

Our Roles as Jews, as Humans, and as Jewish Educators

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The blow of October 7 has unsettled all of Israel. All is fragile, vulnerable, dangerous. At the same time, Jews around the world have borne witness to their own vulnerability, as so many of their non-Jewish friends and allies have proven impervious to their pain.

In addition to all the physical and emotional losses that have been suffered through the war, there is another element that we are at risk of losing: reflective education. In a moment of deep suffering, there is an important drive to unite and be together as a people. But there is also the risk of confusing this with the drive to self-defeating uniformity.

In our view, there are three different ways to contribute to our togetherness:

1. **Support and Comfort** – Jews throughout the world, but particularly in Israel, are going through hell. We need to focus on supporting and comforting all those painfully affected by the October 7 massacre, kidnappings, evacuations, and fighting.
2. **Defend and Fight** – Jews throughout the world, particularly those in Israel, have



enemies. Both on the actual and the virtual battlefield, we need to strengthen all our “soldiers” and supply them with tools for all forms of combat: intellectual and military.

3. **Learn and Understand** – Any minute now, Israel’s consensus about the war and the leaders conducting it will crumble, as will Diaspora consensus about the war and its effect on Gazan civilians. At this point, reflective Jewish education will return to the fore.

Our concern is that in our overwhelming desire to address the first two requirements, the third will be squeezed into insignificance. Why does this matter? Because of the threefold question posed to us by Hillel two thousand years ago:

If I am not for myself, who will be?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, then when?

For good and for bad, we have found ourselves instinctively re-embracing particularity. The idea that we are connected not only by values or religious belief, but also by the inherited bonds of extended family—this aspect of Jewish Peoplehood has now met us in our guts. Both in our solidarity, and in our isolation.

It is this particularity that Hillel was addressing when he asked, “If I am not for myself, who will be?” We are

realizing that we must be “for ourselves” – Comfort and Support; Defend and Fight.

Yet in order to be fully Jewish, we must also address the second challenge of Hillel: “And if I am only for myself, what am I?” Here we are challenged to think beyond our needs for comfort and defense, and ask about the consequences of our actions while defending and fighting for ourselves.

Three more questions we might answer:

What is our role as Jews?

The full-hearted defense and support of Jews.

What is our role as humans?

Compassion for humanity and striving for justice.

What is our role as Jewish educators?

To empower our learners to explore the connection between the two.