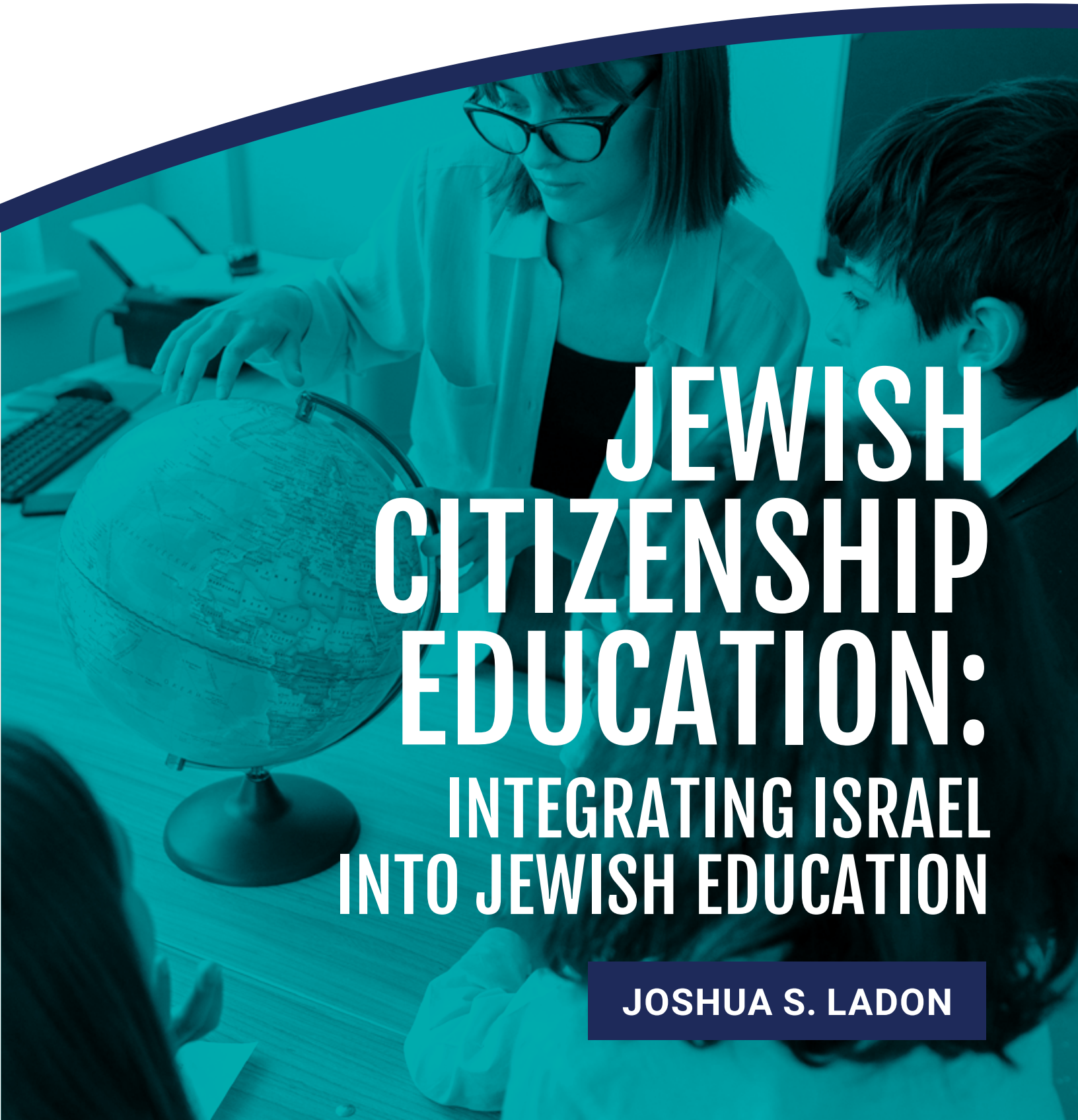
THE JEWISH EDUCATION PROJECT

REIMAGINING ISRAEL EDUCATION



JEWISH CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION:

INTEGRATING ISRAEL INTO JEWISH EDUCATION

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This essay is part of a larger collection of research commissioned for Reimagining Israel Education, an initiative of The Jewish Education Project. In the wake of the attacks on October 7, Reimagining Israel Education sought to anchor the growth of Israel education in a strategic approach to Jewish education, reimagined for this era of Jewish life and for today's learners. More information can be found at **jewishedproject.org** and **educator.jewishedproject.org**.

Introduction

This essay advocates for a shift toward Jewish citizenship education, a paradigm that situates Israel education squarely within the broader work of Jewish education (Ladon, 2024; Shem-Tov, 2025). It offers a compelling vision to help learners view themselves as active members of the Jewish people and as Jews engaged in a broader twenty-first-century global society. Jewish citizenship education integrates Israel into four key facets for enacting Jewish citizenship, namely understanding, believing, connecting, and participating, so that Israel is not simply a topic to study but a living dimension of vibrant Jewish life.

The essay begins by examining why prevailing paradigms for engaging Israel within a North American Jewish life are no longer sufficient. It then introduces a framework of Jewish citizenship as a way to reimagine what it means to belong to—and take responsibility for—the Jewish people. Finally, the essay articulates a robust vision of Jewish citizenship and situates Israel within that framework, clarifying its role in cultivating a committed, pluralistic Jewish life.

By articulating the principles and practices of Jewish citizenship education, this essay aims to guide educators, funders, and institutions toward a model that inducts learners into active citizenship within the Jewish people, heirs to a living tradition and responsible contributors to its ongoing life.

Why Current Paradigms Fall Short

For decades, the dominant paradigm of Jewish education in North America has focused on instilling a sense of Jewish identity. This model assumes that if Jews feel Jewish, they will adopt normative Jewish practices such as ritual observance, marrying Jewish partners, and commitments to Israel (Krasner, 2016; Kravel-Tovi, 2020; Levisohn & Kelman, 2019). In practice, however, the subjective nature of Jewish identity has undermined this assumption.

Sociologists once measured Jewish identity through external indicators, such as lighting Shabbat candles, synagogue attendance, and traveling to Israel. Over time, this gave way to an additional model for studying Jewish lives, focusing not on the Jewish nature of one's life but on how Jews engage with their own Judaism. This second model was supported by the ways many educators in the field understood Jewish identity, that is, as an internal, sociopsychological sense of "feeling Jewish" (Prell, 2012). While a focus on external metrics to determine whether programs can "move the needle" persists, the prevailing emphasis on Jewish continuity has foregrounded a subjective identity, allowing individuals to define Jewishness on their own terms (Krasner, 2016). The post–October 7th attacks made this subjectivity starkly visible:

Many were stunned to see Jews who practice Jewish rituals and speak in Jewish idioms while simultaneously identifying as staunch anti-Zionists. Jewish identity, as a subjective category, does not in itself generate normative Jewish commitments.

Other paradigms, such as Israel and peoplehood education, are designed less as subjects to understand or sites of existential inquiry and more as commitments disguised as content. The underlying assumption is that learning about and experiences with Israel and Israelis will naturally lead to commitment (Chazan, 2016; Davis & Alexander, 2023; Horowitz, 2012; Zakai, 2014, 2022).

The literature has never addressed the reality that many Jews feel deeply at home in North America and experience Jewishness differently than Israelis do. Experiences with Israel and Israelis do not necessarily lead to commitment.

Indeed, the very evolution of "Israel education" in the late 1990s and early 2000s reflected this tension. It emerged in part as a response to the unprecedented integration of American Jews into U.S. society. Earlier Zionist education had presented Israel as the inevitable home of the Jewish people and encouraged aliyah (immigration). However, for a community that felt increasingly secure in the United States, the narrative of aliyah rang hollow. Israel education sought to build a connection to Israel while affirming that Jews could remain rooted in America—a marked departure from the Zionist paradigm that preceded it.

While these no doubt shape North American Jewish views toward Israel, a more fundamental challenge underlies this reality: In shifting from Zionist to Israel education, the field has not articulated the meanings of Israel for North American Jews. As North American Jews find meaning in the form of Judaism and feel committed to contributing to their broader societies where they feel at home and secure, the fundamental purposes of Israel as a safeguard for Jewish survival and the end of Jewish history do not answer a need in their lives. The existing educational paradigms, whether centered on identity or on Israel, have not equipped young Jews to navigate these complexities or to view themselves as participants in a shared Jewish future.

The Idea of Citizenship

As citizenship is often considered the legal foundation of the modern nation-state, many understand—and critique—it narrowly as a status that confers rights and privileges. In the United States, discourse on citizenship has come under attack from both the left and the right. On the left, some reject the notion that certain rights should be tied to citizenship status, viewing nation-states fundamentally as oppressive and advocating for universal human rights. On the right, citizenship has been narrowed and recast in ethnonationalist terms, tying "real Americans" to white Christian heritage and eroding the institutions that uphold civic life, from voting rights to judicial independence and a free press.

However, citizenship can also be understood not as a legal status but as a set of aspirational ideals. Michael Walzer (2014) describes citizenship as "collective self-determination, which is both a responsibility and a benefit—the citizen who accepts the responsibilities and enjoys the benefits and participates in the arguments about what the responsibilities and benefits should be" (para. 2). The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2006) roots citizenship in three core capacities:

1. **Critical examination of oneself and one's traditions**
2. **Global perspective: seeing oneself not only as a member of a local group but also as a human bound to all others by ties of recognition and concern**
3. **Narrative imagination: the ability to imagine others' experiences, hopes, and desires, unlike those of oneself**

Walzer and Nussbaum offer a language for an aspirational view of citizenship, providing a powerful model for Jewish education that aims to help Jews see themselves as inheritors and contributors to tradition and their people. **Rather than instilling identity as an internal feeling, Jewish education can induct learners into the responsibilities, relationships, and ongoing debates of Jewish civic life, helping them see themselves as participants in shaping the Jewish collective.**

The Debated Nature of Membership in the Jewish People

Any project of Jewish citizenship must grapple with the contested nature of Jewish belonging itself. As Donniel Hartman (2023) argues, Jewish collective identity holds two seemingly opposite claims: Being a part of the Jewish people comes simply from 1) who you are, regardless of what you believe or do, and 2) striving to live by a shared set of values, beliefs, ideals, and practices. These competing claims are naturally in tension with each other. On the one hand, Jewishness is understood as something embodied, an imagined biology that one is either born into or converted into. On the other hand, to be a Jew is also to participate actively in an aspirational system of rituals, beliefs, behaviors, and values. Both parts of this claim are constantly being contested, considered, and reconsidered within the Jewish community.

This imagined biological element, often referred to as Jewish Peoplehood, provides a foundation for understanding how Jews from around the globe, for example, from Syria, Ethiopia, and Lithuania, likely share few ethnic traits yet identify as part of a single people. **Because of this sense of Peoplehood, Jews can debate and argue (within an ever evolving "socially" accepted sense of reason) about the texture and contours of a shared set of values and obligations while remaining confident in their membership to the people** (Halbertal, 1997; Hartman, 2023).

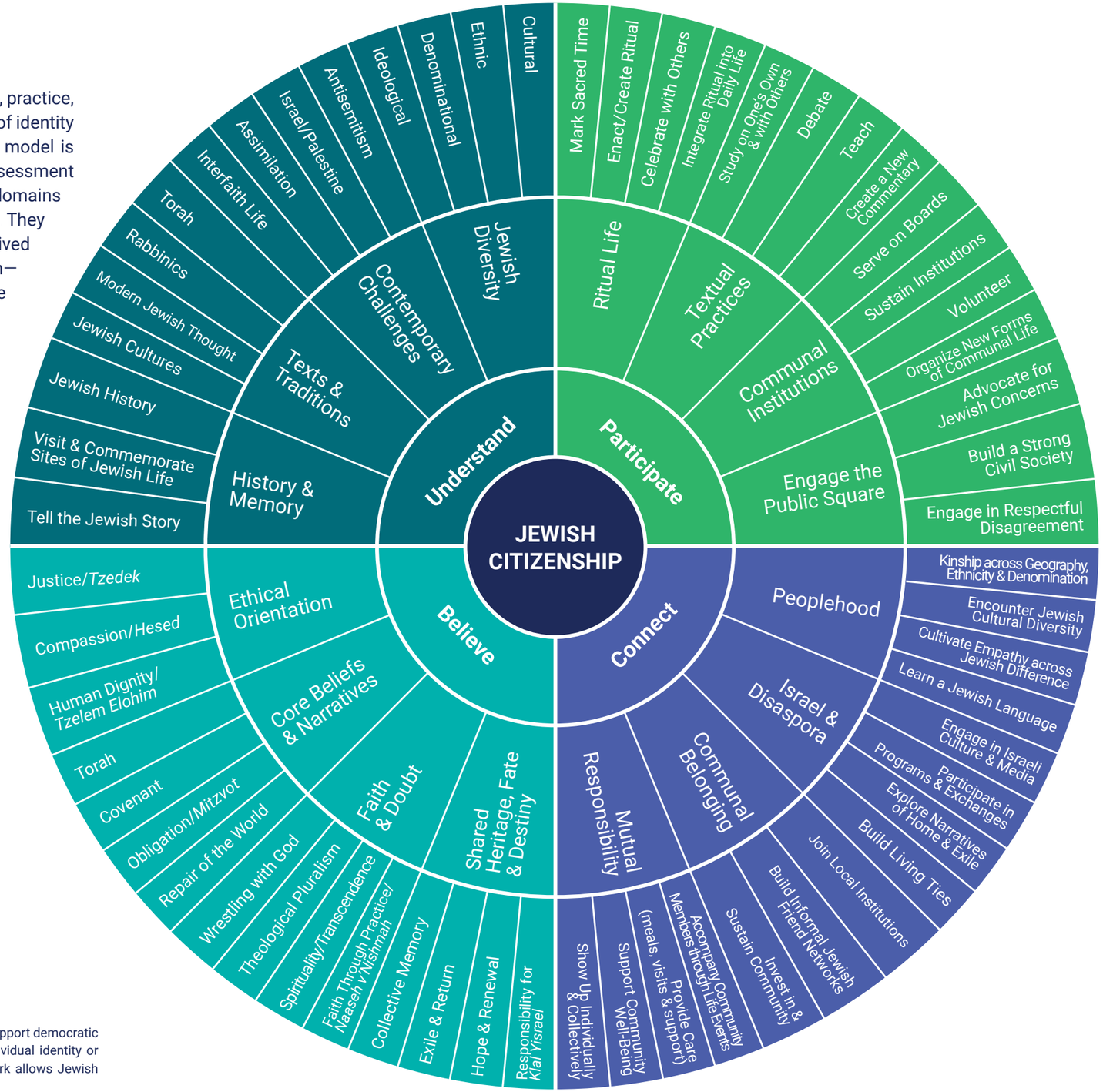
Beyond biology, Jewish status is also conferred through different systems: Classical Jewish law recognizes matrilineal descent; the Sephardi chief rabbi of Mandate Palestine, Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel, extended recognition to *zera Yisrael* (children of Jewish fathers); many liberal movements accept patrilineal descent; and the Law of Return allows anyone with one Jewish grandparent to immigrate to Israel, even if they are not considered Jewish by religion (Charmé, 2022; Ellenson & Gordis, 2012; Greenspoon et al., 2014; Jacob et al., 1994; Walzer et al., 2006).

Rather than undermining the case of Jewish citizenship, this multiplicity strengthens it. **As there is no single fixed criterion for who counts as Jewish and how to behave as one, Jewish citizenship offers a breathable category, capacious enough to encompass both the ascriptive (status-based) and aspirational (value-based) dimensions of Jewish belonging.** By shifting from the language of peoplehood, which can be understood as value-neutral, to that of Jewish citizenship, we can begin to reintroduce core commitments that underpin the diverse nature of contemporary Judaism.

Four Facets of Jewish Citizenship

The four recommended facets of Jewish citizenship outline the broad terrains of belief, relationship, practice, and knowledge through which Jewish life is enacted. They offer a comprehensive yet flexible vision of identity formation rooted in shared responsibility and open to multiple pathways and commitments. The model is adapted from a civic readiness framework developed for democratic education and institutional assessment (Gallos et al., 2024)[1]. Rather than prescribing what Jewishness must be, they create spacious domains in which diverse learners can take up the work of sustaining and renewing the Jewish collective. They move Jewish education away from subjective identity and toward the induction of learners into the lived practices and responsibilities of Jewish civic life. They name four interlocking domains of formation—belief, connection, practice, and knowledge—through which Jews sustain the collective lives of the Jewish people.

While some individuals may gravitate more strongly to specific domains, Jewish civic education relies on cultivating all four domains, which mutually reinforce and deepen one another over time. For educators, this map provides a vision of the broad competencies and dispositions that Jewish civic education should cultivate. For funders and institutional leaders, it provides a way to ask whether our communal systems make these domains visible and accessible, and whether the pathways, norms, and cultural expectations exist to sustain them.



Jewish Citizenship Readiness Map[2]

1 BELIEVE: FOUNDATIONAL ORIENTATIONS

Cultivating convictions and commitments that animate Jewish life

- Core Beliefs and Narratives: Torah, covenant, obligation/Mitzvot, and repair of the world
- Ethical Orientation: Justice (tzedek), compassion (hesed), and human dignity (tzelem Elohim)
- Faith and Doubt: Wrestling with God, theological pluralism, spirituality/transcendence, faith through practice (*Naaseh v'Nishmah*)
- Shared Heritage, Fate, and Destiny: Collective memory, exile and return, hope and renewal, and responsibility for *Klal Yisrael*

1 The Civic Readiness Map has been used in higher education to assess student civic development and the institutional conditions that support democratic participation. It is a useful analog for conceptualizing participation in Jewish life because, like civic life, it depends not only on individual identity or knowledge but on cultivated dispositions, shared practices, relational bonds, and communal infrastructures. Adapting this framework allows Jewish educators to assess both learner formation and the ecosystems required to sustain Jewish citizenship over time.

2 Modeled on the Civic Readiness Map

2 CONNECT

Fostering bonds with other Jews, communities, and the wider world

- Peoplehood: Kinship across geography, ethnicity, and denomination; encounter Jewish cultural diversity; cultivate empathy across Jewish difference; and learn a Jewish language
- Israel and Diaspora: Engage in Israeli culture and media, participate in programs and exchanges, explore narratives of home and exile, and build living ties
- Communal Belonging: Join local institutions, build informal Jewish friend networks, and invest in and sustain community
- Mutual Responsibility: Accompanying community members through lifecycle events, providing care (meals, visits, and support), supporting community well-being, and showing up individually and collectively

3 PARTICIPATE

Engaging in practices and institutions that sustain Jewish life

- Ritual Life: Mark sacred time, enact/create ritual, celebrate with others, and integrate ritual into daily life
- Textual Practices: Study on one's own and with others, debate, teach, and create a new commentary
- Communal Institutions: Serving on boards, sustaining institutions, volunteering, and organizing new forms of communal life
- Engage the Public Square: Advocate for Jewish concerns, build a strong democratic civil society, and engage in respectful disagreement

4 UNDERSTAND

Developing knowledge that grounds Jewish identity and action

- Texts and Tradition: Torah, rabbinics, modern Jewish thought and Jewish cultures
- History and Memory: Jewish history (biblical origins through contemporary moments and stories of persecution and resilience), visit and commemorate sites of Jewish life, and tell the Jewish story
- Jewish Diversity: Cultural, ethnic, denominational, and ideological variety
- Contemporary Challenges: Antisemitism, Israel/Palestine, assimilation, and interfaith life

These four interdependent domains constitute Jewish citizenship, but they are not intended as equal benchmarks. Individuals and institutions will naturally prioritize and emphasize certain domains over others. Various institutions are also better equipped to educate people about different domains. Rather than prescribing uniform outcomes, **the map serves as a diagnostic tool, helping educators, institutions, and funders assess how they cultivate a healthy sense of Jewish citizenship across a broader communal ecosystem**. In this respect, the framework draws on the insights of Michael Walzer and Martha Nussbaum, both of whom emphasize that citizenship is not defined by fixed or universally distributed criteria, but by ongoing argument about its meanings, obligations, and boundaries. As both Walzer and Nussbaum remind us, these categories are themselves meant to be interrogated and debated; indeed, the practice of contesting and revising them is itself a vital expression of Jewish citizenship.

> ***...the map serves as a diagnostic tool, helping educators, institutions, and funders assess how they cultivate a healthy sense of Jewish citizenship across a broader communal ecosystem.***

Shift in the Field

Realizing this vision of Jewish education rooted in Jewish citizenship will require a fundamental reorientation of the field. This shift is not simply about revising curricula; it demands rethinking the very purposes, pedagogies, and structures that shape how Jews are formed. At stake is helping learners come to view that **being Jewish is not only something they are but something they must enact through ongoing participation in the life, responsibilities, and renewal of the Jewish collective.** Achieving this transformation will require coordinated change across five domains: educational goals, pedagogical strategies, structural ecosystems, the role of Israel, and the broader content infrastructure.

First, Jewish educational goals must move beyond cultivating an internal "sense of Jewish identity" as the primary endpoint. **Jewish civic education aims to cultivate learners who view themselves as active participants in a shared Jewish endeavor and as contributors to a living tradition, rather than as possessors of a private identity.** Success would no longer be measured primarily in terms of emotional attachment, but in both the sense of responsibility one takes and the practiced engagement one has in sustaining and shaping Jewish life.

Second, pedagogical strategies must be reoriented to make participation a central focus. **Educational experiences should help learners see their studies, rituals, ethical commitments, and communal activities as contributions to the ongoing life of the Jewish people.** Interpretive practices, such as text study, debate, and dissent, should be framed not only as intellectual exercises but as ways of joining an intergenerational conversation. Educators will need support to guide learners toward internalizing the idea that their Jewish actions matter because they are part of something larger than themselves.

Third, the ecosystem of Jewish life must be structured to support this orientation. Jewish civic education cannot succeed if it is experienced as a series of disconnected episodic programs (Chazan et al., 2017). **Learners need real pathways to act on their commitments and settings, where they can enact belief, connection, participation, and understanding in visible, supported ways.** This might mean incentivizing participation in multiple educational contexts, in addition to engaging those on the periphery of organized Jewish life. Moreover, connection to other Jews (i.e., Israelis) cannot simply be an exercise in the imagination. Institutions and funders must ensure that educational institutions can actually cultivate the experiences and ethics of real connection. This has been achieved most successfully by bringing Israeli counselors to camp. Institutions and funders must use the four facets of the Jewish Civic Readiness Map as a diagnostic tool to ask, "Where are these pathways strong, and where are they missing?" This will require investing in what Peter Berger called "plausibility structures," or the cultural norms and institutional supports that make active Jewish participation feel not only possible but also expected (Berger, 1967).

Fourth, Jewish education—the area where the deepest new work is needed—must reframe the role of Israel in the lives of North American Jews. **Rather than treating Israel as a discrete subject or a loyalty test, Jewish civic education positions Israel as a contrasting civic context that illuminates what it means to live as a Jew under different political, cultural, and institutional conditions.** Learners must be invited to compare the core ideas that shape Jewish life in Israel and the United States. This means examining the contrasts between sovereignty and voluntarism (Jewishness being embedded in public structures versus being chosen and opted in), majority and minority Jewishness (defining the cultural baseline versus navigating life as a small minority), ethno-national and multiethnic civic models (a Jewish nation-state versus a multicultural democracy), and embedded and chosen Jewish practices (Jewish time, language, and ritual suffuse public life versus where they rely on continual personal and communal commitment).

Educators will need support to guide learners toward internalizing the idea that their Jewish actions matter because they are part of something larger than themselves.

This comparative civic framing is not the totality of what it means to place Israel education within Jewish education. Still, it represents the area of greatest need: an undertheorized dimension of the American Jewish experience. Crucially, this work must be paired with the integration of Israeli voices across the entire Jewish Civic Readiness Map. **When learners study beliefs, ethics, peoplehood, or Jewish texts, they should encounter Israeli thinkers alongside the broader canon, ensuring that Israel is woven throughout the fabric of Jewish civic formation rather than confined to a single domain.**

Ultimately, the broader content infrastructure requires updating. Beyond Israel, Jewish civic education requires curricula that highlight the comprehensive civic fabric of Jewish life, encompassing shared texts, diverse Jewish communities, mutual obligations, and the interplay of place, power, and responsibility. Learners should experience each of the four facets—believe, connect, participate, and understand—through compelling stories, practices, and exemplars drawn from the Jewish world. This will require curating and creating content that models what it looks like to live Jewish life as an enacted, ongoing, and shared endeavor.

Taken together, these shifts of goals, pedagogy, structures, Israel's role, and content mark the field-level realignments needed to make Jewish citizenship education more than an isolated program and integrate Israel into Jewish education. They create the conditions for learners to experience Jewishness as something they actively participate in, sustain, and renew.

Challenges and Tensions

Implementing Jewish education rooted in Jewish citizenship will not be simple. It requires educators, funders, and institutions to disrupt long-standing mental models, realign entrenched systems, and navigate conflict in a polarized moment. The goal of this section is not to resolve these tensions, but to name them directly so they can be anticipated and addressed rather than allowing them to erode the project quietly from within.

Pluralism Versus Coherence

Jewish life today is ideologically fragmented, and any framework that gestures toward a shared purpose risks being read as a bid for consensus. A citizenship model raises the question "How can we cultivate a shared sense of belonging without enforcing ideological conformity?"

For educators, this tension can manifest as a fear of flattening differences to teach shared commitments. For institutions, it can manifest as anxiety about building a public-facing culture in a diverse membership base.

Jewish civic education must define citizenship not as agreement but as a shared commitment to participating in the collective, even amid disagreement. This reframes coherence as procedural rather than ideological; what binds us is not shared views but shared responsibility and destiny.

Loyalty Versus Critique

Particularly around Israel, attempts to nurture commitment can be misread as efforts to suppress dissent. **For many learners, critiquing Israel feels essential to moral integrity; for many institutions, it can feel like disloyalty.**

Jewish civic education must model critique as an act of care—a sign that one takes the collective seriously enough to hold it accountable. Framing critique as part of citizenship can enable institutions to create space for difficult conversations without perceiving them as existential threats.

Politicization and Partisanship

A citizenship framework could easily be co-opted by partisan agendas, becoming yet another ideological litmus test rather than a capacious framework. Funders and institutions may fear that adopting it will embroil them in political controversy or donor backlash.

Jewish civic education must be framed not as a partisan stance but as the cultivation of capacities—responsibility, solidarity, and interpretive humility—that can be enacted across political lines. Naming this risk openly can help institutions insulate the framework from ideological capture.

Complexity Versus Legibility

Finally, funders and institutional leaders may worry that this paradigm is simply too complex to implement or assess. Identity frameworks are appealing in part because they are easy to measure and evaluate. By contrast, citizenship is diffuse, long-term, and nonlinear.

This challenge cannot be eliminated, but it can be managed. Rather than promising quick metrics, the field can develop narrative and developmental assessments that track dispositions over time: curiosity, responsibility, interpretive openness, empathy, and sustained participation.

These tensions are not grounds for withdrawing from the project. Instead, they are reminders that Jewish civic education must be pursued with humility and care. Naming them explicitly signals to educators, funders, and institutions that this paradigm is not naive about conflict or complexity, and that it seeks not to erase disagreement but to cultivate the resilience and commitment required to carry it forward.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

The upheaval since the October 7 attacks has exposed the limits of Jewish education organized around identity and information. **For too long, we have assumed that if learners feel Jewish or know enough about Israel, commitment will follow. This has yielded private identities but not public stewards; that is, too many see Jewishness as a personal expression, but too few see themselves as bound to one another and responsible for the shared future of the Jewish people. Jewish citizenship education offers a distinct path, orienting Jewish education around inducting learners into living people, cultivating the dispositions of belief, connection, practice, and understanding that make Jewish life shared, enduring, and mutually binding.**

Embracing this paradigm means reimagining both formation and infrastructure. It calls on educators to consider their task as inducting learners who regard themselves as inheritors and contributors, alongside comfort with the fact that other Jews will enact that inheritance differently, and alongside responsibility even to those with whom they disagree or struggle. It also calls on funders and institutions to move beyond the assumption that sparking interest will inevitably lead to long-term engagement, and to take seriously that enduring participation depends on building the material conditions, cultural expectations, and institutional pathways that make Jewish citizenship possible. **Jewish belonging cannot rest solely on inspiration. It must be made real, supported, and continually renewed.**

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