

The Conversations Jewish Educators Must Have Now

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In the aftermath of October 7, among the new realities that we face as a people, Jewish educators will need to ask some of the biggest questions that they have posed since 1948.

The accounts and images of Jews being slaughtered and kidnapped, and subsequent mobs of people chanting anti-Jewish slogans across the western world, have left Jewish educators worldwide scrambling. Foundational concepts in Jewish life and education, including Diaspora life and Zionism, antisemitism and Jewish allyship, God and evil, Jewish power and victimhood, have all come into educational conversations over the last few weeks.

While none of these are new topics for Jewish educators to consider, October 7 has raised the stakes and the need for immediacy in addressing these issues. What these concepts share is a thread that pushes Jewish educators to ask difficult questions about the world for which we are preparing our learners. While the temptation for many will be to return to Jewish education as normal— to avoid tackling some of the sacred cows—that would be to our collective detriment.



Some of the questions educators now ask will address both pedagogy and content, and some questions will confront foundational cornerstones of what Jewish education is today. Below are five of these emerging questions. They prompt discussions that can be facilitated in various age-appropriate ways, dependent on the setting where education is taking place. For any organization committed to Jewish education, they need to be asked, and answered, in a post October 7 world.

1. What is the relationship between the head, heart, and hands of Jewish education?

The ABC's of education have always balanced the Affective (heart), Behavior (hands), and Cognitive (head). In recent years the Jewish community has proudly touted mass engagement programs, but recent weeks have revealed that generations of Jews, even if proud of being Jewish, are largely illiterate when it comes to some of the very basics of Jewish life, history, and Israel.

2. How, when, and why do we teach antisemitism?

While no one wants to spend precious time specifically discussing Jew hatred, no Jewish educator in the last few weeks has escaped some variation of the question of, "why do they all hate us so much?" Pogroms, blood libels, and Jewish control of the world are 21st

century memes that have resurfaced in ugly ways that cannot be ignored or relegated to the pages of Jewish history. And yet Jewish education cannot rely on victimhood to establish either Jewish guilt or pride.

3. How do we love both our family and humanity as a whole?

Jewish educators must be able to grapple with questions of Jewish tribalism and universalism with unequivocal dedication to both. As Jews see their brothers and sisters being slaughtered and kidnapped, this is undoubtedly a moment for a resurgence in Jewish Peoplehood education. Simultaneously, educators must also struggle with how to teach a “love” and “pride” of what it means to be a people, even as others might elevate the moral and ethical questions of such an affinity. This duality of allegiance to both the Jewish people and the world at large has been further challenged for many Jewish progressives who are feeling isolated as they deal with silence, abandonment, and at times antagonism from allies they have stood by in multiple causes for many decades.

4. What time do we dedicate to Israel education?

Time is perhaps the most valuable commodity in Jewish education. In the limited time all of us have with learners, we must make difficult

choices about what to teach based in part on what learners need most right now. Not that it needs to be either/or, but at certain junctures Jewish educators will need to consider whether Jewish education is about preserving the past or about preparing for the realities of today and tomorrow. To get micro for a moment, unless one can dramatically increase the hours of learning, these conversations must push educators to consider replacing hours of traditional Jewish learning (including Torah, Talmud, and Hebrew language) with modern Jewish history and Israel studies.

5. What does it mean to be a proactive Jewish educator?

As Jewish educators, we are accustomed to reacting to crises—and in recent years we have had our fair share, including Parkland, Pittsburgh, Covid, and now Hamas. Time and time again, many educators report being caught off guard, unprepared and left scrambling for talking points and emergency curricula. This is simply not good enough, and we must be able to respond to what 21st century Jews need from us right now. Especially now, the answers should not and cannot look the same as they did when most Jewish educational organizations were first developed. Rather than continue traditional educational practices, stakeholders in Jewish education must ask what it will take to create

a cadre of Jewish educators equipped to proactively teach the Jews of today and tomorrow?

Post October 7, Jewish educators must resist the urge to think that what got them here is what our learners need right now. Over the next few weeks, my colleagues and I will begin to elaborate on these conversations—in writing, in convenings, through webinars, and podcasts. By design, these discussions will challenge prior convictions, and no doubt this will make many of us uncomfortable. Asking such questions should not be seen as acquiescing to terrorism, but rather part of the continued evolution of Jewish education—which must always strive to be relevant. Even in the relatively early days since the massacres of the Black Shabbat, it has become increasingly evident that reluctance to engage in these discussions would be a failure with massive consequences—namely, the disenfranchisement of generations of Jews who right now arguably need us more than ever.