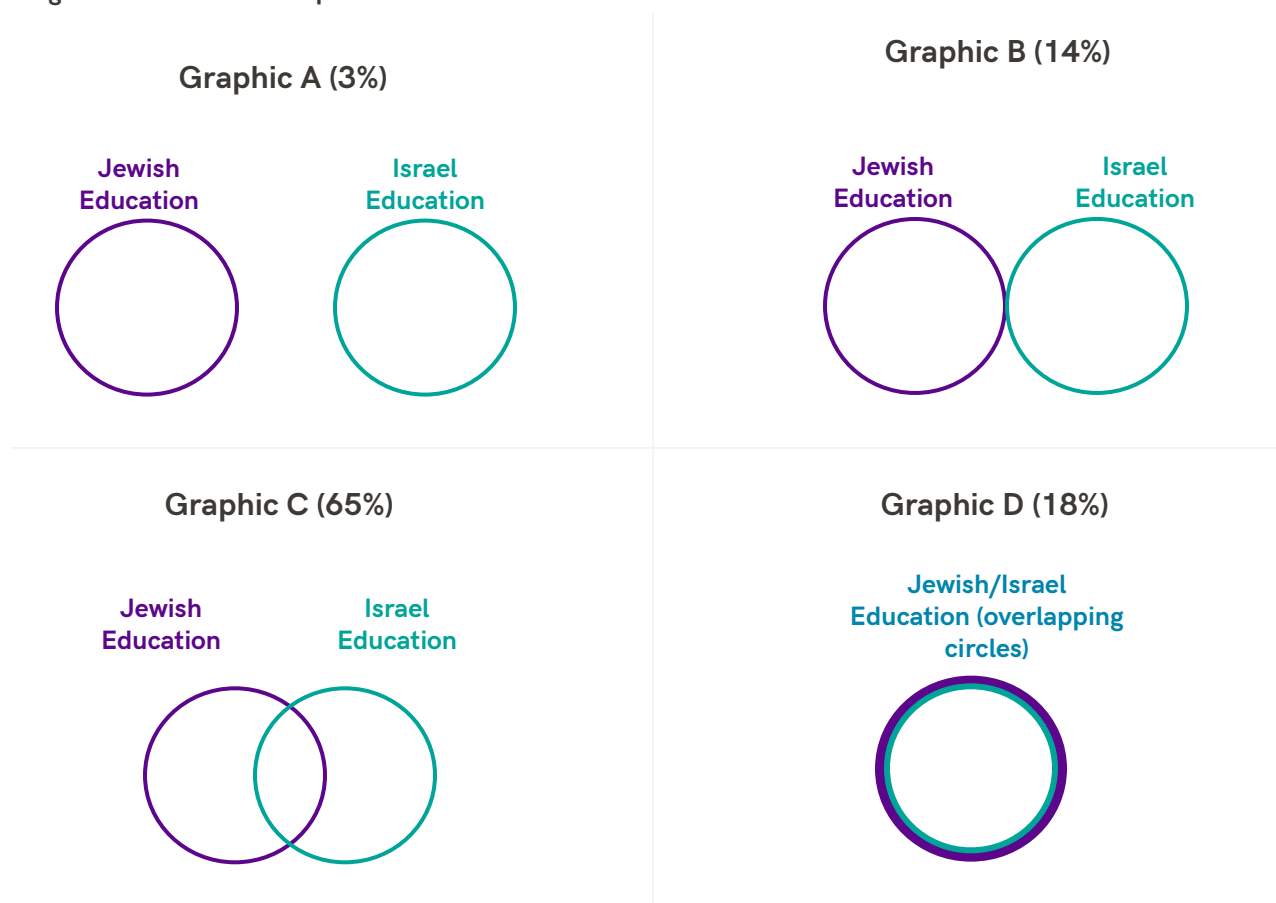
## 2. Approach to Dialogue and Controversial Topics

- **Camps:** Camps are focusing on equipping staff and campers to handle diverse viewpoints but often without delving into highly political debates. The goal is to foster understanding and confidence in discussing Israel-related without destabilizing camp communities.
- **Day Schools:** While some day schools have become more willing to incorporate multiple perspectives, they are more cautious when framing these discussions for younger students. They seek to balance education about Israeli culture and society with careful messaging around political content, aiming to prepare students with foundational knowledge before then engaging in more controversial topics.
- **Synagogues:** Synagogue educators report a striking openness to diverse perspectives, often embracing dual narratives and creating spaces for difficult conversations that include both Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints. This reflects a setting where adults and families engage in complex discussions, addressing varied opinions within the community.

## The Structural (Re)organization of Israel Education

To further probe how organizations are approaching Israel education today, survey respondents were presented with the following series of images and were asked to indicate which best “describes the current relationship between Jewish education and Israel education in their workplace.” The proportion of those who selected each option is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The relationship between Israel education and Jewish education



When explaining their selections, respondents made clear that, overall, the events of October 7<sup>th</sup> and their aftermath have set in motion a centripetal process in which Israel education and Jewish education have become more closely intertwined, if not thrust together. As an educator based in a central agency explained, *"Graphic A better explains the connection between Israel and Jewish education provided by my organization. Since October 7th, bringing each aspect closer together has become even more urgent."* As the responses below indicate, these arrangements are not circumstantial, they are often grounded in strong ideological orientations which are unlikely to shift.

Graphic A. *Israel's right-wing government pretends to be the government for all Jews around the world. And the American political left projects that onto their sense that all American Jews are supportive of Israel's right-wing government. It's a toxic situation. The fact is, the Israeli government is a government for Israelis, not for Jews. And American Jews are not a monolith. So, our educational approach has intentionally moved AWAY from seeing Israel and Jewish education as intertwined, but intentionally separating the two.* —Arts Educator

Graphic B. *There is some overlap, but not all things ISRAEL are JEWISH and not all things JEWISH are ISRAEL.* — Jewish Engagement Educator

Graphic C. *We have always believed that having a meaningful relationship with Israel is a core component of Jewish identity. As a Zionist summer camp, this is part of our values. While there is a lot of overlap in our Jewish and Zionist*

*programming, we still do have elements of our program that focus more on one over the other which is why I chose the partially overlapping circles and not the fully overlapping ones. —Camp Educator*

Graphic D. *We have always been proud Jews and proud Zionists but now more than ever those 2 identities are bonded together. —Day School Educator*

## What Educators Need

### Emotional Support in the Face of Fatigue and Grief

Beyond questions about the ways in which their practices and their organizations have changed over the past year, educators shared, in the context of one-on-one interviews, some of the features of this moment that continue to be especially challenging for them. Above all, these features relate to a feeling of how little the situation in Israel has moved forward, and how challenging it is therefore to convey a spirit optimism to their learners—a point of principle for many educators.

*I just feel like nothing's changed. I feel like when I was there in February, people were sort of hopeful and talking about the giorim and the heroes, and it was very uplifting... I just walked away sort of feeling as if Israel, the people, they got this, and they're going to persevere. And then I was in Israel for a few weeks over the summer and it felt much more depressing. I don't know. Everyone I spoke to was kind of like, yep, still here, still going to funerals. And now that I'm back in school and nothing has changed since we left school. In fact, it's getting more intense with planning for October 7th...I feel like I've lost some of that hope that I had after the trip, although I don't let that on to my students. —Day School Educator*

These emotions are deeply felt; a few of the interviewees could not hold back tears during our conversations. They conveyed just how exhausting it is to somehow keep themselves from being overwhelmed; exhaustion was a word many used. They're caring for themselves and for their learners, and that's exceptionally draining work, as conveyed powerfully in the following comments:

*How do I take how I'm feeling and make it productive, not just let it drag me down and wallowing? It's just a huge challenge. And those kids, my kids, I mean, they think about it, but in my day-to-day, I'm thinking about my husband, and my kids in Israel, and that's not how I was before the 7th. I've always thought about Israel, but I have not thought about the trauma of what happened. Now, I think about that every day. There's not a day that I don't think about Hirsch or that I'm not thinking about the Bebis babies. They're at the front of my head, and I don't want to assume, but I don't think that that's the case for most of my kids. I think now it's like, how do we protect them? —Congregational Educator.*

Few interviewees explicitly stated that they needed special emotional support at this time, but such a need can be strongly inferred from their comments. The supervisors of more junior staff and the volunteer leaders who work alongside senior educators should be aware of the heavy emotional weight many educators are bearing.

### Help with Facilitation and Implementation, Not More Content

Interviewees made clear that they are aware of and have access to a great body of new content with which to teach about Israel. They readily named resources they found helpful from the iCenter, Unpacked, and the

Jewish Education Project, for example. They found *navigating* those resources much more challenging; as they explained, it's hard to know what to implement, what to focus on and what approaches to take. For example, a common query among educators who work with youth is how much to focus on October 7<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath, and how much to focus on lighter, cultural topics; how much to just provide space for young people to have fun together. This was an acute challenge for camps, as one interviewee related:

*How do we do Jewish camping in this new reality...and be a camp where Israel is such a core component of our culture and our mission and our educational experiences in camp. How do we do that and keep it joyful but at the same time balance out the reality of the world?* —Camp Educator

A senior educator conveyed how his staff fixate on content when it would do better to focus on being in conversation with teens without feeling that they themselves need to be content experts. Teens can access content in any number of ways; staff need to think of their roles differently and need help exploring what that would look like:

*I think content knowledge is only so [important], and I want them to be there to support our teens with their questions. Our teens today can find all the information they want to find, but it's like you need to help them navigate it, you being a trusted Jewish adult for them, you being someone for them in case something comes up....* —Federation Educator

## Conclusion

This study began as an effort to track the contribution of a set of short, Israel-based experiences for educators and educational leaders in the wake of the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>. To a large extent, these experiences have indeed made a profound contribution to how educators think about and approach the work of educating about Israel. This is even more apparent six months after the various programs' end than it was in their immediate aftermath.

At the same time, this study has provided an opportunity to observe the extent to which the political and cultural eruptions of the last 12 months have produced a seismic shift in how many of these educators are approaching the work of Israel education, beyond what was prompted by their experiences in Israel. The content these educators emphasize, the goals and concerns they have for their learners, and the priorities and arrangements in the organizations where they work are, in many instances, in a process of shifting. These shifts have subtly varied in different sectors, for example, in camps, day schools and synagogues. The educators' reflections suggest that this tectonic process is still in motion and will be worth continuing to track.



**Questions?**

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