

# REIMAGINING ISRAEL EDUCATION



*EDUT: WHY  
WITNESSING  
MUST BECOME THE  
FOUNDATION OF  
ISRAEL EDUCATION*

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- 02 Introduction:  
From One Generation of Testimony to Another
- 05 Why Testimony Is Harder Now:  
The Crisis of Knowing
- 07 The Jewish Category of *Edut*:  
Biblical, Rabbinic, and Modern Meaning
- 09 What October 7 Testimonies Teach Us—  
and How Educators Should Practice *Edut*
- 13 The Four Commitments of  
*Edut* in Israel Education
- 14 Pedagogies of Digital Witnessing
- 15 Toward a Covenantal Israel Education

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## Introduction: From One Generation of Testimony to Another



For those who received a formative Jewish education between the 1970s and the early 2010s, listening to Holocaust survivors was a nearly universal activity. Their stories were told at school assemblies, synagogues, youth groups, summer camps, Israel trips, and communal commemorations. These were not ordinary educational moments. The mood in the room would shift, students would instinctively grow still, and a quiet seriousness would take hold. Even young listeners sensed that they were being entrusted with something that mattered—something that would not come again. **Testimony was not only information; it was inheritance.**

Jewish educators understood that the survivor generation was aging. For decades, they prepared for the time when no living witnesses would remain. Voices and images were recorded, digitized, archived, and curated with extraordinary care. Students learned not only to listen but also to accept that one day they would have to carry these stories forward. Holocaust testimony became a central mechanism of Jewish identity formation not because it delivered facts but because it shaped a posture of listening that fused cognition, emotion, and responsibility.

**For years, the Jewish educational world prepared for a future without survivors.**

**October 7 overturned that expectation.**



This essay argues that post October 7, **Israel education must move beyond advocacy and embody the act of witnessing.** In an age of misinformation, fractured reality, and digital distortion, *edut* (witnessing) offers a Jewish epistemology: a way of knowing and a way of holding testimony with accuracy, humility, and covenantal responsibility. *Edut* restores the ground upon which knowledge, identity, and action can stand.

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A new generation of survivors instantly emerged, not because they were old but because they were young, traumatized, and bearing stories still in formation. They included Nova festival attendees who ran through fields under gunfire, families who hid for hours in safe rooms, residents of razed *kibbutzim*, first responders who faced unimaginable images of violence, torture, and destruction, and hostages returned from underground captivity with eyes struggling to readjust to daylight.

Soon, these survivors began speaking in high schools, Hillels, synagogues, living rooms, federation programs, and leadership gatherings. But students' responses have been uneven. Some lean in with full attention. The attention of others drifts, as they are distracted by their phones or unsettled by the rawness of what they are hearing. We do not see the automatic, reverent silence that once accompanied Holocaust testimony.

And yet, something unmistakable is happening outside formal educational settings. During the past year, in Israel, millions sat before their televisions on Saturday nights to watch Ilana Dayan's *Uvda* as each new survivor shared his or her story. Testimony became a national appointment viewing. Public life paused to witness. And in North America, testimonies continue to echo through communal spaces with similar intensity. **Even when students do not recognize it, they are being invited into a new kind of educational moment—one that requires them to decide what it means to listen, to receive, and to be obligated by another's story.**



# Why Testimony Is Harder Now: The Crisis of Knowing

Teaching testimony today requires more than sensitivity. It requires reconstructing the very conditions under which reality can be perceived. Students enter educational environments from digital ones that have fundamentally reshaped their attention, motivation, and trust.

Matthew Crawford argues that modern digital platforms systematically erode the human capacity for sustained attention, thereby undermining the conditions for perceiving reality itself (2015). Attention, he suggests, is not simply a cognitive skill but a moral and epistemic posture. When attention fractures, he concludes, the world becomes harder to know.

Christine Rosen extends this argument by showing how social media collapses the hierarchies of credibility that once anchored public life. In digital feeds, survivor testimony appears alongside conspiracy, satire, and advertisement, all flattened into a single stream designed for maximum engagement (2021). **When every statement is presented in the same format, students tend to treat them as interchangeable. The distinction between claimant and witness thus dissolves.**

Testimony suffers uniquely under these conditions. Testimony requires slowness, presence, and vulnerability. It asks the listener not only to comprehend but also to be claimed, obligated to what they hear. But digital formats compress testimony into short, affective bursts that circulate detached from context. Trauma scholars have warned that such compression transforms witness stories into “portable affect,” something consumed

rather than integrated into moral understanding (Montgomery & Guterman, 2022).

Add to this the rise of artificial intelligence (AI)-generated misinformation. Within hours of October 7, deepfake videos, miscaptioned footage, and false claims proliferated across media platforms. Trust in images—once the bedrock of testimony—has weakened. Philosophers of technology warn that AI destabilizes visual evidence itself (Sacacas, 2021). **If nothing can be trusted, everything becomes contestable.**

This crisis is not only technological; it is epistemological. **Students increasingly struggle to determine what counts as evidence, how to weigh it, and who has the authority to describe reality.** Advocacy-based models of Israel education cannot fix this. They assume a stable factual ground on which arguments can be built. Content-delivery

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models cannot fix it either; they assume that students already know how to evaluate information.

**Israel education must therefore begin by rebuilding Jewish ways of knowing.** *Edut* offers exactly that. It is not merely memory, nor merely history, nor merely empathy. It is a disciplined practice of receiving truth with responsibility.





*Testimony is not only descriptive;  
it safeguards justice  
and preserves communal integrity.*



## The Jewish Category of *Edut*: Biblical, Rabbinic, and Modern Meaning

*Edut*, in the Jewish tradition, is not simply a narrative act. It is a covenantal vocation that binds fact to moral responsibility.

The Hebrew Bible frames Israel as a people constituted through testimony. “You are My witnesses,” Isaiah declares, invoking a national calling to remember and to affirm God’s presence in history (Isaiah 43:10). In Deuteronomy, Moses summons heaven and earth as witnesses to the covenant (Deuteronomy 30:19) and commands that his song be taught to the people as “a witness” that

would remain in their mouths even when memory faltered (Deuteronomy 31:19).

The rabbinic tradition formalizes *edut* as a legal and ethical discipline. A witness must be competent, present, consistent, and morally upright. False testimony is considered an act that “destroys worlds,” which underscores the cosmological importance of truth (Babylonian Talmud Makkot 5b). **Testimony is not only descriptive; it safeguards justice and preserves communal integrity.**

In *halachic* (Jewish legal) literature, the character of the witness matters as much as the content of the testimony. Witnessing is a relational act that requires humility, integrity, and responsibility (Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 33).

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, describes the modern rupture between liturgical memory and historical reconstruction. **For centuries, Jews sustained identity through ritual memory and by collapsing past and present for ethical purposes. Modern historiography disrupted this unity by introducing a detached, analytic posture that often dilutes covenantal belonging** (1982). At the end of *Zakhor*, Yerushalmi invokes Nietzsche (1874) by asking, “How much history do we require, and what kind?” These questions remain unanswered.

Michal Govrin deepens this critique. She argues that Jewish Holocaust commemoration too often aestheticizes suffering, shaping it according to Christian tropes of martyrdom rather than Jewish

paradigms of liberation. Responsible remembrance, she insists, must resist mythologization and move toward ethical obligation (Govrin, 2021). Her argument is urgent in the context of October 7. The temptation to ritualize trauma before it is understood is real.

Former Supreme Court Justice, Antonin Scalia, in a 1997 Holocaust Remembrance Day address, articulated a similar theme. He warned that remembrance must combine “the cold, dispassionate recording of facts” with the moral imagination needed to perceive the fragility of civilization (Scalia, 1997). Testimony, for Scalia, is a civic and moral summons.

***Edut* integrates these insights. It bridges memory and history. It grounds truth in responsibility. It forms character. And it offers Israel education a framework that honors the dignity of testimony without rushing it into ideology or myth.**

# What October 7 Testimonies Teach Us—and How Educators Should Practice *Edut*

The testimonies that have emerged after October 7 differed from Holocaust testimonies not only in content but in temporality. They arrived unprocessed. They were not retrospective accounts shaped by decades of reflection but stories still in motion. Their narrators did not know what their stories meant. This makes them both pedagogically potent and pedagogically perilous.

Omer Shem Tov's testimony is one example.

Abducted from the Nova festival and held in Gaza, he described reciting psalms not as an expression of theological certainty but as something to hold onto in captivity. In the months after his release, he recounted how his mother had been reciting Psalm 20 daily in his empty bedroom, unaware that he was uttering the same verses underground (Rubin, 2025, paras. 5–8). He later reflected that in captivity,

*“You are looking for something to lean on, to hold onto...  
The first place I went to was God”*

(Rubin, 2025, para. 11)

His testimony is neither a theological argument nor a political claim. It is the articulation of a young man reaching for language that preserved continuity with his family and with a world he could not see.

Sharabi's testimony is of a different register.

Kidnapped from Kibbutz Be'eri and held for 491 days, he endured starvation, humiliation, and the knowledge—upon his release—that his wife and daughters had been murdered. In an interview with *Hadassah Magazine*, he describes reaching what he calls “rock bottom,” and then making a conscious decision to live differently:

*“I wake up every morning and say,  
'I choose life,' again and again”*

(Marks Eglash, 2025, 3)

The statement is simple, almost spare. It is not framed as theology or philosophy. It is a daily act of resolve. His testimony does not present redemption. It presents a man who refuses despair, not because suffering has been resolved, but because life, even in grief, demands a response.

Trauma research suggests that testimony is not simply the recounting of experience but a relational process whose effects depend on how it is received. A systematic review of bearing witness emphasizes that testimony can shape not only survivors' psychological outcomes but also the responses and responsibilities of

audiences, and that context plays a decisive role in whether testimony deepens understanding or produces unintended harm (Wyles et al., 2022, 9–14). Testimony is therefore not something to be consumed; it is something that carries relational and moral weight. And this is where educators must be careful. In the wake of October 7, some

schools invited survivors and families of hostages to speak with the hope that these testimonies would strengthen Jewish identity or commitment to Israel. Some students listened with full presence, others struggled to sustain attention, and still others recorded on their phones, unsure how to respond. **Divergent responses were not**

**necessarily a failure of empathy. They revealed a failure of preparation.**

To practice *edut*, educators must teach students how to listen and why they should listen before the testimony begins.

*Halachically*, according to Jewish law, a kosher (legal) witness must be present, attentive, and morally trustworthy (*ed kashur*). A witness who is distracted does not invalidate the testimony, but he fails in his own obligation. Likewise, **a witness who listens only for confirmation of his prior beliefs is considered *noge'a b'davar*—too entangled in self-interest to serve justice. Applied to education, this means the following.**



## How *not* to practice *edut*

- Do not frame testimony as “inspiration.” It flattens trauma into moral uplift.
- Do not extract political messages from testimony in real time. It instrumentalizes the survivor.
- Do not expect survivors to supply meaning before they themselves can grasp meaning.
- Do not invite students to react immediately with emotions or activism; this centers the listener, not the witness.
- Do not compress testimony into TikTok clips or highlight reels. Shortening testimony into visually gripping fragments is a form of commodification that decontextualizes suffering and encourages voyeurism.

## How to practice *edut* responsibly

- Prepare students with the same guidelines developed for Holocaust testimony: emotional readiness, historical framing, clear boundaries about privacy and detail, and reflective listening (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019).
- Clarify the difference between “listening to a story” and “receiving testimony.” The latter involves obligation, restraint, and accuracy.
- Teach students to listen without demanding coherence. Testimony is often fragmentary. It is not their job to resolve the fragments.
- After the testimony, ask not “How did this make you feel?” but “What have you now been entrusted with?”
- Create space for writing rather than immediate discussion. Silence and reflection are part of the posture or practice of witnessing.
- Help students place the testimony within a larger historical timeline—not to collapse October 7 into other Jewish traumas but to understand continuity and rupture without mythologizing catastrophe.

**To practice *edut* is to help students understand that receiving testimony makes a claim on them. It does not tell them what to think politically. It tells them how seriously to take reality. It binds them to accuracy. It forbids distortion. It resists the flattening force of myth.**

In this way, the testimonies of Omer and Eli serve as living laboratories for rebuilding Jewish ways of knowing after October 7. They teach that meaning does not precede survival, testimony precedes interpretation, truth is relational, and witnessing is not a passive activity but a moral stance.

# The Four Commitments of *Edut* in Israel Education

*Edut* becomes actionable when framed through four commitments that respond directly to the distortions of the digital age and the moral stakes of testimony.

## Fidelity to truth without advocacy.

Advocacy selects facts for persuasion, while testimony preserves facts for fidelity. Students must learn to distinguish evidence, acknowledge uncertainty, and resist distortion.

1

## Complexity without relativism.

Digital culture flattens distinctions between claims. *Edut* teaches students to map what is known, probable, contested, and unknown. It emphasizes humility without nihilism.

2

## Suffering without mythologizing.

Govrin warns against aestheticizing Jewish trauma (2021). Thus, October 7 testimonies must not be forced into Holocaust frameworks or symbolic narratives. Each is particular and irreducible.

3

## Covenant: testimony obligates.

Testimony binds the listener to the work of preserving truth. Scalia articulated this obligation in civic terms (Scalia, 1997). *Halachic* tradition frames it as a moral requirement. Students must understand that hearing creates responsibility.

4

# Pedagogies of Digital Witnessing



Digital witnessing poses unique pedagogical challenges. Students often first encounter testimony as content — clipped, captioned, and framed for virality. Christine Rosen warns that digital culture privileges “speed over reflection and amplification over accuracy” (2021, 46), flattening distinctions between claims and reducing serious narratives to consumable fragments (54). **Even sacred stories can become scrollable moments.**

Trauma research reinforces the stakes of this distortion. Testimony does not function independently of its setting; its impact depends on the conditions of reception and the relational space in which it is heard (Wyles et al., 2022, 9–14). When testimony is detached from context, it risks becoming affect without obligation.

**For educators, this means the task is not merely to invite witnesses but to reconstruct the environment in which witnessing occurs.** The United States

Holocaust Memorial Museum’s guidelines emphasize preparation, framing, reflective listening, and space for complexity. Those principles remain essential. But today they must expand to include media literacy: **students must learn not only what a witness says, but how digital platforms shape the meaning, circulation, and reception of that story.**

Reconstructing the environment of reception is vital because October 7 testimonies remain tethered to an unfolding reality. They resist closure and remain vulnerable; they require what Michal Govrin calls responsible remembrance (Govrin, 2021, 6). Moreover, Antonin Scalia’s insistence that remembrance must rest on factual grounding combined with moral imagination provides a framework for adaptation: testimony must be approached with humility, precision, and ethical seriousness. **Students must learn not only to empathize but also to uphold truth in a world in which truth itself feels increasingly fragile.**

# Toward a Covenantal Israel Education

Witnessing offers Israel education what no other framework can: a way to rebuild Jewish knowing from the ground up. **In halachic tradition, a witness is not merely someone who saw; a witness is someone who becomes responsible.** The act of witnessing is formative. It shapes character.

Students who learn to witness begin not with ideology but with presence. They learn to discern what is known, what is uncertain, and what remains contested. They learn that truth requires humility and discipline. **They learn that testimony obligates the individual and the groups that receive the testimony.**

This model resists both mythologizing Israeli suffering and sanitizing Israeli reality. It anchors political debates in moral seriousness. It prepares students to resist propaganda by grounding them in practices of verification and discernment. It forms civic actors capable of speaking truth in a world that increasingly abandons it.

**If the twentieth century asked Jewish schools to transmit the memory of the Holocaust, the twenty-first asks them to guard the possibility of truth itself.** We cannot know how long today's witnesses will speak or how their stories will evolve, but we do know this: Students must be taught how to receive them.



This is the promise of *edut* for Israel education post October 7. It restores gravity to pedagogy. It asserts that some stories must be received with care. **It tempers advocacy with humility and detachment with responsibility.** It teaches that before students speak about Israel, they must learn how to listen to Israel. And before they argue about Israel, they must learn how to uphold the truths that make argument possible.

In a world in which reality is fragile, witnessing becomes the first *mitzvah* of Jewish education. It is the disciplined refusal to let suffering be forgotten, the moral commitment to preserve human dignity, and the covenantal courage to carry the stories that shape our people. And it is the ground upon which all other forms of Jewish identity can stand.

**...a witness is not merely someone who saw; a witness is someone who becomes responsible.**

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