

# Israel and Jewish Teens Where They Are

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Post October 7, it has become clearer to me that we must look at teen Israel education through the lens of, to quote my colleagues Abi Dauber Sterne and Robbie Gringras, *Hazmana* (invitation), rather than *Hasbara* (explanation).

While October 7 has forced us all to reconsider Israel education across the board, it is the subsequent unleashing of normalized anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiments on social media, in the classroom, and among peer groups that has had a seismic impact on how young people relate to Israel and accordingly, to their own sense of what it means to be Jewish.

An extremely complex situation is being simplified for young people in a way that assumes teens cannot handle complexity. It is served up on social media as oppressor vs. oppressed, evil vs. good, vaunted vs. marginalized.

Jewish teens who were at best apathetic about Israel are now forced to pick a side. Young Jews who would have otherwise defaulted toward their parents' supportive position on Israel are now doubtful that their progressive values align with Israel.

October 7 and the subsequent effect of the worldwide response on Jewish teens should push us to embrace



facts about under-engaged Jewish teens that until now made us feel too uncomfortable to consider as part of a mainstream effort to engage young Jews in Israel.

Facts like:

- A. Young Jews reject exceptionalism; they don't want to be "chosen."
- B. Under-affiliated young Jews are more likely to participate in something Jewish if other young people from other faiths participate on equal terms as well.
- C. A growing number of young Jews don't list "Jewish" as one of their top five identities.
- D. Most young Jews identify as progressives, and accordingly follow suit in believing that Israel is not progressive.
- E. Young Jews of all levels of engagement reject and/or distrust Israel education that dances around Israel's complexities and imperfections.

These facts and others must inform the decisions we make and the strategies we employ in engaging and educating young Jews about Israel, and not just under-affiliated Jewish teens. Opportunities for young skeptical Jews to freely ask difficult questions, and to dive into challenging conversations, should become more commonplace and acceptable.

These opportunities must ensure that:

- Teens are not shamed or otherwise made to feel different, misguided, or just plain wrong by asking tough questions or making challenging statements.
- These questions are asked, and these conversations are held, in Israel and in immersive experiences.
- Israeli teen peers from a diversity of backgrounds are essential and equal participants in these experiences.

And they should seriously consider including teens from other faiths as full participants as well.

I believe October 7 will necessitate that those in the field of Israel education make a choice to meet an expanding population of Jewish teens where they are and not invite them to where we think they should be.