

## Education in a Time of Present Traumatic Stress Disorder

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One of the most profound statements our Mishlachat Areyvut group heard about Israel post-October 7 was from one of our Israel-based colleagues who, shortly after we gathered for the first time in Jerusalem, asserted: “We are not suffering from what you think of as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). This is *present* traumatic stress disorder. The trauma is still very much a real part of our lives.”

That trauma was evident in the still shell-shocked, anguished, and anxious faces of the Israeli refugee families with whom we shared our hotel; the survivors and mourners of Kibbutz Be’eri who we met at their temporary home in Ein Bokek; the families of hostages being held in Gaza who pleaded for their return; the sullen parents of slain children and those currently serving in the army; the Bedouin heroes of October 7 we heard from at AJEEC in Be’er Sheva; and the many ordinary Israelis—among them, airport employees, taxi and bus drivers, hotel and restaurant workers, school administrators, school-aged children, musicians, grassroots movement leaders, family, and friends—who are going about their lives while seemingly not...living.



Indeed, one of the most remarkable things you hear in the big cities right now is silence. The scores of cranes that only recently were building up Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and other “startup” cities have ceased working. The roads, while surprisingly still traffic-clogged, are (thankfully) missing the regular annoyance of pestering car horns. Commercial air traffic is at 25 percent capacity, with El Al the only way to get in and out of the country, and the planes are now routed over Haifa rather than the beaches of Tel Aviv, for safety’s sake. The shuks, pedestrian malls, and other public spaces—aside from Kikar HaChatufim (Hostages Square)—lack their typical crowds and liveliness. The classroom we visited in the makeshift Nofey Habsor regional school for refugees by the Dead Sea was devoid of students, its chairs flipped over onto empty desks.

It's that last image that sticks with me for our present purposes. The silence of the Israeli schoolroom is deafening. The Home Front Command has established a color-coded security status system for schools all over the country during the war: ‘green’ means all systems go, ‘yellow’ means in-person classes only if bomb shelters have adequate capacity for everyone, and ‘orange’ means no in-person educational activities are allowed. While the majority of the country remains green, large regions adjacent to Gaza and Lebanon are orange, and Tel Aviv has spent a fair amount of time in yellow. This effectively means that students attend school only two to three times a week at best, with distance learning on other days, if available at all.

According to the principals of the Nofey Habsor elementary and high school and the superintendent of Tel Aviv-Yafo schools, with whom we met, the biggest problem they face right now is the absenteeism of teenagers, especially, who are too traumatized or distracted to get out of bed, let alone go to school. Children (and parents) still weary from two or more years of online learning during the pandemic have little energy to fire up their computers yet again, even if the teachers are now quite experienced with teaching online. The teaching force is among the shell-shocked described above, so many of them single parenting while a spouse is on army reserve duty. Though some educators are leaning on informal education techniques to draw kids back into a more “fun” learning venue, *tiyulim* (trips) and other outdoor experiential educational programs are on indefinite hold. With a few bright spots as exceptions to the rule (e.g., places where refugees have successfully integrated into their temporary homes and classrooms), this is what education in a time of *present* traumatic stress disorder looks like in Israel.

Research on education during wartime and education among refugees amply demonstrates that learning loss is among the most significant forms of collateral damage of any conflict. The damage is humanitarian foremost, as children are deprived of their right to learn and to grow in a stress-free environment. It also affects the national psyche, politics, society, and the economy, as a rising generation—already demonstrably behind in their learning achievements

owing to the pandemic—now has a war to contend with that will deprive them of further learning.

The field of Israel education has focused its attention to date mainly on developing the relationship of Jews in the diaspora to Israel. This will continue and likely expand and strengthen as we continue to absorb the aftershocks of October 7 and its implications for life in Israel, and accordingly, for diaspora Jews' relationships with Israel. Furthermore, Israel education and Jewish education will need to attend to the significant cognitive-emotional needs of North American Jewish youth who are contending with virulent anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and antisemitic sentiments among the general public post October 7. Yet at the same time, the field of Israel education also needs to widen its lens more broadly than ever before to include supporting the educational needs of those living in Israel. Immediately after October 7 a grassroots effort was organized to have Hebrew-speaking educators from the diaspora teach Israelis online. This is a very small start. More substantial, organized, thoughtful, and concerted efforts and investments in aiding Israeli children to process their individual and collective trauma, to resume formal and informal learning, and to get back on their feet generally, are needed so that children, along with Israeli society more broadly, can get back to making joyful noise in the months and years ahead.